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Towards the (Re)Making of Public Space?

Simon Susen[1]

Abstract: This article provides a critical analysis of Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century* (2025 [2022]). While their earlier work, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* (2020 [2017]), is situated within economic sociology, their latest book – originally published as *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle* (2022) – marks a significant shift towards political sociology, broadly conceived. The article contends that *The Making of Public Space* represents a highly original contribution that will further consolidate the considerable influence of Boltanski and Esquerre's collaborative work on cutting-edge debates and research agendas in the contemporary social sciences. In particular, the book makes a strong case for examining the relationship between processes of "turning into current affairs" [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*]. The analysis is structured in two main parts. The first part summarizes the central arguments advanced by Boltanski and Esquerre in *The Making of Public Space*. The second part offers a careful assessment of the book's principal limitations and suggests possible ways to address them.

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I. Setting the Scene

Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* (2020 [2017])[2] is a study in economic sociology.[3] By contrast, their new book – originally entitled *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle* (2022)[4] – is marked by a shift towards political sociology, broadly conceived. Anyone who has read both the original French (Gallimard) edition and the subsequent English (Polity) edition of this important investigation will be able to confirm that the latter is a superb translation of the former. *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century* (2025 [2022])[5] [henceforth *MPS*] is a highly original contribution that will further consolidate the significant impact of Boltanski and Esquerre's collaborative work on cutting-edge debates and research agendas in the contemporary social sciences. It is a *tour de force* that obliges us to reconsider the relationship

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2   Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2020 [2017]). See also *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

3   See Nancy Fraser, "A New Form of Capitalism? A Reply to Boltanski and Esquerre", *New Left Review* 106 (2017). See also Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", ibid. In addition, see, for instance: Thomas Angeletti, "Capitalism as a Collection – Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement : Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris, Gallimard, 2017)", *European Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 3 (2019). Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, and Fabian Muniesa, "Grappling with the Economy of Enrichment", *Valuation Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015). William Outhwaite, "Book Review: *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017)", *Journal of Classical Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2018). Simon Susen, "The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?", *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 2, no. 2 (2018). Cf. Rainer Diaz-Bone, "Luc Boltanski und Arnaud Esquerre: Bereicherung. Eine Kritik der Ware", in *Schlüsselwerke der Wirtschaftssoziologie*, ed. Klaus Kraemer and Florian Brugger (2., aktualisierte und erweiterte Auflage, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021).

4   Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022).

5   *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2024 [2022]).

between processes of "turning into current affairs" [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*].[6]

II. Turning into Current Affairs and Politicization

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre offer a thorough analysis of the relationship between two sets of processes that are constitutive of modern public space in general and modern public spheres[7] in particular – name-

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6 For a detailed (and critical) account, see Simon Susen, "Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?", *Theory, Culture & Society* 40, no. 7–8 (2023). For alternative accounts, see, for instance: Bo Yun Park, "Public Opinion in the Making – Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle* (Paris, Gallimard, 2022, 352 p.)", *European Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 3 (2023). Paul-Arthur Tortosa, "Luc Boltanski et Arnaud Esquerre, *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*", *Questions de communication* 44 (2023). Peter Wagner, "Breaking News: Upheavals in the Formation of Public Opinion. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ?* (Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre)", *Journal of Classical Sociology* 23, no. 4 (2023). See also Alan O'Connor, "Review of Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's Book *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*", *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 23, no. 1 (2025).
While the present article draws on Susen, "Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?", it focuses on Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, rather than on *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*.

7 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity, 1989 [1962]) and *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962). See also, for example: "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992). "Überlegungen und Hypothesen zu einem erneuten Strukturwandel der politischen Öffentlichkeit", *Leviathan* 49, Sonderband 37 (2021). "Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022). *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik* (Frankfurt am Main: Berlin, 2022). *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2023 [2022]). In addition, see, for instance: Simon Susen, "Critical Notes on Habermas's Theory of the Public Sphere", *Sociological Analysis* 5, no. 1 (2011). "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas", *Society* 60, no. 6 (2023).

ly, the relationship between processes of "turning into current affairs" [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*]. The former are based on present occurrences, permitting a large number of people to obtain knowledge about facts and events that, for the most part, they have *not* directly experienced. The latter manifest themselves in the problematization of facts and events and, thus, in a multiplicity of competing descriptions and interpretations conveyed in comments, commentaries, discussions, and controversies.

Given the thematic focus of their study, it is not surprising that the concept of public space [*espace public*] is central to Boltanski and Esquerre's investigation. The two authors make it clear, however, that their analysis is *not* founded on a "normative definition of 'public space'"[8] or attached to a particular political philosophy. Rather, their approach is inspired by the bottom-up spirit of the "pragmatic sociology of critique"[9]. In accordance with this outlook, Boltanski and Esquerre are committed to shedding light on "the implicit notions underlying the competences that people draw on in order to act"[10] when navigating everyday life. Far from treating these competencies as transcendental faculties, removed from the experiential realms of spatiotemporal contingencies, Boltanski and Esquerre regard them as "historically and socially situated ontologies"[11].

8　Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 1. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 9.

9　On this point, see, for example: Simon Susen, "Luc Boltanski: His Life and Work – An Overview", in *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'*, ed. Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner (London: Anthem Press, 2014). "Is There Such a Thing as a 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'? Reflections on Luc Boltanski's *On Critique*", ibid. (2014 [2012]). "Luc Boltanski and His Critics: An Afterword", ibid. (2014. Luc Boltanski, Juliette Rennes, and Simon Susen, "The Fragility of Reality: Luc Boltanski in Conversation with Juliette Rennes and Simon Susen", ibid. (2014 [2010]). Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the "Pragmatic Sociology of Critique"* (London: Anthem Press, 2014).

10　Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 1. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 9.

11　*The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Centu-*

Recognizing the distinctiveness of "the democratic public space"[12], Boltanski and Esquerre draw attention to the sociological significance of two aspects.

The first aspect concerns the relationship between public space and current affairs [*actualité*]. This dimension comprises anything that occurs in the present, hits the (local, national, and/or global) news, and may be (directly or indirectly) relevant to people's lives. It is hard to overstate the extent to which digitalization has exacerbated the continuous circulation of news, shaping people's perception and interpretation of reality. Owing to this accelerated digitalization process, the news cycle has become not only a critical part of, and vital reference point in, people's everyday lives but also a fast-evolving sequence of reports and narratives, replacing each other in a matter of days, if not hours or minutes.

The second aspect concerns dynamics of politicization [*politisation*]. This dimension refers to "the way in which politics manifests itself today in the public space"[13]. Immersed in the news and current affairs, people are exposed to, and often participate in, processes of politicization. The political sphere would not come into existence without these processes. In accordance with their pragmatist account of reality, Boltanski and Esquerre conceive of *politics* not as *the political* but as *politicization*. In other words, they are committed to a relational and processual, rather than essentialist or substantialist, understanding of politics.

In brief, Boltanski and Esquerre examine the relationship between the production, circulation, and consumption of *news*, on the one hand, and processes of *politicization*, on the other. Instead of explaining one in terms of the other, the two scholars emphasize the relative autonomy of

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 ry, 1. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 9.

12 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 1. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 9.

13 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 2. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 10.

each side of this complex relationship: not every fact or event reported in the news is necessarily politicized, just as processes of politicization can unfold without being covered in the news. While they are closely intertwined, *processes of "turning into current affairs"* and *processes of politicization* are irreducible to each other.

III. Ontology and Politics

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre pursue two main objectives: first, to develop an ontology of actuality [*ontologie de l'actualité*]; and, second, to dissect the terrain of politics [*la politique*]. Let us consider each of these objectives in more detail.

1.

Boltanski and Esquerre's ambition to develop an "*ontologie de l'actualité*"[14] – that is, an "*ontology of actuality*"[15] (which may also be described as an "*ontology of the present*" or an "*ontology of contemporary reality*") – is inspired by Foucault's commentary on Kant's "What is Enlightenment?"[16]. The two sociologists endorse a neo-Foucauldian approach aimed at exploring "multiple forms of knowledge concerning the world and what is happening in it"[17]. Given their emphasis on the intimate relationship between epistemological and ontological dimensions, Boltanski and Esquerre are not satisfied with the somewhat limited objective of delivering yet another version of media studies, as if the nexus between knowledge-seeking practices and the construction of social life were reducible to the functioning of digital information and communication technologies.

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14 *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 10 (italics in original).

15 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 2.

16 Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?", in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986 [1984]).

17 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 2. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 11.

When different types of knowledge circulate and become part of the news agenda, the vast majority of recipients (that is, readers, watchers, and listeners) do *not* have direct and personal experiences of the facts and events about which narratives are being constructed. Consequently, there is a gap between their *direct* experiences of facts and events in their lifeworlds, on the one hand, and their *indirect* experiences of facts and events via digital media, on the other.[18] Making sociological sense of this gap is one of the most challenging tasks that Boltanski and Esquerre set themselves in *MPS*.

One need not be a Heideggerian to recognize that all modes of engagement with the world – whether these be direct or indirect, intuitive or reflective, experiential or rational – have a *temporal* dimension. In their previous work, Boltanski and Esquerre[19] have highlighted the pivotal role of temporality in the enrichment economy, notably with regard to the discursive construction of "the past" as a key reference point for value creation in "the present".[20] In *MPS*, they reconsider this "canonical opposition" – which, in effect, reflects an "entrenched contrast"[21] – between "the present" and "the past" in ontological terms: the former presents itself in a "superficial"[22] manner, to such an extent that temporality is "deemed to be too short to be 'true'"[23]; the latter is associated with the

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18 Cf. Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1993]).

19 See, in particular: Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* ; "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser"; *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*.

20 Cf. Susen, "The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?".

21 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 12.

22 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 12.

23 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 12.

idea of a "long period"[24], in which "unfolds the silent but profound evolution of structures"[25], shaping – if not governing – the course of social actions.

2.

Drawing on their neo-Foucauldian approach to the ontology of actuality, Boltanski and Esquerre dissect the terrain of politics [*la politique*]. They do so by scrutinizing both the constitution and the function of politics, which have been profoundly transformed in societies that are marked by the constant production, circulation, and consumption of news. In the Western world, most citizens engage with politics through the lens of the media. One vital element of politics is to define – implicitly or explicitly – what counts (and what does not count) as "political"[26] or, more specifically, as a "political problem"[27]. Part of this task is to grapple with political issues, differences, and struggles – notably in terms of their impact on the development of society.

Delimiting the terrain of politics, however, is more complicated than it may appear at first sight. Indeed, Boltanski and Esquerre are wary of the (arguably inflationary) notion that, in one way or another, "everything is political". Since the French Revolution, this dictum has reinforced utopian expectations about the possibility of a "total revolution"[28]. If everything were political, then politics would not have anything outside itself

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24 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 12.

25 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 12.

26 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 13.

27 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 12–13.

28 See Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). See also Luc Boltanski, "The Left after May 1968 and the Longing for Total Revolution", *Thesis Eleven* 69, no. 1 (2002).

and, by implication, could be conflated with social life, or even with *any* aspect of human existence.[29] The realm of "the political" is more specific (and more limited) than the realm of "the social". In terms of scope, the latter is far broader than the former.

Boltanski and Esquerre make a case for a "processual approach"[30]. In their estimation, the claim that "everything is political" is no less problematic than the proposition that "everything is social". On this view, the *normativist* contention that "*tout est politique*" is as questionable as the *socio-constructivist* assertion that "*tout est social*", resulting in inflationary conceptions of "the political" and "the social", respectively. Having distanced themselves from explanatory reductionism, Boltanski and Esquerre insist, however, that *everything is politicizable*.[31] In principle, any facet of human existence – regardless of whether it may be classified as an objective, normative, or subjective dimension – *can* be politicized. In short, *not everything is political, but everything is politicizable*. Yet, the role of politics in our lifeworlds may vary significantly between different historical contexts and, hence, between different societies.[32]

IV. Towards a Temporalized Sociology

Boltanski and Esquerre's study is based on an extensive analysis of two main sources of data:[33]

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29 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 13.

30 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 13.

31 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 13.

32 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4–5. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 13.

33 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 15–203. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 23–241.

- approximately 120,000 comments, addressed to the daily newspaper *Le Monde* by its online subscribers in September and October 2019;
- numerous comments on past events, published on two online video channels in January 2021 by the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* [National Audiovisual Institute] on *YouTube – INA Société* (approximately 7,000 comments) and *INA Politique* (approximately 1,300 comments).

In relation to the first source (*Le Monde*), it should be noted that approximately a sixth of these comments, because they had been rejected by the company in charge of their moderation, were *not* put online. This made it possible for Boltanski and Esquerre to compare, with respect to any one article, comments judged "acceptable" with those deemed to be "unacceptable".

In relation to the second source (*INA*), it should be noted that its careful consideration has a twofold advantage: first, access to an audience whose members – demographically speaking (that is, particularly in terms of age and level of education) – are substantially different from the readers of *Le Monde*; second, the possibility of a systematic comparison – especially in cross-generational terms – between comments about the latest and, so to speak, "newsiest" news, on the one hand, and comments about what constituted the news of yesteryear, that of the "past", on the other. This is due to the fact that these comments are posted online by Internet users conveying different opinions, having watched and interpreted the rebroadcasting of news images dating back several decades and archived by the *INA*. Unsurprisingly, the comments are of variable importance and quality (in both cases). Despite this variability, however, they are generally of short format (up to 1,000 characters for a post on *Le Monde*; on Twitter the limit was originally set at 140 characters, before it was increased to 280 characters in 2017).

Boltanski and Esquerre have succeeded in shedding light on opinion- and will-formation processes in pluralistic societies marked by high degrees of digitalization. A noteworthy element of their project is an

in-depth analysis of what – in accordance with more or less stringent editorial moderation policies – can and cannot be said, comparing accepted and rejected comments with each other. Throughout their investigation, Boltanski and Esquerre emphasize the *paradoxical* status of *actualité*:[34] it plays both a *central* and a *marginal* role in our lives. In terms of its *central* role, everyone is immersed in some form of contemporary reality, irrespective of whether it is experienced directly or indirectly. In terms of its *marginal* role, the kind of information that captures our attention obtains its prominence from the fact that it distinguishes itself from everyday experiences. One of the most remarkable features of *actualité* is that it often renders present what appears to be inaccessible.[35]

The interpretation of the material examined in *MPS* poses a new challenge for the social sciences, since it obliges us to move beyond a pragmatic sociology that is limited to the study of journalistic practices and, hence, lacks a sustained engagement with the key focus of journalistic work: *actualité* (understood as "contemporary reality") in general and *actualités* (understood as "news") in particular. Boltanski and Esquerre dismiss reductive versions (and narrow conceptions) of media studies; at the same time, they reject any "explanatory routines of a classical sociology"[36] aimed at unearthing "so-called 'social' properties of actors"[37]. In their assessment, approaches of this sort run the risk of succumbing to "identitarian essentialism and behavioural essentialism"[38].

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34 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 5–6. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 13–14.

35 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 5. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 14.

36 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 15.

37 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 15.

38 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Centu-*

In line with this "uncovering mission", it is common to draw a distinction between two levels of analysis in modern sociology[39]: on the one hand, a *superficial* level, which is composed of observable facts, succeeding each other in time and resulting in the emergence of *actualité*, more or less ignored or treated as if they were contingent and escaped scientific investigation; on the other hand, a *profound* level, which is typically conceived of in terms of underlying structures – a point explored in *Enrichment*.[40] The second level is epitomized in different forms of structuralism – notably *social structuralism* (which tends to focus on social organizations and institutions) and *cognitive structuralism* (which presupposes the existence of invariant structures within the human mind, serving as a fixed point).

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre seek to resolve the opposition between these two levels of analysis. To this end, they defend the idea of a *temporalized sociology*[41], capable of grasping "the way in which people co-exist and interact at a given moment"[42] and, therefore, of understanding the contingencies permeating both the "actuality" and the "History" [*sic*] of their lifeworlds. The purpose of Boltanski and Esquerre's inquiry is eloquently summarized in the following section:

> We have taken comments on the news [*actualité*] seriously,
> viewing them both as the expression of singularities and as
> attempts to rise to a more general level [*montée en généralité*],
> testifying to the way in which different actors, immersed in
> the temporality of their lifeworlds, strive to adjust to the news

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ry, 7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 15.

39 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 3–5. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 15–17.

40 See *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 338–342.

41 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 16.

42 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7 (quotation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 16.

[*actualité*] – i.e. to what, like others, they know only by hearsay [*ouï-dire*]. This possibility of momentarily detaching oneself from one's lifeworld in order to pay attention to what is inaccessible is a central way of co-ordinating with others and thereby of "being part of society".[43]

V. What Moment?

One of the most original contributions made by Boltanski and Esquerre in *MPS* is their proposal to distinguish three key historical periods, to which they refer as "moments":

1. the crowd moment   [*moment foule*]:   1870–1914
2. the mass moment   [*moment masses*]: 1930–1970
3. the network moment   [*moment réseau*]: 1990–present

According to Boltanski and Esquerre, these three periods share several important features.

First, each of these periods is shaped by a new agent [*actant*]. This agent, however, is *not* tantamount to a peaceful, constructive, and co-operative subject, whose actions are aimed at securing the harmony and stability of social order. Rather, it represents a potentially destructive force that – "through its violent, blind, and harmful action"[44] – "threatens society and destroys the political structures that regulate it"[45].

Second, each of these periods is characterized by "a logic of gregarious association"[46]. This curious logic brings people closer together, but

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43 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 8 (quotation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI*e* siècle*, 16.

44 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI*e* siècle*, 18.

45 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI*e* siècle*, 18.

46 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI*e* siècle*, 18.

it comes at a cost: it strips each person of their sense of singularity and uniqueness, implying a preponderance of the collective over the individual. As a consequence, actors – insofar as they lack a sense of personality – are, as it were, "freed", if not "emancipated", from the moral control mechanisms of the "*superego*"[47]. Their capacity to internalize social and political taboos and restrictions is profoundly undermined, thereby fostering the emergence of deviant, transgressive, and criminal behaviour. Moreover, it becomes far more likely that particular social groups (notably minorities) refuse to accept the law (especially when it is perceived as conveying the will, and defending the interests, of a majority).

Third, in each of these periods, individual choices and the exercise of a person's autonomy are severely curtailed by the *horizontal* logic of imitation and/or the *vertical* logic of intimidation or manipulation. Usually, this kind of dynamic benefits individuals who succeed in taking on the role of a leader, equipped with the power to impose their wishes and desires upon their (quasi-hypnotized) followers. Whether such a leader takes the form of "an opinion leader, a gangster, a star, or an influencer"[48], they are bestowed with the capacity to exert a considerable degree of power over those who follow them. From a realist point of view, it is irrelevant whether their power is (politically) legitimate or illegitimate, (socially) acceptable or unacceptable, and/or (morally) defensible or indefensible. The point is that these leaders *do* exercise a significant level of power over their followers.

In short, the three historical periods described above have a pronounced *destructive*, *normative*, and *imitative/manipulative* potential, which manifests itself not only in the radical transformation but also in the gradual synchronization [*Gleichschaltung*] of society.

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47 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9 (italics in original). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 18.

48 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 18.

In these three periods, the close relationship between social order and political order is at stake:

1.

The *crowd moment* (1870–1914) owes its rise, to a large extent, to revolutionary gatherings and movements. An illustrative example of this narrative is Hippolyte Taine's *Les origines de la France contemporaine* [*The Origins of Contemporary France*] (published in six volumes between 1875 and 1883)[49], exposing the social and political consequences of "national decadence"[50]. Another example is Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* [*The Crowd*] (1895)[51], grappling with the link between "the popular mind" and "criminal crowds".[52] The Paris Commune (1871) as well as the numerous strikes and riots that took place in late-nineteenth-century France are key reference points for this "crowd" narrative.[53] Paradoxically, to the degree that many of these forms of collective action were vigorously repressed by the state, the crowd moment – far from being obliterated – gathered momentum.

By definition, the crowd is made up of a variety of bodies that "physically approach each other until they mingle"[54]. Yet, the crowd is composed not only of physically interconnected bodies but also of behaviourally,

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49 See Hippolyte Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine*, 6 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1875–1883).

50 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 19.

51 See Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Alcan, 1895). See also *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Introduction by R. K. Merton, Penguin, 1977 [1895]).

52 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 19.

53 Cf. Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

54 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 19.

symbolically, and motivationally (or, in a metaphorical sense, spiritually) interconnected actors, whose actions, thoughts, impulses, and desires *converge* in the construction of a meaning-seeking collective. As such, the crowd's participants engage in a collective act of mimicry, characterized by *both* a sense of reciprocity, solidarity, and horizontality among members *and* a sense of unilaterality, asymmetry, and verticality in terms of the relationship between a leader and his (or her) followers. Leaders may employ techniques of hypnosis, suggestion, and/or manipulation to engineer the power (social, political, cultural, charismatic, and/or otherwise) they exert over their followers.

2.

The *mass moment* (1930–1970) is inextricably linked to the rise of fascism (notably in Italy, but also in other countries, such as Spain and Japan), National Socialism (in Germany), and Stalinism (in the USSR). During the spectacular public ceremonies of totalitarian regimes, the masses associated with this "moment" became increasingly visible; their impact was significantly amplified via highly effective propaganda mechanisms, especially on the radio and television. Having suffered different degrees of despair and alienation[55], these masses follow a leader, whose authority – which is typically reinforced by charismatic power – they confirm by recognizing him (or her) as their ultimate superior.

In this historical period, the masses are made visible through spectacular public ceremonies and mobilized through nation-wide radio programmes. Their leader uses his (or her) own voice with the aim of reaching and seducing – and, to a significant extent, controlling – his (or her) followers, who, in their plurality, remain largely isolated. They may be (physically) placed side by side (for instance, in a large venue, such as a square, an arena, or a stadium); they may be dressed in identical clothes; they may be performing the same actions and gestures; or

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55 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967 [1951]). Cf. also Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith (edited by Frederick Neuhouser, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014 [2005]).

they may be (physically) isolated at home and/or work, experiencing a lack of control over — and meaning in – their lives. Given their sense of estrangement from the objective, normative, and subjective dimensions of the world (that is, from their natural and social environment as well as from themselves as individuals), they suffer from "loneliness"[56] at an existential level.

Unlike the crowd, "the mass is made up of separate individuals who, because of their absolute similarity and the new techniques of communication and control to which they are subjected, compose a single body"[57]. Far from being a peaceful, constructive, and emancipatory endeavour, however, this body – materialized in each individual and, by extension, in the collective as a whole – carries a potential for hatred, animosity, and destruction. In the crowd moment, this destructive capacity takes hold of people, in a major way, only in phases of collective madness – that is, when they are more likely to engage in acts of cruelty. In the mass moment, by contrast, this sort of disorderly and negative behaviour – even if it erupts only from time to time on a large scale – is the norm, rather than the exception.

3.

Within the network moment (1990–present), processes of deindividualization and depersonalization persist no less forcefully than in the preceding historical configurations. Digitally mediated lifeworlds are structured by disembodied – and inherently disembodying – modes of interaction, in which corporeality is rendered secondary, if not altogether absent. While individuals continue to exist as embodied subjects, their presence within the logic of digital networks is articulated primarily through the inscription of textual and visual traces disseminated across the Internet. In numerous instances, such traces are mediated by pseudo-

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56 Cf. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 415.

57 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 19.

nyms, which function as nominative artefacts that simultaneously confer a name and obscure the referent, thereby rendering processes of identification virtually impossible.

An idiosyncratic feature of the logic of the network is that it generates a digital environment in which it is possible to separate the number of published contributions from the number of people to whom these are attributed and by whom they are consumed. This logic, however, is far from unproblematic: in principle, network participants can say and write whatever they want, unless their contributions are monitored, and potentially censored, by those who control the digital platforms on which they are published.

Network participants mostly enjoy this freedom, because their digital existence (especially if it remains anonymous) escapes the physical (and reputational) risks to which crowds and masses are exposed when engaging in socially "deviant" behaviour in the "real" world. This issue is reflected in the large amount of abusive behaviour that is widespread on the Internet. Those who participate in the construction of digital networks, whether they do so as influencers or as followers, have the freedom to express any opinion they like, since editorial policies are far less restrictive and prescriptive than in what is now known as the "old", "traditional", or "legacy" media.[58]

Sociologically speaking, networks may be regarded as "agents" [*actants*][59], given that they "act" *with*, *through*, and *upon* both "agents" and

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58 See Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*. See also Susen, "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas".

59 On this point, see, for instance: Anders Blok, Ignacio Farias, and Celia Roberts, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory* (London: Routledge, 2020). Dave Elder-Vass, "Disassembling Actor-Network Theory", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 45, no. 1 (2015). Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013 [2012]). Idongesit Williams, ed. *Contemporary Applications of Actor Network Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

"actors" (and, hence, make them perform certain actions in particular ways, while preventing others). Historically speaking, networks – notably digital networks – may be considered "unparalleled", due to the scope, pace, and significance of their influence. When turned into a largely malignant force, they are marked by "an unprecedented violence, rapidity of reaction, malfeasance, and robustness"[60]. The proliferation of "trolls" – especially in the form of "troll factories" or "troll farms" – is a relatively recent phenomenon of major importance. Institutionalized groups dedicated to the creation of Internet trolls are able to interfere in political decision-making processes, thereby playing havoc with traditional channels, instruments, and procedures underlying the construction, maintenance, and legitimization of democratic systems.

A related – and extensively discussed – problem is the extent to which social and digital media have contributed not only to the rise of echo chambers but also to the rise of populism and authoritarianism across the world.[61] Digital networks – their advantages and disadvantages notwithstanding – generate dynamic realms for processes of opinion- and will-formation in the twenty-first century. As a worldwide network of instant communication and 24/7 news provision, the Internet is an omnipresent feature of the global village. Arguably, the Internet has become so powerful that it can seriously destabilize not only political structures and practices associated with liberal democracy but also, in a more fundamental sense, society as a whole.[62]

A noteworthy consequence of this logic is that the exercise of digital power in the network moment is, to a substantial degree, a numbers

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60 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 11 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 20.

61 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 8. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 17.

62 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 18.

game: in the "click culture" of "likes" and "dislikes", those seeking to exert influence by virtue of attention capital "gain their significance by weight of numbers"[63]. In terms of their success (or failure), influencers depend on those who follow and endorse them, echoing their views and opinions, taking their normative positions and prescriptive statements seriously, and providing them with high levels of legitimacy.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

Given Boltanski and Esquerre's concern with the production, circulation, and consumption of *political news*, including the *events* on which they are (presumably) based and the *opinions* through which they are (effectively) interpreted, it is worth mentioning that each of the aforementioned "moments" is associated with a dominant means of large-scale communication:[64] first, the *crowd moment* (1870–1914) with the *popular press*, particularly *tabloids and newspapers*; second, the *mass moment* (1930–1970) with *radio and television*; and, third, the *network moment* (1990–present) with the *Internet* and the rise of the *new (notably digital and social) media*.

A key challenge for contemporary sociologists consists in accounting for the degree to which technological transformations in the means of communication have triggered, and will continue to trigger, profound changes in prevalent modes of socialization, including both bottom-up and top-down dynamics of politicization. Different social scientists may formulate different hypotheses about both the causes and the consequences of the structural transformation of public space. Irrespective of one's assessment of these hypotheses, the growing influence of AI (artificial intelligence) is likely to be one of the main ingredients of the next major historical transition, which may result in a new "moment".[65]

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63 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 20.

64 On this point, see Susen, "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas", 857–858. See also "Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?", esp. section IV ("Crowds, Masses, and Networks").

65 See, for instance: Brian P. Bloomfield, ed. *The Question of Artificial Intelligence:*

VI. Hobbesian Pessimism: the Social *vs.* the Political?

Hobbes's pessimistic anthropology[66] is well known and popular among advocates of "realist" interpretations of social life. From a Hobbesian perspective, politics is an artificial arrangement designed to ensure that people, having left the state of nature, can co-exist in a more or less peaceful manner. If one shares this view, then one is confronted with a series of oppositions: the social *vs.* the political, state of nature *vs.* social contract, barbarism *vs.* civilization, war *vs.* peace. An important reason for questioning the validity of such a binary framework is that some political regimes produce forms of life that are closer to the imposition of the state of nature, barbarism, and/or war than to the defence of social contracts, civilization, and/or peace.

Bringing Boltanski and Esquerre's periodizing approach into the frame, it becomes possible to understand why sceptics – seeking to go *with* Hobbes *beyond* Hobbes – may conceive of crowd, mass, and/or net-

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Philosophical and Sociological Perspectives (London: Routledge, 1987). Margaret A. Boden, *Artificial Intelligence and Natural Man*, 2nd (expanded) ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987 [1977]). *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). *Artificial Intelligence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019). "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities", *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (2019). Rosi Braidotti and Matthew Fuller, "The Posthumanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences", ibid. Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. Hella Beister, Max Pensky, and William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 2003 [2001]). Erik J. Larson, *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence: Why Computers Can't Think the Way We Do* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021). John C. Lennox, *2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2020). Simon Susen, "Reflections on the (Post-)Human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?", *Social Epistemology* 36, no. 1 (2022), esp. 65–66.

66 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 11–12. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 20–21. In addition, see Thomas Hobbes, "Leviathan", in *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1996 [1651]).

work societies as out-of-control historical formations that should – but cannot – be mitigated, let alone regulated, by democratic politics. Such a critical view *converges* with Hobbesian pessimism, notably with regard to the conflictual, belligerent, and destructive potential of humans in general and human societies in particular; at the same time, it *diverges* from Hobbesian contractarianism, recognizing that state-governed formations – including those associated with crowd, mass, and/or network societies – may end up realizing humanity's darkest potential, rather than preventing it from unleashing in the first place.

Sharing this kind of scepticism about the Hobbesian position, Boltanski and Esquerre refuse to conceive of *democracy* in terms of binaries, such as the following: real *vs.* false, authentic *vs.* fake, direct *vs.* indirect, deliberative *vs.* representative, perfect *vs.* imperfect, empowering *vs.* disempowering, liberal *vs.* authoritarian – to mention only a few.[67] To illustrate the importance of this point, they make reference to the position taken by numerous intellectuals in the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s. Many of these intellectuals, both on the right and on the left, were not willing to make the slightest effort to defend the Weimar Republic, because it did not live up to their (unrealistic) expectations – that is, to their somewhat limited, purist, and ultimately uncompromising view of what a "proper" democracy should look like.[68] Not only Germany but the entire world paid a heavy price for this dogmatic pursuit of ideological purity. It prevented democratic players from joining forces to defend liberal institutions and to thwart the rise of National Socialism. The lessons learnt from major historical events pose serious questions about the nature of interpretation – a central issue examined in *MPS*.

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67 Cf. Simon Susen, "Jürgen Habermas: Between Democratic Deliberation and Deliberative Democracy", in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner (London: Routledge, 2018).

68 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 12–13. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 21–22.

VII. The Interpretation of Interpretation

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre draw attention to Paul Ricœur's distinction between two fundamental types of interpretation: interpretation as *recollection of meaning* and interpretation as *exercise of suspicion*.[69]

1.

Interpretation as *exercise of suspicion* is aimed at "the 'reduction of illusions', the laying bare of lies, and the exposure of simulacra"[70]. This orientation – which is driven by the *demand for truth* – may be expressed in numerous ways: for instance, the radical critique of the media empire (by intellectuals), the illegitimate exercise of state authority (by journalists), or the systemic reproduction of elite power (by marginalized social groups). It is not uncommon that members of the public – as "critical citizens" capable of forming their own judgements on a variety of matters – call the validity of the information with which they are provided into question. In extreme cases, they may reject the legitimacy of this "information", especially when dismissing it as "misinformation", "disinformation", or "mal-information".

The epistemic outlook underlying the exercise of suspicion, however, is not reducible to a form of *objectivist realism*, which presupposes that "facts" can and should be regarded as "real" and requires that "tests" [*épreuves*] be undertaken to establish their veracity. Rather, it may be articulated in different versions of *categorical scepticism* and *conspiracy theories*, which tend to assume that self-serving narratives are being con-

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69 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 205. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 246. Furthermore, see Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970 [1965]), esp. 33–35, and *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (edited by Don Ihde, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974 [1969]).

70 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 205 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 246.

structed by powerful groups to cover up their "true" interests and agendas.[71]

To be sure, interpretation as suspicion may take borderline forms. This occurs, in particular, when individual or collective actors seek to demonstrate that "facts" that are widely regarded as "authentic" and "established" are actually "fake" and "engineered", insofar as they are products of the creative and manipulative "fabrication of truth", designed to spread false accounts of specific events, conditions, and realities. In extreme cases (for example, the terrorist attack on, and destruction of, the Twin Towers in New York on 11th September 2001), conspiracy theorists may claim that an "ostensibly" seminal and devastating event of world-historic importance was "staged" in an intentional, dramaturgical, and sensationalist fashion.

Often, those supporting interpretations based on radical suspicion aim to gain credibility by relying on inventions and fabrications, rather than evidence. Ironically, however, they purport to do the exact opposite – that is, to expose the alleged inventions and fabrications of those whom they accuse of spreading "fake" news. As Boltanski and Esquerre illustrate in *MPS*, these (arguably worrying) trends are far more common among visitors to *INA* websites than among readers and commentators of *Le Monde*. Yet, the latter can be as critical of the articles published in their daily newspaper as the former of the material made available on digital video platforms.

2.

Interpretation as a *recollection of meaning* is guided by the conviction that "the most likely meaning of a text or utterance […] may, considered in itself, appear mysterious or ambiguous"[72] and may, in this sense, be above

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71 Cf. Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2014 [2012]). Cf. also Simon Susen, "Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny", *SocietàMutamentoPolitica: Rivista Italiana di Sociologia* 12, no. 23 (2021).

72 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions*

and beyond one's immediate reach. A central dimension of this herme-neutic orientation lies in the pursuit of understanding texts and utter-ances not solely through the contextualization of "the interpreted" but equally through the contextualization of "the interpreter".[73] Within the framework of *actualité*, the interpretive process unfolds along two possi-ble axes of contextual extension: one oriented towards *the past*, the other towards *the future*. The former (that is, the retrospective axis) entails the articulation of present phenomena in relation to prior events, thereby situating the contemporary within a diachronic continuum. Converse-ly, the latter (that is, the prospective axis) involves the projection of the present into its possible trajectories, enabling judgments concerning the (actual or potential) implications of current phenomena for medium- and long-term futures.[74]

In either case, the domain of *actualité* manifests as "the scene of a trial"[75] – that is, as an ongoing, dynamic process, a milieu perpetually in flux. When interpretation is oriented primarily towards the antici-pation of future states of affairs, however, it eludes conventional binary classifications of "true" or "false", insofar as the phenomena to which it refers have not yet materialized and, therefore, lack the status of es-tablished reality.[76] In other words, future-oriented interpretations are

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in the Twenty-First Century, 206. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 247.

73 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 206–207. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 247–248.

74 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 207. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 248.

75 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 208. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 249. Cf. Luc Boltanski and Élisabeth Claverie, "Du monde so-cial en tant que scène d'un procès", in *Affaires, scandales et grandes causes. De Socrate à Pinochet*, ed. Luc Boltanski, et al. (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2007).

76 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opin-ions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 251.

– by their very nature – inherently provisional, epistemically tentative, and contingent, in contrast to their retrospective, past-oriented counterparts.

The question of the adequacy [*justesse*] of judgements based on common sense is inextricably linked to the question of the adequacy [*justesse*] of an interpretation.[77] Boltanski and Esquerre wish to "propose the idea that the feeling of adequacy [*sentiment de justesse*] that the interpretation of a news item can arouse is based on a synthetic judgement directed towards both the question of truth and the question of justice"[78]. Put in Kantian terms, the pursuit of an accurate interpretation hinges on the confluence of theoretical reason and practical reason in the daily search for truth and justice.

The adequacy of an interpretation, however, is contingent not solely upon the interplay between *representational* and *moral* functions but also upon the relational dynamics that it enacts: first, between *the interpreter* and *the interpreted*; and, second, between *the individual* articulating the interpretation and *the interlocutor* seeking to comprehend it. In this sense, interpretive validity emerges not as a static, let alone transcendental, property of a statement but, rather, as a relational and contextually mediated achievement.

On this account, an interpretation – "the violence inherent in any interpretative procedure"[79] notwithstanding – can be considered *right*, *accurate*, or *adequate* [*juste*] insofar as it obtains a "degree of acceptability, which is itself partly a function of the convergence between the beliefs and prejudices of the person who proposes it and the beliefs and prej-

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77 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 252.

78 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 252.

79 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 252.

udices of its addressees"[80]. In brief, interpretation is, at once, a meaning-seeking, meaning-projecting, and meaning-reciprocating exercise.

VIII. Beyond "Right" and "Left"?

Dominant ideologies have the power to shape how members of a particular society interpret (and, crucially, how they do *not* interpret) key elements of the past, present, and future.[81] Reflecting on the role of ideologies in modern societies, Boltanski and Esquerre examine the famous right–left divide, which emerged in the French National Assembly more than two centuries ago and, subsequently, spread to other parts of the world. Initially, it captured the divide between those who were in favour of establishing a constitutional monarchy, similar to the British model (sitting on the right side of the tribune), and those who were in favour of assigning a limited role to the King (sitting on the left side of the tribune). Different meanings can be attributed to the right–left divide:

1. As a *social* opposition: capitalism *vs.* socialism, noble *vs.* non-noble, top *vs.* bottom, rich *vs.* poor, elite *vs.* people, dominant *vs.* dominated, bourgeoisie *vs.* proletariat, bosses *vs.* masses, distinguished tastes *vs.* vulgar tastes. This opposition is central to the politicization of social hierarchies and inequalities.

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80 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 252. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London: Sheed & Ward, 1989 [1960/1975]).

81 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 211. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 253.
On this point, see also Luc Boltanski, *Rendre la réalité inacceptable. À propos de «La production de l'idéologie dominante»* (Paris: Demopolis, 2008) and Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, *La production de l'idéologie dominante* (Paris: Demopolis / Raisons d'agir, 2008 [1976]). In addition, see Simon Susen, "Reflections on Ideology: Lessons from Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski", *Thesis Eleven* 124, no. 1 (2014) and "Towards a Critical Sociology of Dominant Ideologies: An Unexpected Reunion between Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski", *Cultural Sociology* 10, no. 2 (2016).

2. As a *temporal* opposition: past *vs.* future, conservative *vs.* progressive, conservatism *vs.* progressivism, rear-guard *vs.* vanguard, tradition *vs.* invention/renovation, repetition of the same *vs.* exploration of differences. This opposition is central to the politicization of temporalities.

3. As a *normative* opposition: conformism *vs.* critique, alienation *vs.* emancipation, order *vs.* disorder, authoritarianism *vs.* democratism, docility *vs.* revolt/revolution. This opposition is central to the politicization of the question of freedom.

4. As a *transcendental* opposition: spiritualism/idealism *vs.* materialism, belief *vs.* reason, labour *vs.* work. This opposition is central to the politicization of the relationship between the religious and the secular.

One may seek to classify different values, principles, and/or characteristics in terms of the classical right–left taxonomy. Such an exercise would demonstrate that these classification patterns are variable and context-dependent:[82] a term that may be situated on the left in one taxonomic field may be situated on the right in another field. The significance of this observation is illustrated in the "orientation towards difference"[83]: it is located "on the right" when associated with the deliberate search for "social distinction"[84], which manifests itself in social hierarchies and inequalities, and "on the left" when associated with "the logic of emancipation, freedom, and creativity"[85].

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82 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 211–215. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 253–257.

83 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 212. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 255.

84 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 212. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 255. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979). Cf. also Simon Susen, *Pierre Bourdieu et la distinction sociale. Un essai philosophique* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

85 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 212. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 255.

In their interpretation of the right–left taxonomy, Boltanski and Esquerre favour a *relational(ist)* approach, thereby rejecting any kind of ontological or epistemological *substantialism*. It is no surprise, therefore, that they take issue with Jean-Michel Salanskis's (arguably substantialist) contention that the "pursuit of equality" lies at the centre of the ideological universe inhabited by "the left".[86] Actors on "the right" may also follow political agendas concerned with "equality", even if they may interpret this concept very differently (for instance, in terms of "equality of opportunity", rather than "equality of outcome"). A similar argument can be made in relation to other key principles and ideals – such as "freedom", "autonomy", "sovereignty", "solidarity", etc. If one accepts the validity of this (relationalist) view, then it becomes hard, if not impossible, to defend a rigid dichotomy along the lines of "left-wing sensibility" *vs.* "right-wing sensibility".[87] To a large extent, the terms "right" and "left" obtain their meaning from "the structure of the situation of utterance [*énonciation*]"[88] within which they are *used*. Drawing on valuable insights from (the later) Wittgenstein's contextualism and (the later) Foucault's poststructuralism, Boltanski and Esquerre make a strong case for "pragmatic structuralism", which is irreconcilable with any kind of "semantic substantialism"[89]. Just as "[t]he meaning of a word is its use in the language"[90], the value of a

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86 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 213–214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 255–256. Cf. Jean-Michel Salanskis, *La gauche et l'égalité* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

87 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 256.

88 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 256.

89 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 257.

90 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (revised 4th ed., by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 [1953]), §43.

principle is its use in a particular context. The preponderance of practice will always remain practically preponderant.

IX. Processes of (De)Politicisation in the Digital Age

As a political system fostering deliberative empowerment, democracy is meant to provide people with freedom of expression – written and oral, private and public, informal and formal – and to guarantee this privilege within a judicial framework defining the limits of this right.[91] In some cases, however, a red line may be crossed: hate speech, denial of major historical facts (such as genocide), and discriminatory discourses based on extreme forms of classism, sexism, racism, ageism, and/or ableism – to mention only a few examples.

Far from being governed exclusively by *dominant ideologies*[92], people's cognitive and behavioural modes of functioning may be influenced, if not engineered, by *nudging strategies*[93]. These processes encompass the strategic deployment of emotion, framing, and anchoring to influence decision-making processes, thereby supplanting established patterns of behaviour with alternative configurations and re-orienting (and, so to speak, "re-biasing") predominantly unconscious preferences and dispositions. This trend acquires particular significance in the digital age, wherein algorithmically mediated modalities of engagement profoundly shape human interactions with the world, as illustrated in their capacity to regulate human cognition and behaviour, including both its non-institutional and its institutional forms.

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91 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 215. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 257.

92 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 215. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 258.

93 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 217. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 260. Cf. Nicholas Gane, "Nudge Economics as Libertarian Paternalism", *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2021).

Aware of the far-reaching consequences of this trend, Boltanski and Esquerre highlight the *ambivalent* character of politics: on the one hand, it shapes everyone's lifeworld, exerting its power as "a superior principle of reality"[94], from which nobody can escape; on the other hand, it may be perceived as a special(ist) kind of concern – that is, as something that is imposed upon ordinary people from the outside and that, consequently, may be largely ignored, or at least not taken seriously, by them.[95] Paradoxically, then, politics is both an endogenous and an exogenous (and, by implication, both a universal and a contingent) element of everyday life.

During periods of intense politicization, the boundaries between "the political" and "the non-political" are increasingly blurred. In periods of this sort, the spontaneous (and often accelerated) development of lifeworlds indicates that *all* (including the seemingly most trivial) aspects of people's existence can be politicized – from their shopping habits and sexual behaviour to their domestic lives and personal identities. Just as politicization processes can be an expression of progress and emancipation, they can be retrograde and, hence, be used as an instrument of control and domination.[96] "In democracies, it is always possible to escape politicization campaigns by ignoring them."[97] Given their tension-laden nature, democracies can be marked *both* by varying degrees of politicization *and* by varying degrees of depoliticization. The balance of power within a particular political regime notwithstanding, democratic societ-

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94 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 219. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 263.

95 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 219. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 263.

96 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 263.

97 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 263.

ies are shaped by struggles for recognition and by competition between different agendas.[98]

One need not be a psychologist to understand that the rise of populism and authoritarianism, exacerbated by the echo chambers of social and digital media[99], is at least partly a result of the profound sense of existential uncertainty and vulnerability, if not fragility and insecurity, experienced by more and more people across the world.[100] Especially those

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98 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 263. Cf. Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes. Génocide, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997).

99 See Susen, "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas". See also, for instance: Adrian Athique, *Digital Media and Society: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). Marco Bastos, *Spatializing Social Media: Social Networks Online and Offline* (London: Routledge, 2021). Anne Kaun, " 'Our Time to Act Has Come': Desynchronization, Social Media Time and Protest Movements", *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2017). Simon Lindgren, *Digital Media and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2021 [2017]). Hartmut Rosa, "Social Media Filters and Resonances: Democracy and the Contemporary Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022). Kai Shu et al., eds., *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media: Emerging Research Challenges and Opportunities* (Berlin: Springer, 2020). Philipp Staab and Thorsten Thiel, "Social Media and the Digital Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022).

100 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220–221. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 264. On this point, see also, for example: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen, "The Fragility of Reality: Luc Boltanski in Conversation with Juliette Rennes and Simon Susen". Rodrigo Cordero, *Crisis and Critique: On the Fragile Foundations of Social Life* (London: Routledge, 2017). Stephen Crook, "Change, Uncertainty and the Future of Sociology", *Journal of Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2003). Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott, and Michael Gibbons, *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). F. David Peat, "From Certainty to Uncertainty: Thought, Theory and Action in a Postmodern World", *Futures* 39, no. 8 (2007). Giovanni Stanghellini and René Rosfort, *Emotions and Personhood: Exploring Fragility – Making Sense of Vulnerability*, International Perspectives in Philosophy and Psychiatry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Simon Susen, *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Bryan S. Turner, *Vulnerability*

who regard themselves as "politically consistent and responsible"[101] may find that they have "lost *the meaning of [global] History*"[102] as well as "the meaning of their [local] history"[103] and, thus, of their capacity to attribute meaning to their existence in the context of their lifeworlds. It is one of the greatest challenges for human actors, therefore, to attach meaning to both History (as a lifeworld-transcending process) and history (as a lifeworld-emanating process) and to grasp the possible tensions between them.[104]

Inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt, Boltanski and Esquerre are adamant that we need to differentiate between *factual truths* and *interpretations* to avoid falling into the traps of relativism, nihilism, conspiracy theories, and/or mere propaganda.[105] This distinction makes it possible, and indeed necessary, "to subject politics to constant demands for justification despite the plurality of temporal spaces with which it is confronted"[106]. On this view, it is imperative that politics – insofar as it is oriented towards social change and, by extension, towards the construction of a better future – be attentive to *factual truths of the past*, established by

and Human Rights (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

101 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 264.

102 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220 (italics in original). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 264.

103 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 221. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 264.

104 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220–221. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 264.

105 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 223–224. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 267.

106 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 224. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 267.

historians, and *factual truths of the present*, guaranteed by the guardians of current affairs, from journalists and commentators to academics and researchers. If, however, factual truths are treated as if they were tantamount to "imaginary creations"[107], then we enter the territory of "fake actuality" based on "fake news".

The "the dialectic of Enlightenment" means for modernity what "the dialectic of the Internet" means for late modernity: both are indicative of the deep *ambivalence* built into technologically advanced forms of life. On the one hand, the social networks created through the Internet have generated spheres of communication and discussion that are more accessible, inclusive, and global than any of their predecessors. On the other hand, these networks have produced echo chambers on an unprecedented scale as well as an accelerated (and algorithmically monetized) flow of data. Given the velocity and ease with which information (and, by implication, mis-, dis-, and mal-information) can circulate without undergoing serious editorial processes of "fact-checking", the reliability and veracity of online content may, in many cases, be questionable. A relatively benign (but nonetheless problematic) manifestation of this trend is infotainment.[108] The spread of hate speech, denial of major historical facts, conspiracy theories, and discriminatory discourses as well as the rise of populism and authoritarianism – intensified by the diffusion of mis-, dis-, and mal-information – are malign manifestations of this trend.[109]

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107 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 224. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 267.

108 See Susen, *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences*, 227, and "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas", 849, 850, and 853. See also, for instance: Kees Brants, "Who's Afraid of Infotainment?", *European Journal of Communication* 13, no. 3 (1998). Lloyd S. Davis et al., "Transformation of the Media Landscape: Infotainment versus Expository Narrations for Communicating Science in Online Videos", *Public Understanding of Science* 29, no. 7 (2020). Daya Kishan Thussu, *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment* (London: SAGE, 2007).

109 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 224–226. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité*

Digital technologies have profoundly reconfigured the nexus between the circulation of news and the articulation of social critique. The Internet, in particular, functions as a principal medium for the politicization of reality, insofar as it constitutes a privileged site for the production, dissemination, and contestation of meaning. As an ever-expanding proportion of the world population derives its knowledge of local, national, regional, and global events from online sources, the very perception of reality becomes mediated by the digitalization of subjectivity. Through "the dialectical relationship between facts known by experience and reported facts"[110], which underpins the symbolic construction of reality, "the main objects of struggle"[111] are perpetually reconstituted. Under these conditions, actors are compelled to mobilize both the cognitive and the normative dimensions of their critical capacities in order to sustain a sense of agency within their increasingly digitalized lifeworlds. Without the use of these reflexive capacities, subjects are rendered susceptible to the erosion of rational freedom[112] and, consequently, to intensified forms of systemically induced heteronomy.

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politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle, 268–270.

110 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 226. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 270.

111 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 226. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 270.

112 On the concept of "rational freedom" [*vernünftige Freiheit*], see Jürgen Habermas, *Also a History of Philosophy, Volume I: The Project of a Genealogy of Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2023 [2019]), *Also a History of Philosophy. Volume II: The Occidental Constellation of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2024 [2019]), and *Also a History of Philosophy. Volume III: Rational Freedom. Traces of the Discourse on Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2025 [2019]).

X. Critical Remarks[113]

1.

As outlined in the preceding sections, Boltanski and Esquerre's analytical framework is anchored in two foundational concepts: *processus de mise en actualité* and *processus de politisation*. The authors emphasize that, in their view, while not everything is political, everything is politicizable – that is, while not all phenomena are inherently political, they are potentially subject to politicization.[114] This reflection evokes the well-known slogan "the personal is political", which gained prominence during the student movement and second-wave feminist activism of the late 1960s (and which continued to shape the discourses of numerous – especially progressive – forms of social engagement in subsequent decades).

Boltanski and Esquerre rightly caution against the pitfalls of an arguably reductive "pan-politicism" – that is, the notion that *all* aspects of social life are *intrinsically* political. Instead, they advocate for a more nuanced understanding that recognizes the *politicizable* nature of various domains. Nonetheless, some critics may contend that this observation is self-evident and that, in fact, similar arguments apply across other spheres of social experience. For example, while not all phenomena are moral, aesthetic, or commodified by default, they *may be* subject to processes of moralization, aestheticization, or commodification. These issues are key concerns in moral, cultural, and economic sociology as well as in some areas of philosophy. In a similar vein, the difference between "the political" and "the politicizable" is an object of controversy in both political sociology and political philosophy. Thus, the analytical challenge lies in elucidating the interplay between transformative social processes (including processes of politicization, moralization, aestheti-

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113 This section draws on Susen, "Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?", section IX ("Critical Reflections").

114 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 13.

cization, and commodification) and, by implication, in examining their impact on the constitution and evolution of forms of life.[115]

2.

Boltanski and Esquerre delineate four primary "forms of valuation"[116], which they conceptualize as a "distinctive pragmatics of value-setting"[117].

These forms of valuation, whose "relationships can be articulated as a set of *transformations*"[118], may be categorized as follows:

a. the "*standard form*", which is vital to *industrial economies* and which allows for the possibility of mass production[119];

b. the "*collection form*", which prevails in *enrichment economies* and which is based on a narrative attached to an object's past[120];

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115 Cf. Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018 [2014]). Cf. also Simon Susen, "Between Forms of Life and Immanent Criticism: Towards a New Critical Theory?", *Journal of Political Power* 15, no. 2 (2022).

116 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, esp. Ch. 4. See also "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 67–70 and 72–73.

117 Nancy Fraser, "A New Form of Capitalism? A Reply to Boltanski and Esquerre", ibid., 59. Cf. Susen, "The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?", 325–330.

118 Boltanski and Esquerre, "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 68 (italics in original). Boltanski and Esquerre spell out that they conceive of this "set of transformations" in Claude Lévi-Strauss's sense of the term. On this point, see *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 4 and 110. See, in particular, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962). See also Patrice Maniglier, *Le vocabulaire de Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Ellipses, 2002), 55–56. On the relevance of Lévi-Strauss's work to Boltanski and Esquerre's argument, see, for example: Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 4, 79–80, 110–111, 132, 163, 190–191, 336–337, 388n1, and 410–411n3. "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 68–69. Cf. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*; cf. also *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris: PUF, 1949) and *L'homme nu. Mythologiques, tome IV* (Paris: Plon, 1971).

119 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, esp. Ch. 5 and Ch. 6.

120 See ibid., esp. Ch. 7 and Ch. 8.

c. the "*trend form*", which is crucial to *fashion economies* and whose principal reference points are contemporary high-profile individuals, such as present-day celebrities[121];

d. the "*asset form*", which is preponderant in *financial economies* and which is driven by the incentive to re-sell objects for a profit at some point in the future[122].

The distinctiveness of their "specific arenas of transaction"[123] notwithstanding, these four modes of valuation converge around a noteworthy commonality: the prices of the commodities that they uphold remain subject to legitimation and contestation through a plurality of justificatory frameworks, meaning that they "can be *justified* or *criticized* according to a range of *different arguments*"[124]. The development of these "forms of valuation"[125] is conditioned by the justificatory and critical practices enacted by market participants, who – above all, in their social roles as buyers and/or sellers – sustain the distinctive logic of interaction and transaction that characterizes each modality. In light of its engagement with the digitalization of society (particularly the digitalization of political life), Boltanski and Esquerre's most recent work would have been strengthened by a more detailed analysis of the aforementioned "forms of valuation" (and of the social dynamics triggered by them). In this regard, the following considerations merit attention:

First, an important question that arises is whether *digital economies* warrant recognition as a distinct "form of valuation", grounded in what may be termed the "*virtual form*". These economies are situated within a globally interconnected matrix of commercial interactions and transactions, whose operations are not merely facilitated but significantly accelerated by advanced information and communication technologies.

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121 See ibid., esp. Ch. 9.

122 See ibid., esp. Ch. 10.

123 "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 70.

124 Ibid., 70 (italics added).

125 See *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, esp. Ch. 4. See also "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 67–70 and 72–73.

Owing to the pervasive digitalization of social life, it becomes increasingly plausible to suggest that the traditional (Marxist) distinction between "base" and "superstructure" has become blurred, if not obsolete.[126]

Second, it is pertinent to examine the broader implications of this (fifth) "form of valuation" – not only within the domain of economic sociology, as explored in *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* (2020 [2017])[127], but also within the realm of political sociology, which constitutes the focus of *MPS*. Boltanski and Esquerre underscore the profoundly *ambivalent* nature of the digital age. Arguably, its ambivalence is rooted in the striking tension between its progressive and its regressive dimensions. This tension manifests itself in technologically mediated forms of life and is reflected in the dominant "forms of valuation" that characterize contemporary societies. The key question, then, concerns the trajectory of these developments: what future do these (constantly evolving) "forms of valuation" portend for society and, more generally, for humanity as a species?[128]

Third, in order to delineate the distinctive characteristics of a form of capitalism that mobilizes *all* four – or, arguably, five – forms of valuation,

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126 On this point, see, for instance, Susen, *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences*, 90–92, 97–98, and 100–101. For excellent discussions of the Marxist distinction between "base" and "superstructure", see, for instance: Philippe de Lara, "Superstructure", in *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, ed. Gérard Bensussan and Georges Labica (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982). Stuart Hall, "Rethinking the 'Base-and-Superstructure' Metaphor", in *Papers on Class, Hegemony and Party: The Communist University of London*, ed. Jon Bloomfield (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977). Georges Labica, "Base", in *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, ed. Gérard Bensussan and Georges Labica (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982). Jorge Larrain, "Base and Superstructure", in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1991 [1983]). Thomas Weber, "Basis", in *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus (Band 2)*, ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1995).

127 Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*. See also *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*.

128 Cf. Susen, "Reflections on the (Post-)Human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?".

Boltanski and Esquerre introduce the concept of *integral capitalism*.[129] The co-articulation of these diverse "valuation regimes" is pivotal to the emergence of a novel capitalist configuration. What renders this multilayered economic organization both remarkably resilient and exceptionally adaptable is its capacity to exploit "new lodes of wealth and interconnecting different ways of valorizing things"[130], thereby facilitating their circulation within market systems to maximize profit extraction. A central concern for contemporary sociological inquiry involves the multifaceted positioning of goods across diverse economic regimes. Specifically, goods may be *simultaneously* embedded within (a) industrial economies characterized by "standard forms", (b) enrichment economies structured around "collection forms", (c) fashion economies driven by "trend forms", (d) financial economies organized through "asset forms", and – as a recent addition – (e) digital economies predicated on "virtual forms". This overlapping configuration underscores the complexity of valuation processes in late-capitalist societies and invites further analysis of how these types of value-setting interact, compete, and coalesce in shaping market dynamics and cultural meaning. Indeed, the values ascribed to a given item may vary not only across distinct "form-specific" economies but also across different spatial and temporal contexts. This multi-layered dynamic arguably applies – drawing on Bourdieusian terminology – to multiple *social fields*.[131] It is not confined to the *economic field* and its various subfields; rather, it extends to other social fields – for example, the *journalistic field* and the *political field*. A crucial dimension

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129 On the concept of "integral capitalism", see, for instance: Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, 26, 375, 399–400, and 566; "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 68 and 73–75.

130 "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 74.

131 On Bourdieu's "field theory", see, for example: Pierre Bourdieu, "Some Properties of Fields", in *Sociology in Question*, Pierre Bourdieu (London: SAGE, 1993 [1984]) as well as Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "The Logic of Fields", in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). See also, for instance, Simon Susen, *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology* (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2007), esp. 171–180.

that warrants further investigation is the degree to which these diverse "forms of valuation" influence individuals' *concurrent* engagement with *actualité* and processes of *politicization*.

3.

It is reasonable to support Boltanski and Esquerre's adoption of the term "*lifeworld*" [*monde vécu*], particularly in view of its philosophical lineage. While acknowledging the foundational contributions of thinkers such as Dilthey[132] and Husserl[133], Boltanski and Esquerre emphasize that their own interpretation of the concept aligns primarily with a Habermasian framework.[134]

In line with Habermas, Boltanski and Esquerre conceptualize "social interaction" in general and "communicative action" in particular as integral components of the lifeworld. They diverge from Habermas's perspective, however, insofar as they reject the dichotomy between "lifeworld" and "system". Instead, they propose to distinguish between "people's relationship with what is *accessible* to them"[135] and "people's relationship with what is *inaccessible* to them"[136]. The former refers to individuals' direct and "lived" experience of reality, while the latter emerges through their technologically mediated engagement with the world. Nevertheless, this alternative conceptualization is not necessarily

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132 See, for example, Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung f*ür *das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte* (Erster Band, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1883).

133 See, for example, Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik* (4. Auflage, redigiert und herausgegeben von Ludwig Landgrebe, Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1972 [1939]).

134 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251*n*7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 297–298*n*7.

135 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251*n*7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 298*n*7.

136 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251*n*7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle*, 298*n*7.

less problematic than the lifeworld–system model proposed by Habermas; in fact, it raises its own set of theoretical and empirical challenges.

First, one may have doubts about the validity of Boltanski and Esquerre's interpretation of Habermas's conception of the lifeworld, which is considerably more differentiated than they appear to acknowledge.[137] The relationship between "lifeworld" and "system" – and, by extension, between hermeneutics/phenomenology and functionalism/systems theory – is more complex than Boltanski and Esquerre's account suggests. Equally intricate is the internal structure of the lifeworld itself, comprising the components *culture*, *society*, and *personality*, each of which serves a species-constitutive function by providing sources of *interpretation*, *integration*, and *identity formation*. Admittedly, Habermas conceives of communicative action as the lifeworld's driving force; he recognizes, however, that other forms of action – such as teleological action, normatively regulated action, and dramaturgical action – are *also* "always already" embedded (and, hence, ubiquitous) within the lifeworld. Crucially, these forms of action exist *prior to* their colonization by the steering mechanisms of the system's two principal realms: the state and the market.[138] This insight underscores that *some* (but by no means all) of the most problematic dimensions of social life – such as the context-specific dominance of instrumental action – are not merely *exogenous* impositions inflicted on the lifeworld by the system (in accordance with Habermas) or the result of "people's relationship with what is *inaccessible* to them"[139]

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137 For a detailed and critical account, see Susen, *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology*, Chs. 3 and 4. See also "Jürgen Habermas", in *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory. Volume I: A Contested Canon*, ed. Peter Kivisto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 381–382 and 389–392.

138 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1987 [1981]), and *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1987 [1981]).

139 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 298n7.

(in accordance with Boltanski and Esquerre). Rather, they are *endogenous* components of the lifeworld and/or of "people's relationship with what is *accessible* to them"[140].

Second, despite its limitations, Habermas's "colonization thesis" offers a more perceptive analytical framework than Boltanski and Esquerre, who reject the lifeworld–system architecture, are willing to concede. According to Habermas's thesis, lifeworlds are increasingly colonized by the functionalist rationality of the system – above all, by the administrative logic of state bureaucratization and the profit-driven logic of market competition. Arguably, this framework can be fruitfully expanded to scrutinize the pervasive influence of technological networks. In the current "network moment", the colonization of lifeworlds by digital technologies has reached unprecedented levels, raising profound questions about the nature of "agency". Advanced technologies function as non-human or extended forms of human agency, thereby affirming Boltanski and Esquerre's claim that each historical "moment" is shaped by a new agent [*actant*], capable of transforming society in a fundamental sense. To their credit, Boltanski and Esquerre acknowledge that the boundary between "lifeworld" and "system" is often blurred. For example, when engaging with digital technologies – such as using a computer or browsing the Internet – individuals are *simultaneously* immersed in (an experiential) "lifeworld" and (a digital) "system". Yet, it is precisely the degree to which the former is *colonized* by the latter that lends explanatory power to Habermas's "*colonization* thesis".

Third, a more nuanced understanding of the lifeworld reveals that the notion of a "direct" or "immediate" experience of reality is philosophically (and sociologically) problematic. Even our most immediate experiences are *mediated* – if not by systemic or technological forces, then by our sensory apparatus. Kant's transcendental idealism famously highlights this epistemological limitation: we can access only the "phenomenal

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140 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251*n*7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 298*n*7.

world" (that is, the world as it appears to us), not the "noumenal world" (that is, the world as it is in itself).[141] The former is the world that we *perceive* and *experience*, whereas the latter is the world of things as they "really" *are*. While Boltanski and Esquerre's distinction between "the accessible" and "the inaccessible" is not equivalent to Kant's distinction between "the phenomenal" and "the noumenal", a potentially fruitful challenge lies in examining the ontological, epistemological, and socio-logical implications of the fact that this tension is *always already* present within the lifeworld – that is, *prior to* any kind of systemic or technological mediation.

Finally, building on the preceding point, everyday life is character-ized by a "constant back-and-forth movement […] between what can be known through experience and what can only be known in a mediated fashion"[142] – that is, by a continuous oscillation between knowledge de-rived from experience and knowledge acquired in a reason-guided fash-ion. This oscillation reflects the interplay between sensory immediacy and rational abstraction – that is, between the seemingly direct access we gain to the world by virtue of our senses and the indirect ways of obtaining knowledge about the world by virtue of reason and logic. This matter lies at the core of the long-standing empiricism-*vs.*-rationalism debate. Empiricists seek evidence derived from experience; rationalists prioritize logical reasoning; and Kantians aim to synthesize sensory data with insights derived from the triadic interplay of *Verstand*, *Vernunft*, and *Urteilskraft*.[143] A further (empirical and theoretical) challenge for Bol-

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141 See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995 [1781]). Cf. Michael Oberst, "Two Worlds *and* Two Aspects: On Kant's Distinction between Things in Themselves and Appearances", *Kantian Review* 20, no. 1 (2015). Cf. also An-drew Ward, *Kant: The Three Critiques* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), Part I.

142 Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Mak-ing of Modern Societies*, 229. Cf. Susen, "Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inqui-ries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny", 33.

143 Cf. Susen, "Between Forms of Life and Immanent Criticism: Towards a New Critical Theory?", 305. On the triadic interplay between *Verstand*, *Vernunft*, and *Urteilskraft*, see, for instance: "The Philosophical Significance of Bina-

tanski and Esquerre is to explore the extent to which *both* "people's relationship with what is *accessible* to them"[144] *and* "people's relationship with what is *inaccessible* to them"[145] are fundamentally shaped by their relationship with *both* experience *and* reason. The interdependence between knowledge derived from experience and knowledge acquired in a reason-guided fashion is built into the human condition.

ry Categories in Habermas's Discourse Ethics", *Sociological Analysis* 3, no. 2 (2009), 104–105. "Remarks on the Concept of Critique in Habermasian Thought", *Journal of Global Ethics* 6, no. 2 (2010), 112–113. "A Reply to My Critics: The Critical Spirit of Bourdieusian Language", *Social Epistemology* 27, no. 3-4 (2013), 326 and 330–331. *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences*, 13, 105, 215, 219, 234, 236, 259, and 275. "Emancipation", in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, ed. Michael T. Gibbons, et al. (Vol. 3, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 1027–1028. "Further Reflections on the 'Postmodern Turn' in the Social Sciences: A Reply to William Outhwaite", 432–433. "Reflections on Patrick Baert's *the Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual*", in *The Sociology of Intellectuals: After "The Existentialist Moment"*, Simon Susen and Patrick Baert (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 18 and 43. "Saussure, Ferdinand de", in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, ed. Bryan S. Turner, et al. (Volume V, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 28. *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 10–11. "Intimations of Humanity and the Case for a Philosophical Sociology", *Journal of Political Power* 13, no. 1 (2020), 131, 137, and 138. "No Escape from the Technosystem?", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46, no. 6 (2020), 745 and 755. "Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny", 39. "The Case for a Critical Hermeneutics: From the Understanding of Power to the Power of Understanding", in *Hans-Herbert Kögler's Critical Hermeneutics*, ed. Ľubomír Dunaj and Kurt C. M. Mertel (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 18 and 35. "Between Forms of Life and Immanent Criticism: Towards a New Critical Theory?", 283, 299, and 305. "Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?", 47.

144 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251*n*7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 298*n*7.

145 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251*n*7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 298*n*7.

4.

Boltanski and Esquerre make a strong case for rejecting reductive approaches within the social sciences – particularly those grounded in substantialist, essentialist, behaviourist, and determinist paradigms. As they rightly point out, sociological inquiry often involves distinguishing between a *superficial* level, constituted by observable phenomena, and a *deeper* level, comprising underlying structural mechanisms. Upon closer examination, however, this dichotomous framework reveals several conceptual limitations that warrant critical scrutiny.

First, the distinction between the "superficial" and the "profound" levels of reality is considerably more complex (and controversial) than Boltanski and Esquerre seem to suggest. This conceptual dichotomy has deep roots in the history of ideas, traceable as far back as Ancient Greek philosophy.[146] Across all major domains of intellectual inquiry – including the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the formal sciences – scholars have long grappled with the notion that reality is composed of two fundamental levels: the level of *surfaces* and *appearances*, on the one hand; and the level of *essences* and underlying *substances*, on the other. In philosophy – particularly its Kantian and neo-Kantian traditions – this dualism is often articulated through the opposition between "phenomenal realms" and "noumenal realms". In sociology – especially its structuralist and critical variants – a comparable distinction emerges in the contrast between what is perceived as "apparent", "illusory", "deceptive", or "misleading", on the one hand, and what is regarded as "hidden", "real", "genuine", or "authentic", on the other. In one of his previous works[147], Boltanski has provided a fine-grained examination of these tensions, notably in terms of the "REALITY *vs. reality*"

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146 Cf. A. C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2020 [2019]), Part I. Cf. also Susen, "Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny", 44.

147 See Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*.

antinomy.[148] Given the importance of this matter for the analysis of the relationship between *actualité* and *politisation*, *MPS* would have benefitted from a more nuanced assessment of this issue.

Second, Boltanski and Esquerre refer to both *social structuralism* (which emphasizes the role of social organizations and institutions) and *cognitive structuralism* (which posits the existence of invariant mental structures as cognitive anchors). Their treatment of structuralist traditions, however, remains somewhat underdeveloped. A more in-depth account could have acknowledged the diversity of structuralist approaches, all of which rest on a foundational distinction between "a *superficial* level" (of observable phenomena) and "a *profound* level" (of underlying structures). These frameworks include – among others – linguistic structuralism, anthropological structuralism, economic structuralism, biological structuralism, and genetic structuralism. It would have been analytically fruitful if the authors had delineated the principal areas of (a) convergence, (b) divergence, and (c) cross-fertilization between their own formulation of "pragmatic structuralism"[149] and other structuralist perspectives.

Third, Boltanski and Esquerre posit that the contemporary social sciences tend to *undervalue* the study of *the present* and to *overvalue* the study of *history*. Within this framework, the present is often reduced to a *superficial* domain of observable phenomena, whereas history is elevated as the locus of *deeper*, *structural* insights – particularly through genealogical analysis.[150] This diagnosis, however, appears to contrast with prevailing

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148 See ibid., xv; cf. ibid., Ch. 1.

149 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 5–6, 338–342, and 343.

150 On this point, see, for instance: Samantha Ashenden and David Owen, eds., *Foucault contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory* (London: SAGE, 1999). Patrick Baert, "The History of the Present: Foucault's Archaeology and Genealogy", in *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century*, Patrick Baert (Cambridge: Polity, 1998). Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979 [1975]). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon [et al.], Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980). Raymond Geuss, "Nietzsche and Genealogy", *European Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1994). Robert Layton, "Lévi-Strauss et la quête

tendencies in contemporary sociology (especially in Anglophone circles), exhibiting an increasingly a short-sighted preoccupation with the present, commonly framed through the lens of purported "epochal shifts". This orientation is accompanied by a relative neglect of historical inquiry, thereby undermining a granular understanding of the present and its embeddedness in broader temporal trajectories. The dominance of a "presentist lens"[151] is evident in the extent to which much of sociology's disciplinary agenda fails to foster a genuinely historical comprehension, let alone historical examination, of social reality. In the early twenty-first century, historical sociology is frequently relegated to the status of a niche subfield, rather than recognized as a foundational component of social and political analysis. This conceptual and methodological marginalization is further exacerbated by the widespread reliance on reductive periodizing categories – such as "premodern", "modern", "late-modern", and/or "postmodern". These labels tend to obscure, rather than to illuminate, the complexities inherent in large-scale socio-historical transformation processes. Consequently, a paradox emerges: while mainstream sociology continues to exhibit a strong "will to periodize"[152], it privileges the study of the present over the study of the past. Both "stagist" and "presentist" approaches dilute the critical and historicist ethos that characterizes classical sociological thought.[153] Ironically, this

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des structures élémentaires de la société. Généalogie intellectuelle", *Les Temps Modernes* 628, no. 3 (2004). Andreas Rasche and Robert Chia, "Researching Strategy Practices: A Genealogical Social Theory Perspective", *Organization Studies* 30, no. 7 (2009). Martin Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik. Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007).

151 On "presentist lens(es)", see Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, xix and 153. See also David Inglis, "What is Worth Defending in Sociology Today? Presentism, Historical Vision and the Uses of Sociology", *Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 1 (2014), 101.

152 On "the will to periodize", see Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, xix and 162. See also Inglis, "What is Worth Defending in Sociology Today? Presentism, Historical Vision and the Uses of Sociology", 111–113.

153 See Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, Ch. 7.

trend resonates with Boltanski and Esquerre's emphasis on individuals' immersion in and engagement with *actualité*. Yet, to their credit, Boltanski and Esquerre's commitment to empirical and genealogical research stands in stark contrast to the superficiality associated with the kind of headline-grabbing boasting (and opportunistic theorizing) prevalent in catchy forms of *Zeitgeistsurfing*.

5.

Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis of the ideological divide between "the right" and "the left" offers several valuable insights:

a. It underscores the conceptual complexity of this divide, which can be examined across multiple dimensions – particularly social, temporal, normative, and transcendental.

b. It elucidates the multifaceted nature of this divide, revealing how it is constituted both within and across the aforementioned analytical domains.

c. It highlights the contingent and context-laden character of the classificatory schemes linked to this divide, challenging notions of their alleged "universality" and "fixity".

In broad terms, Boltanski and Esquerre are justified in rejecting any form of *substantialist* reduction of the right–left political taxonomy, opting instead for a *relationalist* mode of interpretation. Nonetheless, several critical issues pertaining to the right–left divide remain insufficiently addressed and warrant further investigation:

a. Owing to its *dichotomous* structure, the right–left framework fails to reflect the intricately differentiated political landscapes characteristic of pluralistic societies in the twenty-first century. In such contexts, political arenas are typically marked by a wide-ranging spectrum of positions and dispositions whose diversity, complexity, and interrelations resist reduction to the binary logic of a simple right–left antinomy.

b. Owing to its *anachronistic* structure, the right–left framework fails to account for the processes of political hybridization that have shaped – and continue to shape – pluralistic societies in the twenty-first cen-

tury. The "major" ideological traditions of modernity (that is, anarchism, communism/socialism, liberalism, conservatism, and fascism), alongside their "sub-major" counterparts (such as nationalism, feminism, and environmentalism) and intersectional elements (including [anti-]classism, [anti-]sexism, [anti-]racism, [anti-]ageism, and [anti-]ableism), have increasingly undergone cross-fertilization. These developments have given rise to political projects and alliances that, to varying degrees, transcend the conventional right–left antinomy.[154]

c. Owing to its *essentialist* structure, the right–left framework fails to convey the intersectional constitution of highly differentiated societies in the twenty-first century. The classificatory patterns associated with this dichotomy must be re-evaluated in light of the multiple meanings that they acquire through the dynamic interplay of key sociological variables – such as class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, "race", age, and (dis)ability. These intersecting dimensions of identity and social positioning complicate any attempt to impose a rigid binary taxonomy on contemporary political formations.

Importantly, the previous remarks are *not* intended to suggest that contemporary societies have entered a "post-ideological" era.[155] Rather, they are meant to acknowledge that – in light of the increasing pluralization of social fields (and, by extension, of positions, dispositions, interests, identities, and discourses) within complex forms of life – classical conceptions of the right–left divide fall short of capturing the multiplicity of factors that shape the behavioural, ideological, and institutional configurations prevalent in polycentric societies.

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154 Cf. *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences*, 192–194.

155 On this point, see, for instance: Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, revised ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960]). Leonidas Donskis, *The End of Ideology & Utopia? Moral Imagination and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: P. Lang, 2000). W. D. Rubinstein, *The End of Ideology and the Rise of Religion: How Marxism and Other Secular Universalistic Ideologies Have Given Way to Religious Fundamentalism* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2009). *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences*, 192–195. Chaim Isaac Waxman, ed. *The End of Ideology Debate* (New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968).

6.

The distinction between the three key periods – namely, the "crowd moment" (1870–1914), the "mass moment" (1930–1970), and the "network moment" (1990–present) – constitutes a central analytical pillar of *MPS*. This tripartite model, however, is not without its limitations and warrants critical scrutiny.

a.

The *destructive* potential that ostensibly characterizes all three "moments" – that is, the "crowd moment", the "mass moment", and the "network moment" – may be central to the former two, but it is less evidently a constitutive feature of the latter. The emergence of historical periods is inconceivable without the transformative force of *Aufhebung*: each new "moment" both incorporates and replaces – that is, both preserves and cancels, both confirms and contradicts, both reinforces and transcends – elements of its predecessor, involving a seemingly contradictory process of simultaneous affirmation and negation. Arguably, this tension-laden dynamic of epochal succession is captured not only in Hegel's concept of "sublation" but also in Schumpeter's idea of "creative destruction".

Yet, as evidenced by the wars of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, the destructive capacities of the "crowd moment" and the "mass moment" far exceed those associated with the "network moment" (at least until now). This is not to deny that digital networks possess *transformative* dimensions – most notably, the digitalization of virtually every aspect of social life – as well as highly *problematic* features – such as the proliferation of hate speech, historical denialism, conspiracy theories, discriminatory discourses, and the widespread dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. It is an overstatement, however, to assert that such phenomena amount to a form of societal or political *destruction* comparable to that witnessed in earlier periods. The "network moment", although it may be profoundly disruptive in certain respects, does not embody the same level of existen-

tial threat to social order and/or institutional stability as its predecessors.

It is worth adding that the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) is likely to play a pivotal role in the next major historical transition, potentially giving rise to a new socio-technological "moment". While the "network moment" has been defined largely by the proliferation of digital connectivity and information exchange, the increasing integration of AI into virtually all domains of social life suggests the emergence of a qualitatively distinct phase. This prospective transformation may not only reshape existing institutional, communicative, and epistemic structures but also challenge canonical conceptual (and methodological) frameworks through which we interpret (and study) historical change.

b.

The claim that each of the three "moments"– that is, the "crowd moment", the "mass moment", and the "network moment" – is defined by "a logic of gregarious association"[156], which purportedly draws individuals into quasi-collectivist formations and diminishes their sense of singularity and uniqueness, may be applicable to "crowds" and "masses", but applies only partially to (digital) "networks". The rise of digital networks has significantly contributed to processes of *hyper-individualization* and has reinforced an ideology of *hyper-individualism*.[157] This tendency has been extensively theorized in terms of the transformation of the self in late-modern – if not postmodern – societies.[158]

From a Durkheimian perspective, the *shift from premodern to modern society* cannot be dissociated from a *transition from "mechanic" to "organic"*

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156 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXIᵉ siècle*, 18.

157 Susen, *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences*, 36 and 120.

158 See ibid. See also "Further Reflections on the 'Postmodern Turn' in the Social Sciences: A Reply to William Outhwaite", "Following the Footprints of the 'Postmodern Turn': A Reply to Gregor Mclennan", *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2017), and "Postmodernism", in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Political Sociology*, ed. Maria Grasso and Marco Giugni (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023).

solidarity. From a post-Durkheimian perspective, the *shift from modern to late- or postmodern society* requires a *transition from "organic" to "liquid" solidarity*.[159] In this context, one can trace a historical trajectory from the premodern "cult of God", through the modern "cult of the unitary subject", to the postmodern "cult of the fragmented individual". In late (or post-) modern societies, actors are increasingly expected to construct and to reconstruct their identities by selectively engaging with a wide array of sociological variables – such as class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, "race", cultural preferences, lifestyle, religion, age, ability, and political ideology – thereby cultivating a sense of unique subjectivity.

Rather than reversing this trend, the "network moment" has exacerbated and accelerated it. The impact of the digital age on the constitution of personhood has been the subject of scholarly inquiry for several decades.[160] The emergence of the "digital self" has given rise to a novel and increasingly pervasive form of "digital subjectivity"[161]. Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis of the "network moment" would have been strengthened by a more sustained engagement with the degree to which the digitalization of subjectivity entails a series of contradictory processes – such as individualization *vs.* standardization, personalization *vs.* homogenization, fragmentation *vs.* unification, exclusion *vs.* inclusion,

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159 Cf. Dariusz Gafijczuk, "The Way of the Social: From Durkheim's Society to a Postmodern Sociality", *History of the Human Sciences* 18, no. 3 (2005).

160 On the "digital age", see, for instance: Russell W. Belk and Rosa Llamas, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption* (London: Routledge, 2013). Hubert Burda, ed. *The Digital Wunderkammer: 10 Chapters on the Iconic Turn* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2011). Barbara Junge et al., eds., *The Digital Turn: Design in the Era of Interactive Technologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995). Pille Runnel et al., eds., *The Digital Turn: User's Practices and Cultural Transformations* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013). Wim Westera, *The Digital Turn: How the Internet Transforms Our Existence* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2013). Shanyang Zhao, "The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telecopresent Others", *Symbolic Interaction* 28, no. 3 (2005).

161 See, for example, Zhao, "The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telecopresent Others". See also Belk and Llamas, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption*.

isolation *vs.* integration, alienation *vs.* self-realization, and domination *vs.* emancipation.[162]

<div align="center">*c.*</div>

A further reservation likely to be raised – particularly by critics adopting a postcolonial perspective – is that Boltanski and Esquerre's inquiry is marked by a pronounced *Eurocentric*, and more specifically *Francocentric*, orientation. This limitation is evident in the empirical data, historical reference points, and theoretical frameworks underpinning their study. The scope of their project is largely confined to Western, and predominantly French, socio-historical contexts, thereby neglecting the diverse trajectories, epistemologies, and political formations that characterize non-Western societies. As such, the applicability of their tripartite framework – comprising the "crowd moment", the "mass moment", and the "network moment" – may be questioned in light of its limited engagement with global and transnational dynamics:

- The sources of empirical data employed in *MPS* are predominantly French, notably *Le Monde* and the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* (INA), including its YouTube channels *INA Société* and *INA Politique*.
- The vast majority of illustrative examples are drawn from European – primarily French – contexts, and the proposed periodization is grounded in a Eurocentric historical narrative that, while arguably pertinent to the "Western" world, may not be applicable to other (non-Western) regions, with distinct socio-political trajectories.
- Their theoretical orientation – best described as a form of "pragmatic structuralism" – does not engage with approaches that seek to challenge Eurocentric paradigms in academic discourse, particularly those developed within postcolonial and decolonial studies.[163] As a result,

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162 See Susen, *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences*, 116.

163 See Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) and *Connected Sociologies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). See also, for instance: Manuela Boatcă and Sérgio Costa, "Postcolonial Sociology: A Research Agenda", in *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Encarnación

the framework presented in *MPS* risks reproducing epistemic parochialism by overlooking the plurality of historical experiences and intellectual traditions beyond the European context.

This is not to undermine (i) the substantial body of empirical data that Boltanski and Esquerre have meticulously compiled and dissected, (ii) the diagnostic relevance of their tripartite periodization, or (iii) the theoretical contributions of their "pragmatic structuralism". Rather, this is to reflect on the normative implications of the fact that the empirical, historical, and theoretical foundations of their project remain predominantly Eurocentric and, in many respects, Francocentric. Addressing this issue should not be construed as a superficial gesture of political or sociological correctness. If motivated by the desire to broaden our horizons and to take sociological inquiry to the next level[164], such an engagement would expand the analytical scope of Boltanski and Esquerre's innovative and conceptually rich research programme, contribute to the (de)provincialization of the social sciences[165], and foster the development of a genuinely global sociology.[166]

Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Manuela Boatcă, and Sérgio Costa (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Manuela Boatcă, and Sérgio Costa, eds., *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). Gregor McLennan, "Complicity, Complexity, Historicism: Problems of Postcolonial Sociology", *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 4 (2014). Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London: Routledge, 2010). Martin Savransky, "A Decolonial Imagination: Sociology, Anthropology and the Politics of Reality", *Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2017).

164 Cf. Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, and Jeanne Lazarus, *Comment s'invente la sociologie. Parcours, expériences et pratiques croisés* (Paris: Flammarion, 2024).

165 Cf. Michael Burawoy, "Provincializing the Social Sciences", in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), and Ina Kerner, "Beyond Eurocentrism. Trajectories Towards a Renewed Political and Social Theory", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 5 (2018).

166 Cf. Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, Part II.

Conclusion

The question of the relationship between processes of "turning into current affairs" [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*] is central to Boltanski and Esquerre's investigation in *MPS*. We are constantly exposed to and influenced by the former, just as we are directly or indirectly affected by the latter. In the present era, our lives are increasingly colonized by digital information technologies. At the same time, facts and events are being politicized and, hence, discursively incorporated into our everyday imaginaries and conversations.

One of the key objectives pursued in *MPS* is to elucidate the sociological (and, to some degree, philosophical) implications of the epistemic and experiential gap between *direct* experiences of facts and events in people's lifeworlds, on the one hand, and *indirect* experiences of facts and events via digital media, on the other. Processes of politicization arising from the latter modality are potentially problematic, insofar as they tend to lack the qualitative depth, existential intensity, and grassroots involvement provided by the former. Conversely, processes of politicization anchored in the former modality are potentially problematic, insofar as they remain circumscribed by contextual immediacy and, thus, lack the global scope and sense of interconnectedness generated, and reinforced, by the latter.

As I have argued above (and in a previous article[167]), *MPS* – despite its considerable strengths – has significant limitations. This article is not the place to overcome these limitations. In essence, most of the weaknesses and shortcomings of *MPS* can be mitigated by sharpening and broadening the empirical, historical, and theoretical dimensions of Boltanski and Esquerre's work. Given the breadth and depth, as well as quality and originality, of their research, one can only hope that these two highly creative and prolific scholars will embark on further collaborative ventures in the future.

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167 See Susen, "Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?", esp. section IX ("Critical Reflections").

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The Authoritarian Tendency and Theodor W. Adorno on Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses

Colby Dickinson[1]

Abstract: This essay presents the main fruits of Theodor Adorno's political analysis of radio speeches given by a 1930s American Evangelical preacher, Martin Luther Thomas, whose political theology and use of particular rhetorical devices demand to be revisited as a treasure-trove of analysis and insight regarding forms of authoritarianism in the modern era. For this reason, I am concerned here mainly with giving the reader an expository overview of Adorno's main lines of critique, allowing the conclusion to sketch further some of the main implications of his commentary for our world today. I aim to address three general categories in this essay: the first concerning the deployment of "narcissism, celebrity and authority" in forming the authoritarian mystique, the second focusing on the demand for a (false) sense of social unity and its internal betrayal by members of the ingroup and, thirdly, looking at Adorno's suggestions made toward de-mystifying the pseudo-religious aura of the authoritarian leader.

Introduction

There has been much talk in recent memory of how some members of the Critical Theory school of thought seemingly predicted the rise of a media-savvy celebrity to political power such as we have seen in the as-

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cension of Donald Trump to the office of President of the United States.[2] There is a lot of truth behind such suggestions, just as there remains a good deal of insight yet to be mined from the various investigations of "the authoritarian personality" that Theodor W. Adorno had once undertaken.[3] Perhaps even more relevant for our era in which intellectuals search for the causes and roots of popular support for authoritarian leaders are the series of remarks Adorno once cataloged concerning the radio addresses of an American Evangelical pastor of the 1930s, Martin Luther Thomas.[4]

   What Adorno discerned as an active element within Thomas' radio addresses was a latent political agenda that converged with general authoritarian tendencies and so, Adorno felt, must be subjected to a critique that revealed the tactics Thomas wielded in order to lessen the temptations that authoritarianism, and fascism more specifically, posed to a general populace. As he sought to make abundantly clear, authoritarian tendencies do not appear as if from out of nowhere. They are part of a larger schema of political, social, economic and theological relations that must be understood in ways humanity has thus far failed to grasp.[5]

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2   Alex Ross, "The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming," *The New Yorker* (5 Dec. 2016).

3   Theodor W. Adorno, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, abridged ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982).

4   Theodor W. Adorno, *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Henceforth, Adorno's *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Address* will be cited parenthetically. Subsequent commentary on this work has been somewhat limited in the English-speaking world, with the notable exceptions of Paul Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross: Adorno and Christian Right Radio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Shannon L. Mariotti, *Adorno and Democracy: The American Years* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), pp. 35-41, 133-134; and Christopher Craig Brittain, "Racketeering in religion: Adorno and evangelical support for Donald Trump," *Critical Research on Religion* 6:3 (2018), pp. 269-288. See also the general background offered in Christopher Craig Brittain, *Adorno and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

5   There are certain voices today, however, who are concerned with discerning just such tendencies within our world. See, among others, Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan, 2017).

Adorno's own philosophy of the fragmentary sought to rethink the basic concepts of society in a post-Auschwitz world, providing tools along the way for confrontations with those fascist political powers that had so ravaged the early 20th Century, and which had displaced Adorno's own life. His efforts to stop authoritarianism from spiraling out of control in whatever future context were intended to be taken with the utmost seriousness, though rarely were his remarks so directly portrayed as a clear roadmap of where he thought humanity must go.

It is my belief that Adorno's work on Thomas' thought and rhetorical devices demands to be revisited in our politically tumultuous times, and so, firstly, must be understood as a treasure-trove of analysis and insight regarding authoritarianism in the modern era. For this reason, the present essay is concerned mainly with giving the reader an expository overview of his main lines of thought, allowing the conclusion alone to sketch further some of the main implications of his thought for our world at present. In what follows, I outline some of the major takeaways from Adorno's study by bringing the bulk of his insights into three general categories: the first concerning the deployment of "narcissism, celebrity and authority" in forming the authoritarian mystique, the second focusing on the demand for a (false) sense of social unity and its internal betrayal by members of the political ingroup and, thirdly, looking at Adorno's suggestions toward de-mystifying the pseudo-religious aura of the authoritarian leader.

Narcissism, celebrity, authority

If we can be said to live in an era where modern cults of celebrity have replaced the sovereign's aura of glory, as Martin Heidegger once suggested, then it makes a certain sense that politics has evolved in its focus on the character and personality of our world leaders. As Adorno almost presciently pointed out, even a "harmless movie comedian may unconsciously serve the most sinister purposes of domination" (p. 44). For Adorno, something like the displacement of glory to celebrity was predicated upon the impersonal attributes of an advanced capitalist society

that brought out the desire to imbibe public personas as a compensatory mechanism for its excesses. Quite simply, in his assessment, "The more impersonal our order becomes, the more important personality becomes as an ideology" (p. 1). As if in step with the self-absorbed qualities that material accumulation often engenders, emphasis is placed in modern politics upon the narcissistic qualities of such personalities, especially insofar as they seize hold of specific political contexts. The narcissistic personality as political leader is not an aberration, then, but the inevitable outcome of this logic. Fascist tendencies become therefore dependent upon both the cult of personality and an inherent narcissism, resulting in a situation wherein, in his succinct expression, "[t]he fascist leader characteristically indulges in loquacious statements about himself" (p. 1).[6]

Such a leader, from this perspective, maintains a strict difference from those who voted for them, as the image that is cultivated is one of absolute autonomy as an impenetrable shield that offers to protect them from the otherwise ordinary sphere of politics (the "swamp" of politics, as it is commonly called in the United States today) (p. 2). Rather than such an autonomous existence introducing an inseparable gulf between the fascist leader and his supporters, however, the supporters are libidinally invested insofar as they are considered as "insiders," and so brought deeper within the inner sanctum of the leader's personality, flaws and all.

The inner sanctum established between the authoritarian or fascist leader and their followers becomes a sort of fortress of solitude constructed in order to exclude those voices of dissent or difference that would threaten its more or less homogenous identity. Such communities, as one might suspect, are predicated upon violent exclusions and fictive conceptualizations of themselves. White supremacy and racist ideologies, hatred of minorities and immigrants, anti-Semitic tendencies

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6　This psychological insight is analyzed more in-depth in Adorno vis-à-vis Freud's work in the essay "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 132-157.

and the oppression, even assault, of women are frequently part of those mechanisms that would place blame for the violence and inequalities of society upon those who are, in reality, most often discriminated against. The tactic of the authoritarian who would blame the victim, however, is nothing new to Adorno's analysis; it is part and parcel of it. In Adorno's words, "It is incidentally one of the most outstanding characteristics of fascist and anti-Semitic propagandists that they blame their victims in an almost compulsory way for exactly the things which they themselves are doing or hope to do" (p. 4). Fascist propaganda feeds off this compulsion to project its own desires onto either its perceived or real opponents in order to suppress them and gain advantage over them.

Sustaining such an ethos of projection is highly indebted to the fascist community's ability to sustain or "spin" its falsehoods into reality. It is necessary, for this reason, for the authoritarian leader to have a tight hold on its propaganda machinery so that an alternative world of displaced meanings and "alternative" facts might be embraced and accepted as truthful utterances. As he would phrase the situation, "The more power is concentrated in the agencies and individuals who control the channels of communication, the more their propaganda amounts to 'truth' insofar as it expresses true power relations" (p. 5). "Alternative facts," as the Trump administration has frequently termed them, are little more than such propaganda intended to justify the political coordinates of power that they seek to maintain.[7] In this sense, not only does "pure power flow through pure media," as Peter Sloterdijk has recently suggested in his remarks on communications media and its relationship to authority, but it also explains why such forms of fascist evangelization must be broadcast directly to the people through whatever medium, television, radio, inter-

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7 We might think here of the division, as in Carl Schmitt's thought, between fact and legal norm where the fact is established upon the reality created as if by the "state of nature" as the fundamental gestures of sovereign power, and legal norms as a code seeking justice for all. The former, of course, is favored by the authoritarian tendency and the latter by those "weaker" liberal elements of society.

net, that is brought to the people.[8] Such a mass migration, Adorno rightly suggests, is part and parcel of a slowly encroaching fascist agenda.

Through its tight control of the narratives shaping power relations, these fascist and even potentially fascist forms are able to utilize any political sphere for their own ends. The real agenda which the fascist presents as their main interest is threefold according to Adorno, though each displays the self-referential nature of narcissistic behavior: establishing and maintaining their own organization, dwelling in competitive power and achieving "earthly success" (p. 71). Talk becomes focused on achieving practical goals, especially the increase of financial profit: "The appeal to save America is confused with the fear that the stocks may lose their value" (p. 72). Money becomes everything, Adorno notes, as ideals and abstract thought are flattened out so that the movement from one practical step to the next becomes all that one can imagine. Voices of dissent are overwhelmed and unable to register the full reality of what is truly transpiring. In this way too, "naked self-interest" runs amok and seeks no restraint upon its shameless ambitions.

What distinguished European forms of fascism from their American counterparts, according to Adorno's commentary on such tendencies in the 1930s, is how democracy is utilized through "high-pressure publicity" and the support of its own "tremendous pressure group" to overthrow itself (p. 3). As is by this point in history common in more parts of our world, democratic elements are utilized in order to remove democratic processes and to establish a more authoritarian ethos that favors particular power relations which strengthen a specific group's hegemony over other marginalized persons and peoples. What Adorno calls the "democratic cloak" is that gesture which covers the fascist's intentions in the thin veneer of democratic impulses: "The American attack of democracy usually takes place in the name of democracy. Very often the progressive Roosevelt administration is blamed for being that very dictatorship at which the fascist aims" (p. 50). Any counterattack upon

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8   Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres, Volume 2: Globes: Macrospherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014), p. 692.

such motions must be made to "[…] point out as concretely as possible in every case the distortions of democratic ideals which take place in the name of democracy. The proof of such distortions would be one of the most effective weapons for defending democracy" (p. 51).

The narcissism that is characteristically present in the fascist leader is one that is coupled with a vague self-image, one purposely cultivated as ambiguous so as to allow his audience to develop "any kind of fantasy" they might wish to project onto such a pivotal public figure. "He may be imagined by them as a benevolent and humane clergyman, or as a reckless soldier, or as a high-strung, emotional human being or as a shrewd man of practical life, as a keen observer who knows all dubious inside stories and as a pure soul who calls in the wilderness" (p. 11). This "abstractness," and ultimately amorphousness of character, aligns itself perfectly with a caricature of the leader as one who is also an "innocent" victim capable of legitimating "aggressiveness under the guise of self-defense" (p. 11). What comes about as a result of such posturing is a form of psychological projection that is actually capable of bringing about the reality that, previously, had only been an imaginary delusion on the part of the narcissist. Though this reality is certainly a frightening one in terms of its potential for departure from the lived realities of a majority of people, it can be successful in certain contexts—especially those where a perceived fear of chaos and lawlessness reigns—through its claims to work on behalf of those whom the leader loves. What must be claimed is the sense that the fascist leader is "indefatigable" in their willingness to fight on behalf of the people they represent, and thereby equaling the powers they are fighting against which likewise appear as indefatigable. No longer tied to a theological sense of being bound up with God's predestination, the language presented involving a constant expenditure of energy on behalf *of* the people ultimately makes it possible to justify the "discipline and oppression" placed *upon* a people (p. 13-14).

The populist claims that the fascist leader is only the bearer of a message that transcends their individual position, a characteristic that Adorno points out is instilled in the politician who inclines toward propagan-

da and the blurring of the "borderline between advertising and reality," becomes a standard position that defines the political landscape crafted by the authoritarian personality (p. 16).

> Representing the psychological "integration" of his audience as a totality, he is both weak and strong: weak insofar as each member of the crowd is conceived as being capable of identifying himself with the leader who, therefore, must not be too superior to the follower; strong insofar as he represents the powerful collectivity which is achieved through the unification of those whom he addresses. The image that he presents of himself is that of the "great little man" with a touch of the incognito, of he who walks unrecognized in the same paths as other folks, but who finally is to be revealed as the savior. He calls for both intimate identification and adulating aloofness; hence, his picture is purposely self-contradictory. He reckons with short memories and relies rather on the divergent unconscious dispositions to which he appeals at different times, than on consistent rational convictions (p. 19).

In this light, inconsistency is the hallmark of such a leader's persona. Firmly grounded only in "self-contradiction," and so ultimately those deceptions that accompany them—which is to say they are wholly *ungrounded at all times*—such a leader plays upon the "short memories" of their followers and plays to those psychological states that more truly "ground" the relationship between the leader and their people. As such, the fascist leader directs their attention toward the "resentment and frustration" of those who feel entitled to more than they have been offered by the society they expect so much from. The encouragement of "emotional release," which Thomas' radio broadcasts were intended to induce at various levels, was explicitly aimed at working against the social norms that most are raised with: "He wants them to cry, to gesticulate, to give way to their feelings. They should not behave so well and be so civilized" (p. 7). Bringing a crowd of loyal supporters to this point of emotional excess is not then a purely spontaneous occurrence, but a highly calculated affair, one that must eventually give way to an "endorsement of excess and violence" (p. 7). The violence, to be sure, is of an extremely nation-

alistic or jingoistic type, one that can be shifted to suit the needs of the leader once they have arisen to power (p. 28). In Adorno's words, "There is no real pleasure or joy, but only the release of the feeling of one's own unhappiness and the achievement of a retrogressive gratification out of the submergence of the self into the community. In short, the emotional release presented by fascism is a mere substitute for the fulfillment of desires" (p. 8). In this formulation of relations, there is no real expectation of a valid political agenda or the competence to harness political capital for actual social gains; there is only the defiant expectations and the emotional satisfaction of long simmering resentments.

Though fascism might make its ascendancy to power through its appeal to solidarity—a solidarity that may, in reality, have never been endorsed by the material distinctions that exist between the two sides, the apparent wealth of the fascist leader and the conspicuous poverty of their supporters—there is really only an obedience anticipated on the part of those who brought the leader to power and who brought the overthrow of democracy into place. As Adorno would put a fine point on this state of things, "The substitute for their isolation and loneliness is not solidarity, but obedience." Once loyalty has been established by the leader as the real political goal sought after, there is only the unending circular relationship of loyalty and emotional release that need be sustained: "Since the goal is finally the subjugation of one's own followers, they should be distracted from this goal, and their ambition should be centered around the pleasure which the movement itself may yield, not around the ideas which it might possibly materialize" (p. 32). These almost ritualistic relations typically sustained by the "rallies" centered on adulation, oaths of loyalty and the worship of the leader's aura and celebrity become the central point around which circulates the emptiness, or vacuity of glory, at the heart of its daily affairs.

The ritualistic coding of these relations and the empty promises that casually pass through the atmosphere only to vacate it the next moment are likewise consistently of apiece with the sense that order has been permanently established through these very gestures. The political world

that is created by these gestures, though almost entirely without a pre-conceived agenda, or even sense of what it would look like to accomplish other than a few vague positions, is able to structure the entire political field of relations because it presents itself as the force that grounds all firm identities. The fascist *is* an authority because they alone maintain the right to label and name reality. They call themselves into being *ex nihilo*. There is no other who has the right to rule.[9] From "name calling" to the dismissiveness of facts and lived realities, the fascist leader harnesses a series of powers of identification that no one else seemingly has the right to wield. They alone are the exception to those moral norms which every-one else is rigorously subject to. In this sense:

> Everything is decided before the argument starts. In his con-fused ideas there is a sort of totalitarian order. Everything is settled. One knows what is good and bad, which powers are the powers of the Christian tradition, family, native soil, and which are those of baseness, degeneration, and world Bolshe-vism. No problem exists, no adversary is refuted, no thesis is rationally justified. The logical process merely consists of iden-tification, or rather of pigeonholing. The whole set of values, including even the most doubtful ones, is regarded as pre-es-tablished, and the orator's effort is spent entirely in identifying any group, person, race, denomination, or whatever it may be, with one of the rigid concepts of his frame of reference (p. 33).

In the context of Thomas' rhetoric of the 1930s, though in terms that are resonant with such tactics in our world today, Adorno suggests as well that:

> Even in this process of identification Thomas never takes the trouble to actually prove that any phenomenon belongs right-ly to any of those pseudo-logical classes. He feeds upon the

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9   Whoever rules the nation is likely to be undermined by these fascist tenden-cies through a questioning of their legitimacy to govern (p. 117). The fascist be-lieves that no one has the right to rule except the one who has the right to rule because they alone are capable of seizing power and wielding it effectively. In the contemporary context of the United States, we might think here not only of President Trump's authoritarian tendencies that became more pronounced after his election, but of his previous attempts to undermine the previous pres-idency through conspiracy theories regarding Barack Obama's birth.

> bias connected with the phenomenon and expands it by sub-
> suming it under some high-sounding category, such as the
> forces of evil, the Pharisees, or the Battle of Armageddon. Ar-
> gumentation has been replaced by device […], the "name-call-
> ing device" (p. 33).

This almost god-like power to name and order reality according to the whim of the individual personality at the helm of political power works in tandem with the desire to present reality itself as if it had to be the way in which relations are currently structured. This is its appeal to the harsh reality of a particular "state of nature" as much as it is a possible legitimation for the decisions that emanate from within the leader's orbit. Political decisions are presented as if they *had* to be made in such a way, the "*fait accompli*" device, as Adorno calls it, which makes it easier for people to join the movement and more difficult for people to leave, as such decisions appear as necessary action.

> To most people their life actually *is* decided in advance. As
> soon as there appears an organization which evokes the idea of
> some strong backing by the powers that be, and which prom-
> ises something to its followers, great numbers may be will-
> ing to transform their vague awareness of being mere objects
> into adherence to such a movement. Thus they may turn the
> hateful idea of being thoroughly dependent into an asset, into
> the belief that by giving up their own will they join the very
> institution whose victory is predetermined. The "*fait accompli*"
> technique thus touches upon one of the central mechanisms of
> the mass psychology of fascism: the transformation of the feel-
> ing of one's own impotence into a feeling of strength (p. 43-44).

The strength that results is no doubt one of the most appealing features of taking part in the fascist's political platform, for it promises unity and emotional satisfaction at the same time as it seemingly elevates the re-sentful individual into a paragon of prestige and social respectability. The cost, however, is that such dynamics only serve to increase the temp-tation of the follower to have their conscience shaped for them rather than form one of their own. (One might imagine this as an extreme temp-tation for religious persons in general who are frequently told what their

conscience should or should not accept.) As Adorno will deftly illustrate, the process of bypassing the individual's construction of their own conscience is actually aided by the disjointed pronouncements and contradictions of the authoritarian. The power of utilizing "isolated, logically unconnected statements" becomes one of instilling a conscience in people rather than presenting them with factual evidence and asking them to make deductions on their own. As was true of Thomas no less than of many global leaders today, "He cunningly substitutes a 'paranoic' scheme for a rational process" (p. 34). What is produced is a conscience through which it becomes impossible to distinguish between the nation, or the people, and the leader who implants an image of the nation in the minds of the people.

Adorno had recognized that an authoritarian leader cannot form their will into an explicitly anti-democratic one in the modern age where the divine right to rule (monarchy) is no longer a viable option. Through the self-referential, hence inherently narcissistic, appeal to the leader as the only one capable of delivering a people from their problems, frustrations and resentments, the fascist attains a "paradoxical status" within their political program which "[…] combines irrational devotion on the part of his followers with the rationality that he is actually the best equipped to do the job and that the followers should recognize him as best" (p. 39). In an industrial age of advertising, the sheer repetition of vacuous claims concerning the leader's qualities itself takes on the quality of promoting the leader to the status of an "absolute fetish" in and of themselves. They thereby come to mirror the realm of advertising as the midway point between an "industrial rationality and magical idolatry," lending credence once again to the nexus of celebrity and narcissism that underpins any genuinely authoritarian impulse (p. 40).

False unity and its internal betrayal

There is frequently an appeal to unity made by the authoritarian leader intended to overshadow the apparent chaos enveloping the nation, but which actually looms much smaller in the background than such calls

for unity would recognize. In this manner, the call for unity actually "betrays one of the innermost features of fascism, namely, the establishment of something utterly limited and particularistic as the totality, the whole, the community" (p. 48). As such, the call for unity is never a request for a genuine uniting of differences and diverse peoples across a given national landscape. In truth, such leaders proclaim a unitive force that is premised on the exclusion of particular minorities within their national context, hence revealing the "unity device" as no more than a rhetorical trick destined to exclude, through violence if necessary, a substantial portion of those already "on the inside." In Thomas' time, such a list included "the Communists, the radicals, the sceptics, and, of course, the Jews" (p. 49-50). In a contemporary American context, it is the "real Americans" who seek to exclude the Mexican migrant worker, refugees (a large portion of which are already living among the ordinary citizens), immigrants, Muslims (among whom only a small portion are suspected of actually being terrorists) and a host of other groups, including, one suspects, LGBTQ+ persons, Jews and so on. In Adorno's insightful commentary, "Whenever a group is gathered under the slogan of being 'just plain folks' who are opposed to the refinements and perversions of cultural life, it is ready to strike at those against whom they may be directed to strike" (p. 53). From the outset, then, whatever unity is proclaimed as the goal is inherently false, for no true unity is actually being sought: the fascist leader "[…] feeds upon the ever-present feeling of every man that no true solidarity exists in this society, but he directs these feelings into the channels of very specific interests, antagonistic to such a solidarity – the interest of his racket" (p. 48).

There is, Adorno remarks, a general and vague denunciation of dictatorships on the part of the fascist leader, while a secret respect for actual dictators begins to arise simultaneously as their tactics and rituals begin to mirror those of other authoritarian regimes. Within this thinly-veiled disguise, the increasingly fascist actions pit themselves against existing institutions of government in order to curry favor and solidarity with those disillusioned with the bureaucracy and "waste" of actual gover-

nance. "All fascist movements have a tendency to represent themselves as authority supplementary to and opposed to the actual government, as valid organizations supplementary to the still prevailing organization of society, ready to replace the latter at any given time" (p. 46-47). The demands for unity that are repeatedly made are therefore opposed to governmental exercises, forging a notion of unity that is an abstract, ultimately vacuous notion utilized in order to restrain chaos (p. 47). Unity becomes a fabricated concept that actually sits at odds with the lived experience of governance.

What is "betrayed" by the simplistic propagandists of fascism is that their "utterly limited and particularistic" context is presented "as the totality, the whole, the community" (p. 48). This is its fetishistic logic that, as Adorno makes explicit, is utilized primarily in order to reinforce existing class and social distinctions rather than develop an actual and reasonable plea for unity amidst the diversities and inequalities of a given social and political context. Ironically, then, "The more firmly the idea of ultimate unity is established as an ideology, the easier it is to maintain any kind of inequality within empirical life" (p. 49). The authoritarian pleas made for unity are accordingly predicated upon an exclusionary tactic that would in reality further divide a given population.[10]

The coherence of the fascist and their supporters is subsequently brought to a head through a calculated persona Adorno refers to as the "just plain folks" device. It is a tactic wherein the authoritarian adopts the guise of being one of the ordinary people who gather around them in order to exalt their ordinary, plain speech as a feigned form of humility. This posturing is, in turn, used to exact cruelty upon excluded and marginalized elements within a given society. The "rudeness and savagery"

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10 In turn, what goes less remarked upon is the fetishistic character of representations given for the hated parties of fascism, whether communists, Jews, women, Islam, LGBTQ+ persons and so on. In so many words, the fetishizing of the excluded party explains why hatred of a given group (in Thomas' case, as with the Jews) is not based on any existing traits of the group or of persons within the group, but on the anti-Semite themselves and their own facile construction of their own order.

that is latent within certain quarters of the "plain folks" is precisely what must be utilized and harnessed when the appropriate time may appear. "Whenever a group is gathered under the slogan of being 'just plain folks' who are opposed to the refinements and perversions of cultural life, it is ready to strike at those against whom they may be directed to strike" (p. 53).

Ensconced within the "just plain folks" device is another one which Adorno refers to as the "if only you knew" ruse which uses innuendo in order to strike the position of an omniscient being. By holding the people in thrall to information that only the speaker himself seems to know, the speaker is able to stir up curiosity amongst people while also appearing to know more than their audience actually knows. In his words, "The lure of innuendo grows with its vagueness. It allows for an unchecked play of the imagination and invites all sorts of speculation, enhanced by the fact that masses today, because they feel themselves to be objects of social processes, are anxious to learn what is going on behind the scene" (p.54). Not only do conspiracy theories breed within such contexts, but the leader, through the use of such tactics, never really reveals all that they know, or seems to know, so as to keep for themselves "a surplus of knowledge" which elevates their status amongst their most loyal supporters (p. 55). The conspiracy theories that are constructed by the fascist in order to legitimate hatred of the perceived enemy are, as Adorno noted, in fact a reflection of the "conspiratorial character" of the fascist's own tendencies. Paradoxically, then, the fascist leader's brand of speech becomes highly regarded, as its authority increases through the support that it gains. There is no doubt a tautology at work in these dynamics and it is one that generates belief in the speaker, confusing belief in the movement with belief in the individual person.

The indirect patterns of speech, the lies and deceit that they promulgate and the inconsistencies and ruses which are the bane of journalistic truth and investigation are thereby maximized in order to increase pressure upon the obscure forces of opposition which serve merely as boogeymen in order to legitimate the identity and prestige of the "in crowd."

As Adorno would indicate, "But although the foe is everywhere he does not come out into the open; he remains hidden just as the meaning of Thomas' accusation is hidden by innuendo" (p. 56). In fact, there need be no factual evidence for the claims which are made—in many ways, not having the evidence works more efficiently and without any possible contestation, one might add. Reference need only be made to "certain forces" at work against the unity proclaimed by the leader, forces which can be interpreted as any marginalized group whose exclusion becomes the basis for the community's sense of cohesion (p. 57). The boundaries, borders or walls that are built to keep out the perceived enemy are more concerned with forming the identity of the "in crowd" than they are in keeping out whatever actually existing external threat.

At the same time, Adorno points out how such tactics inevitably lead to the ceremonious unveiling at times of the "dirty laundry" of their opponents which the fascist and their followers delight in revealing to the public as part of the emotional release of pent up resentments. Whatever scandal can be salaciously feasted upon in full sight of the people, and which chosen media representatives may even be able to concoct themselves on occasion, becomes the "fulfillment of a promise" and a sign of the integrity of that leadership which had been crying out for justice for the community besieged by "certain forces" working against it (p. 58). As such, "His realm is that of unrelated, opaque, isolated facts, or rather, images of facts. The more they are presented as isolated, the more some selected favorite topics draw the whole attention of both the agitator and the listeners, the better for the fascist" (p. 104-105). The fascist lurches defiantly and hastily toward whatever controversial topics they feel will elicit the most emotional responses from their audience. Anyone opposed to these views is quickly and inaccurately labelled (in Thomas' case, as a "communist"), though any name-calling would perhaps equally satisfy the demand. Thomas, for instance, never addressed nor needed to address actually existing communism, much as some today never really address actually existing Islam, contexts of immigration or refugees or any other marginalized population's lived struggles. The tendency in

fascist thought, rather, and as Adorno was well aware of, is "to attack images rather than the reality they may represent" (p. 106).

Though it is perhaps the case that "One may well assume that the dark, forbidden things whose revelation he indignantly enjoys are the same things that he himself would love to indulge in" (p. 58), there is at least no doubt that scandal plays a prominent role in the establishment of an emotional investment so integral to the relationship of the leader and their people that it must be consistently referred to throughout their public relationship.

> The fascist-minded listener, at least, is willing to accept without examination any scandal story, even a most stupid one like the ritual murder legend. Furthermore, he generalizes cases which may happen under any political system, regarding them as typical of democracy, especially of its "plutocratic" nature. He becomes furious about facts which at closer scrutiny appear most innocent, or belong so strictly to the sphere of private life that nobody has a moral right to interfere (p. 59).[11]

In service to the performance of a political and rhetorical force that must establish its reality and order in a manner only comparable to divine fiat and, which the revelation of a previously unknown scandal seemed to mirror, "What mattered was the revelation, not the fact" (p. 59). The temptation is to terrorize one's listeners with various possibilities of what evils might befall them if they did not have the protection of their leader. This is how belief in their authority is manufactured (p. 63). Rational thought is removed from any critical perception of the speaker's words, which are received as revelations rather than as factual statements that could be further scrutinized. This is what will allow the leader to assume that they themselves are the only one that can save the population before it is "too late," like a preacher calling their flock to repentance before the "end of days." This is something Adorno sees operative in Thomas' stoking the fears of his listeners through his claims that socialism,

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11 For the fascist conservative, policing the general social morality becomes paramount, even if the individual leader, or one of the "in crowd" perpetuates hypocritical behaviors.

or coordinated government intervention, will take away one's rights or property, rather than examine the possible benefits of particular socialist policies (p. 111).

The fascist, we are cautioned, repeatedly redirects revolutionary energy toward their own purposes, effectively coopting "the concept of revolution" itself, which they inaugurate while denouncing the revolutionary tendencies of their perceived opponents (p. 66). Psychological projection takes on ever new and renewing forms as these dynamics create the very conditions that they themselves claim to be protecting their people from: "The last hour of which the fascist warns is actually the putsch which he wants to commit himself. Purely negative punitive action substitutes for a rational policy by which things might really become better" (p. 67). This is the "nonentity" of conservative revolution, according to Adorno, which actually becomes the political sphere in which a revolution of sorts possibly does end up taking place.

In the end, however, what is fabricated is a reality of contradictions, lies and inconsistencies that must, inevitably, collapse in upon itself. The pleas for unity eventually give way to the sense that the inner greatness of the movement has been destroyed, though not by any perceived external threat, but by the internal betrayal of the leader's closest advisors. The true fascist, we are counselled, is in a very literal sense even incapable of trusting their closest advisors because of the nature of the system of inconsistency they have created: "The Fascist cannot help feeling surrounded by traitors, and so continuously threatens to exterminate them" (p. 68). The tactics that had fostered and elevated the cohesion of the community have come back to haunt the "closed, violent, strictly ruled ingroup," allowing the leader to have to maintain a constant vigilance over their own supporters who may be working against the leader and so needing to be excluded so that the leader might maintain the purity of such a demonic logic. The "permanent state of mutual distrust" between those working under such a leader is in fact the state that is cultivated in order to perpetuate the logic itself. Loyalty oaths are thereby demanded while, at the same time, the desire on the part of insiders to

escape from this repressive atmosphere increases all the more. Any possible suggestion of a change in opinion, or a passing critical remark of any kind concerning the leader's competence, becomes too much for the leader to bear. Anyone wishing to depart from the ingroup functions as a reminder of the sickening conditions under which its unity is formed and so is to be despised by the leader and by those who remain under the fascist's sway.

In very clear terms, Adorno suggests that true opposition to the fascist must focus upon this internal terror that should be investigated and stressed by those wishing to dismantle such a regime. The collapse of its false sense of unity and the loyalties it inspired must be revealed as the fictions sustaining an almost entirely hollow organization. How it has managed to betray itself through its own inconsistencies and contradictions becomes the means by which society is rescued from its own crippling betrayal of the people it claimed to serve.

De-mystifying the pseudo-religious aura of the authoritarian leader

The religious context of Thomas' remarks is revealed by Adorno as the thinly-veiled political ambition he actually promotes. Seeking critically to strip away the religious component behind the political ideology has become even easier in a contemporary context where religious persons are often more than willing to vote for an overtly authoritarian leader.[12] The performative dimensions of fascism are, in Adorno's analysis, easily accessible in a religious mode, causing the fascist leader to appear at times as if mystically legitimated by forces that are beyond their control.

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12 Adorno, for his part, pulls no punches in exposing Thomas' actually *anti*-religious sentiments that are bound up with the fascist tendency to dismiss anything that does not congeal with the ruses for power that they wish to sustain. In a very specific sense, Adorno wagers that the anti-Semitic views that have plagued Christianity throughout its reign in the West are actually more invested in Christian history than Christians themselves are wont to admit. Such temptations toward religiously motivated acts of exclusion are not external to religious desires, but can be firmly located within them. Christians looking to support fascist reasoning have in fact much within their own history to draw from as support (p. 77).

Merging with Adorno's earlier remarks on the excess of knowledge that the authoritarian presents to his followers, the mystical aura they generate is in reality a performance that often goes unnoted but which is fundamental to the establishment of their credibility.

We might take for example the connection between fascist speech patterns and the religious and ecstatic phenomenon of "speaking in tongues" which Adorno shrewdly construes as a performance that replaces genuine speech, but which connects more directly with the desires of the people. In his words, the inane "nonsense" often uttered by authoritarian leaders is consistent with the aura that they perpetuate. In other words, "The ability to chatter is taken as proof of a mysterious gift of speech. Thus, the nonsense contained in all fascist speeches is not so much an obstacle as a stimulant in itself" (p. 80). Against such a dialectic between speaker and audience that defies factual accuracy it only becomes possible to critique them through the emotional links that are established between leader and follower.

> It is indeed possible that an orator like Thomas with an hysterical character structure and a complete lack of intellectual inhibitions is actually incapable of building up a logical and meaningful sequence of statements. However, it is probably just this uninhibited ability to speak without thinking, a capacity traditionally associated with certain types of salesmen and carnival barkers, which fulfills a desire of the audience. Here comes into play the ambivalent admiration of people who are repressed and psychologically "mute" for those who can speak (p. 79).

The mystical aura that they subsequently and intentionally cultivate is, however, only one of the religious elements utilized for explicitly political ends.

Another dimension of the religious becomes evident in the general worldview they foster. For example, there is a clear antiliberal tendency in the fascist's worldview which is geared toward preventing the disintegration of the world. Yet there is also an extreme tension in their views on nature that cannot be reconciled with such a position on the world's

immanent destruction. Theologically, as Thomas points out, nature is a force of God's judgment, speaking traditionally in many people's minds through earthquakes, floods and the like, but also of a certain attitude that favors the "survival of the fittest." At the same time, however, there is a denial of the scientific understanding of human evolution and the complexities of life itself.

> They adore nature as far as nature expresses domination and terror, as it is symbolized by the earthquake. They abhor nature as far as it is concomitant with the undisciplined and childlike, in other words, with everything that is not "practical" […]. They favor the carnivorous, preying beast and despise the playful, harmless animal. They believe in the survival of the fittest, in natural selection, but hate the idea that their antics may be reminiscent of those of the monkey. This inconsistency is an index of the whole fascist attitude (84-85).

It is because this tension cannot be reconciled in the fascist worldview that Thomas consistently stressed a dualistic worldview wherein the good are permanently separated from the evil. The focus on evil in fact becomes everything, at the expense of demonstrating any sort of charity toward those who are actually suffering, just as the complexity of life is rendered mute through a reductionistic presentation of divine judgment within the world. Though they are able to give an account of evil in the world that the liberal will not be as capable of presenting, there is also a lack of sympathy for those who are not included within the ingroup.

Reinforcing a dualistic worldview becomes the major task that must be perpetually reinvigorated and invested with new meaning. As he phrases matters:

> The theological dualism is used to invest the political fight, in which Thomas is involved, with the dignity of a conflict taking place within the absolute. No proof is given that the Communists are devils or that Thomas is the partisan of God, expect that he carries God's name in his mouth. He simply relies on the distinction of in- and outgroup. People he "takes in" are good, and the others are sons of the Devil. Any argumentation would only weaken this mechanism (p. 86).

In this light, it is interesting that Thomas' screeds were often aimed at the larger, institutionalized and mainline Protestant denominations against whom he alone seemed to represent the true, "living faith" (p. 88). This is the political tactic of opposing traditional political operations or institutional affiliations so that *every* operation and institution comes under scrutiny and critique. Personal experience consequently replaces "any objectified doctrine" and the folksy anecdote becomes more powerful than critical propositions reliant upon evidence, data or facts. Such an implicit critique of every structure moves headlong toward, as Adorno suggests, the removal of all religions and of all politics from the world that they seek to create, which is what the fascist envisions in their totalitarian dreams.

Thomas decries partisanship as denominational affiliation of any type, but the real focus is on transcending partisanship and the "disunity" it entails so that a more totalized framework can be envisioned and applied (p. 92). Even law itself becomes subject to the authoritarian tendency which seeks to proclaim unity from the vantage point of having overcome the limitations of law itself. The "justice" that can then be promoted is one which is imbued with a deep emotional resonance for those embittered with resentment, though it is a blatant injustice to so many others who are not part of the ingroup's dominant and oppressive logic.

> While deploring lawlessness, corruption, and anarchy, not only is he "antilegalistic" but he even attacks law as such. This procedure, of course, is parallel to the well-known fascist device of crying wolf whenever a central democratic government shows any signs of strength. Their talk about the dictatorship of the government is simply a pretext for introducing their own dictatorship (p. 92-93).

As such, attacks on the government as an institution are rampant in fascist discourse where government and its bureaucracies can be endlessly disparaged as inefficient, tiresome, wasteful of resources and money, as well as potentially corrupt (p. 114). "The mentality of the actually or supposedly overburdened taxpayer, and its inherent antagonism to centralized government are psychological assets of fascist propaganda. A feeling of injustice is involved in tax-paying under an anonymous state

which takes without being capable of guaranteeing the lives of those from whom it takes" (p. 114).

Rather than champion a society where corruption can openly be discussed—which is what democracy effectively seeks, even though such conversations will always run the risk of making it appear as if corruption were part of democratic forms—authoritarian regimes, as is well documented, are rife with corruption and scandal, though such things are more often than not effectively swept under the rug. Citing false and exaggerated figures becomes the norm for the fascist who seeks after the truth "behind the figures" that has been silenced by the presentation of scientific facts: "The apparent scientific exactitude of any set of figures silences resistance against the lies hidden behind the figures. This technique which might be called the 'exactitude of error' device is common to all fascists" (p. 93). This is why, Adorno will stress, the fascist never cites their sources, but merely refers to sources that cannot be verified in any substantial way (p. 109).

As one might surmise at this point, the fascist struggle against their perceived enemies is really a struggle against the rule of law itself. Every governmental apparatus ruled by law becomes subject to the fascist's vitriolic tirades against them. As Adorno would discern as an operative strategy of the authoritarian, "His stress upon instinct against reason is concomitant to his emphasis on spontaneous behavior against laws and rules. Thus he promotes a spirit of 'action' against the protection granted the minority by any kind of legal order" (p. 94). What we encounter is a situation wherein, in order to feign that true justice will come to those who have long been denied their entitled share of power and privilege, the true leader must subvert the rule of law itself—resulting frequently in the various "states of emergency" that typify dictatorial rule[13]—in order to bring everything under their personal authority. As Adorno would conclude, "Thomas' attack on law and convention does not aim at freedom, it aims at the individual's subjection, not to any independent legal

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13 See the commentary on "states of exception" in Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

or moral standards, but to the immediate dictation of those in command, who can easily dispense with any objective regulative ideas" (p. 94).

The dismissiveness of any position or reality (as historical fact) that does not cohere with the authoritarian's worldview is indicative of the anti-intellectualism that, in turn, supports its foundations and which helps to legitimate the mystical aura around them that cannot be described or defined with words.[14] The dismissals of science (e.g. climate change in a contemporary setting) and factual reporting (e.g. journalists and other investigative media) are of apiece with these instincts, as is the failure to address the social inequalities that lay behind certain governmental policies.

> As it has been pointed out, the concrete political content of Thomas' speeches play but a minor role compared with his method. His psychological "softening up" of his listeners in the fascist sense does not develop any coherent political program or any coherent critique of existing social and political conditions. His whole attitude is thoroughly "atheoretical." This is due partly to his contempt for the intellectual capacity of his audience, partly to the idea of "being practical," and partly, perhaps, to the actual absence of a clear-cut program in Thomas' mind. Like most of today's fascist agitators, he is essentially guided by a keen sense of imitation of the famous and successful models of modern authoritarianism, rather than by political or sociological reflections (p. 104).

In this regard, Adorno addresses one of Thomas' complaints against the unemployed, which Adorno masterfully illuminates as a result of an in-

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14 As one might surmise from all of this, Adorno points toward a fervent anti-intellectualism concealed within the fascist's views, as the utter rejection of critical investigation is what their efforts are founded upon. As he will describe the state of things, "The stimulus involved here is a resentment against the intellect. Those who must suffer, and have neither the strength nor the will to change their situation on their own impetus, always have a tendency to hate those who point out the negative aspects of the situation, that is, the intellectuals, rather than those who are responsible for their sufferings. This hostility is made the more intense by the fact that intellectuals are exempt from hard labor, without being in possession of actual commanding power. Therefore, they excite envy, without simultaneously calling forth deference" (p. 96).

group logic that seeks to exclude and dominate over those less fortunate than themselves:

> The idea that no one should be allowed to eat without working, although the work in itself may be utterly superfluous, has proved most attractive psychologically. One of the paradoxes of the present situation is that envy is concentrated upon the most unfortunate group, the unemployed, because they are conceived of as being exempted from the hardship of labor. This envy works as a tool to bring the unemployed as "soldiers of labor" under the immediate control of the domineering group, while offering a certain gratification to the actual job-holders (p. 118).

Adorno even suggests that those who are most fervent in their support of the fascist's hatred of the lazy, and so "logically" unemployed, are most likely themselves those who were unemployed and seeking to dominate over the weak. This is a principle that Adorno himself traces back to the Reformer Martin Luther and his suggestion that Jews should be placed under conditions of forced labor, presumably for their inherent laziness. Thomas' own fear of the laziness of the unemployed, which is really the Jewish people as a whole for him, is also code for any group that is feared as wanting to unjustly take possession of whatever rightly belongs to the in-group. The fear, which Thomas explicitly stokes in his own context, is that the Jews are seemingly everywhere and are seeking to permeate the borders of the nation in every conceivable fashion. They must, for this reason, be repelled or excluded from proper society, though we are left too with the sense that the "Jew" in this typology is a complete fiction constructed in service to the formation of the ingroup itself (p. 120). It is here that we can locate as well the fears of immigrants and refugees that stokes so many of today's political debates.

> As Adorno noted, Thomas repeatedly attempted to link his pseudo-religious claims to the "faith of our fathers" as an origin story that might legitimate his claims, something akin to the conservative tactic to look to one's ancestors as justification for an "arrogant patriotism" that sprouts from a rootedness in a "founding fathers" mythology (p. 100). What Adorno reveals,

rather, is that Thomas' version of Christianity is "a mere analogy for his worldly authoritarianism" (p. 102). The hatred of the one who represents difference, such as the Jew for Thomas, is reinforced by the collective cohesion of the in-group as a community of sameness. It is easy to see how a sense of supremacy emanates from such a configuration, though it is one that produces an aura of sacrality around their leader even when such a leader is very clearly an inarticulate and inept charlatan.

What the charlatan seeks, however, is what appears to bind the people together in their collective hatred of the one who appears to disrupt the homogeneous sense of communal identity through their portrayal of difference. Efforts to eradicate such instances (and persons) of difference become the rallying cry of those within the ingroup, though they harbor some of the darkest desires humanity has seen. In short, this is what Adorno sought above all else to expose as the lie at the center of it all: "This is the agitator's dream, the unification of the horrible and the wonderful, the drunkenness of an annihilation that pretends to be salvation" (p. 131).

Conclusion

> Hitler's God promised salvation to the many through mercilessness towards others. Hitler's God is a God without grace. In order to experience themselves as a community, this God's "chosen people" had to exclude others to the point of death. It longed for a community because it could not bear the complexity of modernity, not least its cultural complexity. It had to rule the world in order to bear being in it.
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> —Rainer Bucher, *Hitler's Theology* [15]

Though Nazism represents an extreme tendency within both fascist politics and the rhetoric of political religion, there are certain tendencies well worth noting in light of all that has been suggested above concerning fascist rhetorical devices. The absence of grace, as Rainer Bucher discerned

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15 Rainer Bucher, *Hitler's Theology: A Study in Political Religion*, trans. Rebecca Pohl (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 114.

in his study of "Hitler's theology," is perhaps one of the most prominent features it bears, though its rejection of the complexity of modernity is certainly another worth taking a look at. From Bucher's perspective, Hitler's appeal was enormous because he "[…] appeared to enable modernization without pluralization, and thus without the relativization of his own claims to validity, as well as without the liberal emancipation of the subject."[16] What Bucher captures as a foundational dynamic within Hitler's theology is the possibility for a type of universalism to be sought without compromise—the "one-sided" approach that spawned what Alberto Toscano has correctly labeled as the realm of fanaticism.[17]

It is of course a tendency that goes under a variety of names, including, perhaps most prominently in the modern era, anti-Semitism. If Adorno has isolated a phenomenon that we must understand more fully or risk being subjected to its ever worsening violence, then we must recognize that the crisis that still circulates in our modern world regarding the possibility, or possible dissolution, of a universal point of view, is something that the Jew, being the one who represents both an inside and an outside perspective at the same time, seems to exacerbate through their very existence.[18] Or at least this is how the anti-Semite views things (in a manner parallel to frequent remarks made about those other liminal figures of the refugee, the immigrant, transgendered persons and so on). If it is true that all forms of racism stem from the fundamental dynamics that undergird the dynamics of anti-Semitism, as Élisabeth Roudinesco has recently claimed, then getting to the bottom of such a fundamental act of exclusion will help us to comprehend the roots of the fascist tendencies that Adorno highlighted for us in his study of Thomas.[19]

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16 Bucher, *Hitler's Theology*, p. xi.

17 Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2017).

18 Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Revisiting the Jewish Question*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 3.

19 Roudinesco, *Revisiting the Jewish Question*, p. 28. As colonialism spread across the globe, as Hannah Arendt has already noted, so too did anti-Semitism spread to deal with the problems associated with an imposed universalism. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 1996), p.

The real temptation of totalitarian thinking, as Bucher notes, is to totalize your own viewpoint as if it were the only one that existed, thus denying the fundamental, agonistic premises of those democratic tensions—of democracy itself—that should not be simply washed away.[20] Elaborating on the democratic nature of grace as benevolence Bucher goes so far as to assert that "Benevolence loves plurality, the manifold, the other. Through this it gains sovereignty and is free of resentment. Repressive power, on the other hand, loves exclusion, homogeneity, and above all itself. Since this love, just like the sovereignty of power in general, is mostly fictional it has to work itself up into a desperate spiral of outperforming itself."[21] Bucher's point is that such a love that is permanently in love with itself, hence *essentially narcissistic*, creates a "dogma of self-redemption: one has to be worthy of salvation," a premise that fundamentally denies the basic theological message of a salvation directed toward those who do *not* deserve it.

The grandiose illusion that one deserves, or is entitled to, their own salvation is bound to an essentially narcissistic worldview that seeks to preserve itself as the only view worthy of the salvation that it seeks (and which is typically economic and cultural-superior). Adorno's insights, however, reveal the devices and ruses of rhetorical power underlying the fundamental deception lodged within such claims. The problem, as humanity seems repeatedly doomed to discover, is that the historical recurrence of these tactics is not quickly to go away, but remains a perpetual temptation that must be more fully understood and contested so that a more just and democratic order might reign in its place. Bringing such

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xviiff. See too Roudinesco, *Revisiting the Jewish Question*, p. 50.

20   Bucher, *Hitler's Theology*, p. 119. Bucher refers in fact to democracy as a "plural and conflict-laden sphere of decision making" (p. 86) with a vacant center of power in opposition to totalitarian forms that attempt to fill such a void with their own image. It might be helpful to recall as well that not every authoritarian tendency inclines toward constructing a totalitarian state, whose search for absolute power follows particular and predictable patterns. See part III of Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

21   Bucher, *Hitler's Theology*, p. 119.

an order to prominence, however, also means becoming wise to these authoritarian tendencies, understanding the deployment of their power and challenging them wherever, and whenever, they appear.

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Dialectics of the Bodies: Hundred Years of Debate between *Critical Theory* and *Feminism*

Shuichi Nyuya[1]

Abstract: The acceptance of critical theory by feminists, primarily in the English-speaking world, played an important role in enhancing the international reputation of the Frankfurt School, which was responsible for developing this theory. Nevertheless, it is by no means clear what contributions the school has made to feminist agendas, or if the "men" of the school have really treated such agendas seriously. This article looks back at what has and has "not" been at issue between the two over the past century, focusing on the arguments of Jessica Benjamin, who is a key link between critical theory and feminism. It also attempts to interpret this confrontation, albeit somewhat boldly, as a conflict between Kantian normativism and Hegelian dialectics.

> So, if I were to ask for anything, it would be for *more* dialectics.
> —Theodor W. Adorno, *Letter to Walter Benjamin*

> Many of us felt that this stance [of prioritizing theory over practice and movement] did not reflect the dialectical approach on which he [Adorno] himself always insisted.
> —*An interview with Angela Davis*

From the Frankfurt School to Critical Theory? Or Adorno as Residue

This study traces the century-long historical debate between critical theorists and feminists from the perspective of *dialectics of the bodies*. On one side are the "German men" or Frankfurt School intellectuals, such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Herbert

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Marcuse to Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, or Rainer Forst, and on the other side are the Anglo-American women influenced by the Frankfurt School, such as Angela Davis, Jessica Benjamin, Drucilla Cornell, Judith Butler, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, and Amy Allen. This study presents a history that transcends a mere account of influence; it presents dialogue or dialectical conflict between, as it were, the *analyst* and *analysand* that could be described as manipulation and attack, denial and exposure, or projection and counter-projection. Therefore, I argue that the *psychoanalytic narrative* can serve as a useful model for describing the relationship between these two camps. Nonetheless, unlike the empirical rule of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, this relationship is not fixed, where the analyst is "male" and analysand is "female." For example, Adorno, like Fromm, a psychologist, tried to establish the cause of fascism in the mentality of "effeminate" men who lost exemplary authority as fathers and became homosexual. However, feminists of the generation after him perceived a nostalgia for bourgeois subjectivity, that is, a strong, masculine ego. Just as Freud, who analyzed female patients, was later re-interpreted and de-authorized by women as an analysand with repressed desires for his patients,[2] Adorno became an analyst and analysand simultaneously. The leaders of the post-Adorno Frankfurt School are also subject to this dialectical inversion.

Thus, Allen's claim that critical theory still needs psychoanalysis reveals more than her intention:[3] beyond the validity of psychoanalysis as a method of social analysis and criticism, the legacy of critical theory itself requires a psychoanalytic intervention and interpretation from the "outside." In fact, the history of critical theory, at least of the past half century, is also a history of non-German, non-masculine interventions and interpretations. The most heated debate of the 1990s illustrates

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2   See, e.g., Sarah Kofman, *Pourquoi rit-on?: Freud et le mot d'esprit* (Galilée, 1986); Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1998).

3   See, Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

this point when the philosophical debate over the legacy of postmodernism and modernity unfolded among Cornell, Butler, Benhabib, and Fraser,[4] in which Habermas, the defender of modernity and the public sphere, played a key role. Perhaps the question for feminists then was why Habermas was so adamantly normative and universalist. What was this "man" hiding and denying under the ethical ideal of free and equal discourse?

In her 1989 essay *What is Critical about Critical Theory?*, Fraser criticized Habermas's ideal of public sphere as being established by forcing issues of the intimate sphere, such as care work and childbirth, onto women.[5] Honneth, a student of Habermas, similarly criticized his mentor in his debut work *Critique of Power* (1985) for limiting the issue of intersubjectivity to the horizon of linguistic communication. Both theorists claim that Habermas lacked a conceptual framework for focusing on the emotional and physical connections between subjects. Later, Honneth organized and systematized this framework using the keyword *recognition* but was criticized by Fraser and Butler for being overly normative.[6] Again, here the analyst (Honneth) turned simultaneously into an analysand.

In this way, while interesting, the history of the Frankfurt School reveals an intersection between criticism from inside (e.g., Habermas's criticism of Adorno or Honneth's criticism of Habermas) and criticism from outside (e.g., feminist criticism of Habermas and Honneth) in the form of women unraveling and shaking the normative and "strong" men, who are not emotionally swayed, or men who "pretend" to be swayed.

Truly, rational thought often ignores or suppresses interest in the body,

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4   Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (Routledge, 1995).

5   Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory." In *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, edited by Johanna Meehan (Routledge 1995).

6   See, e.g., Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, *Umverteilung oder Anerkennung?: Eine politisch-philosophische Kontroverse* (Suhrkamp, 2003); Judith Butler *et al.*, *Recognition and Ambivalence* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 31–53; 61–68. Butler's criticism of Honneth will be revisited at the end of this paper.

leading feminists to "return" to the pre-Habermas Frankfurt School—especially to Adorno,[7] who seems to be an important reference point for feminists. As Lisa Yun Lee argues,[8] Adorno certainly had an interest in the body, a non-identical dimension that defies identifying tendency of rational thinking, along with his interest in psychoanalysis. However, even he recognized the complexity of the relationship between mind and body. The mind and body are not mere opposites; psychoanalysis teaches that "the other" is also a projection of a part of "the self" that cannot be completely denied. He also positions the relationship between enlightenment and nature similarly in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1947). He states that the self-consciousness of modern enlightenment, which he claims to have escaped the nature/barbarism through conquest by rational thinking, itself speaks of a return to nature/barbarism. These paradoxes are now being revisited in the global context of the new rise of authoritarianism. Recent discussions in the Frankfurt School, Wendy Brown, and others agree that authoritarianism is not a betrayal of the traditions of democracy and liberalism but rather mirrors them.[9] In other words, individualism, which is supposed to be cool and calculating in its pursuit of one's own interests, creates a collective and irrational atmosphere that seems to affirm machismo. Similarly, following Adorno's critique of the

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7   See, Amy Allen, "Critical Theory and Feminism." In *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, edited by Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Axel Honneth (Routledge, 2019), 535ff.

8   The title of this essay is borrowed from Lee's *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T. W. Adorno* (Routledge, 2005), but in her case, she focuses too much on Adorno's later thought and does not discuss dialectics from the broader perspective of the history of the debate between critical theory and feminism. Elaborating further, my study uses "Bodies" instead of Body because the subject concerns the relationships between multiple bodies, including (sexual) differences, or the kind of relationality that "duplicates" a single body. For more information, please refer to the final section of the main discussion.

9   See, e.g., Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism's Frankenstein. Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century 'Democracies'." *Critical Times*, no.1(2018): 60–79; Axel Honneth *et al.*, *Normative Paradoxien: Verkehrungen des gesellschaftlichen Fortschritts* (Campus, 2022).

so-called culture-industry (*Kulturindustrie*), we can witness the thorough commodification and circulation of bodies and emotions, as well as the process through which complex and diverse relationships between individuals are flattened into stereotypical narratives, shaped by capitalist motives and the tendency of thought to homogenize. This is why we cannot simply praise the body. In fact, what Butler, Benjamin, and Allen inherited from Adorno was not merely the emphasis on the body as "the other" to the mind, but rather a dialectical approach aimed at unraveling the "twisted" relationship between the two and interpreting it more productively. In short, they are trying to appropriate and advance Adorno's dialectics—an attempt he conceived as being more Hegelian than Hegel himself. However, does this not, if we may use a metaphor once again, suggest that English-speaking feminists are showing a tendency to distance themselves from their former patrons and strike out on their own—namely, to pursue a further transformation and internal development of dialectics, and thus to surpass Adorno together with him?

Butler, founder and co-director of *the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs*, established in 2016 at the University of California, Berkeley,[10] has made the bold suggestion that critical theory should now distance itself from the name *Frankfurt*, which is constrained by its geographic, temporal, and, perhaps, gender-related implications.[11] *The Institute for Social Research* in Frankfurt, which produced the first generation of critical theory, celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2023. However, will this theory be seized by feminists in the next century and develop without involving men of the Frankfurt School? Yet, prior to discussing the future, we need to re-organize the history of the debate between the "men" and "women," that is, clarify the legacy of the debate between the modern and postmodern intellectual giants.

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10 Incidentally, it is here that Adorno and Horkheimer, who fled to the United States during World War II, established their base of operations and engaged in their research on the authoritarian personality.

11 See, Judith Butler, "Critique, Crisis, and the Elusive Tribunal." In *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, 543.

In what follows, I will first briefly review the question of how the arguments of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, which critically analyzed the authority of the masculine subject before and after World War II, were accepted in postwar America and Germany, and what new formulations of the problem they gave rise to (1). Next, with reference to Benjamin's texts, I will trace how critical theory has been critically examined and repositioned in feminist debate (2). Furthermore, referencing Adorno's texts other than *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, I reconsider the legitimacy of Benjamin's criticism (3). Finally, I summarize the first round of the debate by identifying the intersection between feminism and critical theory in the fundamental question of the *subject*, and then repositioning Adorno in the discussion of this issue by Benjamin, Butler, Benhabib, and others (4).

History: Across the Atlantic

As a somewhat lengthy preface, let me first touch upon research on authoritarianism that the first generation of the Frankfurt School intellectuals conducted in the 1930s and 1940s. The driving force behind this research was Fromm, who would later fall out with his contemporaries.

In a questionnaire survey he began in 1929, he found that Weimar citizens who expressed support for left-wing parties in politics had conservative and authoritarian views of non-political issues that were closely related to their daily lives.[12] Fromm's concerns at the time were whether there was a tendency among citizens to convert to Nazism despite their liberal views, or whether they tended to support Nazism "just because" they were liberal. Early members of the Institute for Social Research inherited their interest in this theme from Fromm, who eventually became an official member of the Institute in 1930 and worked on *Studies on Authority and the Family* (1936) with Horkheimer, the Institute's director.

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12 See, Erich Fromm, *Arbeiter und Angestellte am Vorabend des Dritten Reiches: Eine sozialpsychologische Untersuchung,* edited by Wolfgang Bonß (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980), 36ff.

According to Fromm, the decline of religious authority in modern times, spread of monopoly capitalism, and rationalization of society deprived individuals of the long-term, stable ties with their surrounding environment that made them irreplaceable. It was the loss of solidarity and arrival of a society of naked competition. As the title of his later book *Escape from Freedom* (1941) suggests, being a liberal is a kind of burden. Here, isolated and anxious citizens are forced to adopt a petty sensibility in which only hierarchical relationships are emphasized, namely, masochistic dependence on the powerful and sadistic aggression against the powerless, to survive economically and socially. What Fromm calls the authoritarian personality is a tendency to be strongly attracted to such sadomasochistic impulses.

The sadomasochistic tendency is manifested above all in the growing repressive nature of fathers who are citizens of the German middle class. However, according to the insights presented in *Studies on Authority and the Family*, the authoritative role of fathers in the family is merely a reactionary result. Having lost their individual power as independent businessmen and their confidence after their defeat in World War I and the Great Depression of 1929, fathers could no longer provide exemplary values and moral standards to their family members. Their sadistic behavior toward their wives and sons was a reaction to their lack of confidence. In addition, with the abundance of products circulating in the market and information provided by the mass media, family members were increasingly being given the opportunity to directly learn the norms that society considered acceptable without going through the head of the household/father. However, the more fathers experienced their own powerlessness, even if unconsciously, the more they behaved as authoritarians within the family and sympathized with stronger leaders outside the family. "Hitler and modern dictatorships are in fact the products of fatherless societies."[13] This does not mean that the leaders of fascism

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13 Institut für Sozialforschung, *Soziologische Exkurse: Nach Vorträgen und Diskussionen* (Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2013), 128. It should be noted that the author of this essay has independently translated the following quotations

played the role of exemplary fathers. As Marcuse later stated, "The leaders of fascism were not *fathers*..."[14]; modern charisma is not an outstanding individual who presents the masses with universal values and leads them but is more like a magnifying glass that highlights and reflects the masses' anxieties and ressentiments. Hitler and Mussolini did not hesitate to claim that they were victims, just like the masses. Their clownish agitation is different from that of classical authoritative "adults" such as Napoleon and Bismarck and has a strong narcissistic and "childish" color that is intoxicated by their own weakness. To support solidarity within the group that shares a victim mentality with themselves, they call for sadistic attacks on the socially successful who (appear to) have monopolized happiness by excluding them, such as the assimilated Jews who were integrated into German society at the time. Thus, the members of the Institute for Social Research interpreted the identity of the authority that guided fascism through social psychological methods—harking to Freud's psychoanalytic insights—and concluded that the dichotomy of *in-group inclusion/out-group exclusion* was the prescription that fascism offered to combat the anxiety of individuals who become increasingly isolated.

The perverse logic of authoritarianism, which increases paranoia by projecting the source of inner anxiety outward, was also carried over to their later work *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). This was a joint study conducted by the Institute for Social Research, which had moved its activities to the United States after Hitler came to power, and social psychologists from the University of California.[15] *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in the United States, was well received by academia, but it was not until the 1960s, when Marcuse, who had obtained a university post on the West Coast, suddenly came into the spotlight, that

from German and Japanese literature, except for *Dialectics of Enlightenment* and *Aesthetic Theory*.

14 Herbert Marcuse, "Industrialisierung und Kapitalismus im Werk Max Webers." In vol. 8 of *Herbert Marcuse Schriften* (zu Klampen, 2004), 69.

15 A longer discussion on this topic is not presented due to space limitations.

America truly "discovered" critical theory. The young people of the New Left, who would later be called the 68 Generation, advocated the overthrow of the existing value order and authority—especially Christian sexual morality that adheres to asceticism and monogamy—and formed a counterculture while merging with the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement. In addition, the Rousseauian *return to nature* led young people to turn to Marcuse, who advocated the liberation of the pleasure principle from the reality principle in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and developed a critique of the controlled society in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). His most famous student was probably Angela Davis, who would later study philosophy under Adorno at the University of Frankfurt.

If this is the first phase of the "encounter," then the second and more complex phase occurred after the 1980s. Regarding the latter, Martin Jay states, "It was only after the appearance of Jürgen Habermas, the most prominent figure of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, that American discussion of critical theory split into two camps that could not easily coexist."[16] One of the reasons for this split is his open criticism of the first generation in *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). In other words, the change in phase is also a generational change within the school in Germany. Here, Habermas criticized the self-reflective model of consciousness philosophy that had existed since Descartes, and instead focused on intersubjective relationships established through communication. For American feminists who grew up in the liberation movement of the 1960s, this must have seemed like a new idea to replace the old masculine philosophical discourse that dragged along the image of a non-physical and isolated self. For this reason, while they were attracted to the French postmodern trend aimed at further deconstructing traditional philosophical discourse, they could not help but be confused by Habermas's argument that was affixed to Kantian normativity under

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16 Martin Jay, "Introduction." In *American Critical Theory Today: Beyond Benjamin, Adorno and Fromm*, edited by Martin Jay (Kouchi Shobo, 2000, only in Japanese), 11.

the slogan of defending modernity. Jay's "two camps that cannot easily coexist" is, in short, the axis of conflict between those who agree with Habermas in affirming modern Enlightenment and those who do not. Extending this axis of conflict is the debate between Benhabib and Butler in the 1990s,[17] and the reevaluation of the first generation of the Frankfurt School by feminists such as Allen.[18] Her praise of Adorno can also be read as a retaliation against Habermas, who lumped his former mentor/Adorno together with George Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, and branded him a premodern reactionary.

However, did the Frankfurt School really tackle the issues of feminism head-on? Indeed, Honneth, who represents the third generation of the school, seems to agree with Fraser's criticism of Habermas; in *Critique of Power*, he states that "the study of the fundamental structure of intersubjectivity is reduced to an analysis of linguistic rules, so that the bodily dimension of social action no longer comes into view."[19] He seeks to find the true source of social criticism in this "bodily dimension of social action," that is, in the appeal of the suffering (*Leiden*) of those who have not been socially recognized. Furthermore, Honneth takes up the feminist call for the reevaluation of child care and housework as a typical example of this appeal.[20]

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17 This study refers briefly to this debate entitled *Feminist Contentions* at the beginning. The controversy begins with Benhabib's critique of Butler, wherein Benhabib emphasizes how the postmodern stance that declares the "death" of three concepts—subject, progress, and the absolute—undermines the critical and emancipatory potential necessary for feminism. For a further exploration of this debate, see, Allen, "Critical Theory and Feminism," 529–32.

18 Looking at views other than Allen's, for example, Gudrun-Axeli Knapp accurately stated at the time: "In recent English-speaking debates, critical theory has undergone an enlightened and multi-track reception that has also had an impact on feminist debates: while Habermas is generally seen as the antipodes of poststructuralism and postmodern theory, traditional critical theory is positioned as poststructuralism's neighbor." (Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, "Einleitung." In *Kurskorrekturen: Feminismus zwischen Kritischer Theorie und Postmoderne*, edited by Knapp (Campus, 1998), 12.)

19 Axel Honneth, *Kritik der Macht: Reflexionsstufen einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie. Frankfurt am Main* (Suhrkamp, 2019), 310.

20 See, Axel Honneth, *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit: Aufsätze zur praktischen Philo-*

Yet, Honneth's interest in feminism has not deepened any further, as was the case with Habermas and the first generation. As if to correlate with this, German feminists have maintained a very cool view of the Frankfurt School, which was geographically familiar to them. "Adorno is hardly mentioned in German sociology today. Feminists have analyzed him productively, and his radical challenge to instrumental reason has certainly helped to find a critical opening for the concept of androcentrism. Even in these cases, little attention has been paid to Adorno's sociological achievements. This is not surprising, since no matter how vehemently he denounced patriarchal violence against women, Adorno's image of femininity was more conformist than progressive."[21] These are the words of sociologist Regina Becker-Schmidt, who, like Davis, studied under Adorno in the late 1960s, and there are countless similar views.[22] Even Allen, who is a positive supporter of Adorno, is forced to say that "… the early Frankfurt School's nostalgia for the bourgeois nuclear family and paternal authority is strikingly at odds with the feminist critique of patriarchy. Moreover, none of the members of the early Frankfurt School engaged substantially with the feminist theory of their day, even though Simone de Beauvoir, for example, was their contemporary."[23]

Let me provide two more supporting pieces of evidence. The prospectus for the colloquium "Frankfurt School for Women's and Gender Studies?" held at the Cornelia Goethe Center of Frankfurt University in

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sophie (Suhrkamp, 2000), 106.

21 Regina Becker-Schmidt, "Critical Theory as a Critique of Society: Theodor W. Adorno's Significance for a Feminist Sociology." In *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, edited by Maggie O'Neill (SAGE Publications, 1999), 104.

22 Here, I will only quote a few words from Barbara Umrath's work. According to her, "As with Marcuse, for Adorno, the question of what sexuality is 'actually' defined was not of concern to critical social theory at all." (Barbara Umrath, *Geschlecht, Familie, Sexualität: Die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie aus der Perspektive sozialwissenschaftlicher Geschlechterforschung* (Campus, 2019), 353.) On the contrary, "As critical social theorists, however, the members of the Institute for Social Research were not primarily concerned with providing a positivist description of sexuality and sexual ethics or tracing possible changes." (*Ibid*, 359.)

23 Allen, "Critical Theory and Feminism," 528.

2014 states that "Frankfurt's 'Critical Theory' has provided an important impetus for women's and gender studies," but also criticizes the school's "neglect of gender relations as a social structural correlation, and its male-centered conception of subject formation."[24] In addition, it was only in 2022 that Suhrkamp, which has published many books by the Frankfurt School circle, including the complete works of Adorno, released a collection of essays titled *Critical Theory and Feminism*.

Controversial History: Between Critical Theorists and Feminists

The above discussion has clarified that the influential relationship between the Frankfurt School and feminist intellectuals is limited. However, it is important to note that the scarcity of shared themes does not directly imply the superficiality of the relationship itself. The fact that young Davis, Benhabib, and Benjamin studied philosophy in Frankfurt should not be underestimated. Both camps were concerned with more fundamental issues: questions about the *subject*. Around the 1970s, when they were studying in Frankfurt, French postmodernist Foucault was preaching *the death of the subject* in philosophy, and a young Habermas was attempting the so-called *linguistic turn*. In the field of psychoanalysis, the Freudian model of subject formation based on the Oedipus complex was being forced to undergo major changes due to the developmental psychology of Lawrence Kohlberg and G. H. Mead, and the object relations theory of Donald Winnicott and others. These changes in the ideological constellation meant that the thought of the first generation, which was deeply influenced by Freud, and its criticism of the modern subject model, as represented in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, were "both old and new" to feminists who stood at the very turning point of those times.

This ambivalence is typically expressed by Benjamin, who began to publish her essays in earnest in the late 1970s. In what follows, I will focus mainly on her essay *The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology*

24 Cornelia Goethe Colloquien, "Eine Frankfurter Schule der Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung?," Cornelia Goethe Center for Gender Studies. Accessed September 11, 2024. https://www.cgc.uni-frankfurt.de/centrum/geschichte

(1977) and *The Bonds of Love* (1988), which made her famous, because these seem to anticipate the trend in critical theory, especially after Habermas. In these works, the first-generation's "old" subject model that emphasizes the subject–object relationship is criticized in agreement with Habermas, while the Habermasian theory of intersubjectivity that emphasizes communicative acts is also criticized, as if to foreshadow Honneth's later argument, for ignoring the vivid interrelationships that include friction and conflict between subjects, that is, what Honneth calls in Hegelian term *struggle for recognition*. Benjamin and Honneth agree that the Habermasian model of consensus building, which is based on the neutral gaze of a third person (i.e., observer), is unable to explain how people can establish relationships with others without blanket rejection of aggressive efforts that seek to negate each other.[25] In addition, Benjamin's argument, which is clearly modeled on dialectics, anticipates the attempts of Butler and Benhabib to redefine the subject as a performative or narrative agency because Benjamin emphasizes the process of constantly correcting and repositioning the self through recognizing the story of the "I" projected onto the "you" of the partner as a story that is "also" my own. I argue that Benjamin has thus been a "knot" between critical theory and feminism, but her criticism of Adorno is not entirely without problems.

In the above texts, Benjamin shows that Marx and the first-generation intellectuals of the Frankfurt School presented the impasses and contradictions of modern rationalism with utmost clarity. From a capitalist perspective, the bureaucratic system, described by Max Weber as a uniquely Western product that seemingly guarantees individual freedom and equality, is revealed to be an inhuman mechanism that reduces not only objects but also workers to commonplace products or replaceable instruments. Freud's claim that civilized society exists because individuals suppress and control their sexual urges, or *sublimate* them into labor, is not only exposed as a story supported by the unfair treatment and misunderstanding of women but also declared to be a failure of the story itself. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue, it is science and technology,

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25 This is a point reiterated by Benjamin in her book, *The Shadow of the Other*.

and total war system brought about by civilization itself that made mass murder such as the Holocaust possible and regressed the entire society to a barbarous "pre-civilization" state.

However, according to Benjamin, no matter how much they criticize rationalism, Adorno and Horkheimer, in agreement with Freud, insist on the idea that desire must be critically monitored and controlled by reason.[26] In this case, desire is always considered to be "maternal/feminine" that tempts the male principle of reason, threatens its identity, and degrades it into an uncontrollable state. Benjamin sees here an uncritical inheritance of Freud's teaching on the Oedipus complex. In other words, mother–child intimacy or mother's love in the pre-Oedipal stage is considered to keep humans in a happy but underdeveloped natural state, while the role of forcibly intervening in this intimacy, taking the child (especially the son) "outside" the house (mother), and teaching him the manners and ethos necessary for a civilized life—especially the ascetic attitude necessary for sustained and planned work—is assigned exclusively to the father.

Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which interprets Homer's myth as an allegory of the Enlightenment, seems to Benjamin to be an extension of Freud's teachings into a universal story that applies to the entire Western society. As is well known, the two authors read the formation of "the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings"[27] in Odysseus and his crew, who are faced with the temptations of various goddesses and the fertile earth but reject them and resolutely attempt to return home. Moreover, Homer's myth is not only interpreted in historio-philosophical terms as the seed of the Enlightenment but is also, like the biological claim that ontogeny repeats phylogeny, as the conflict between the state of nature and the process of socialization that "all" humans will experience during their develop-

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26 See, Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalization: Adorno's Social Psychology." *Telos*, no. 32(1977), 42.

27 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 26.

ment. "… and something of this process [similar to Odysseus] is repeated in every childhood. The effort to hold itself together attends the ego at all its stages, and the temptation to be rid of the ego has always gone hand-in-hand with the blind determination to preserve it."[28]

However, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is not simply a rehash of Freud's work. According to the authors, Freud's excessive expectations projected onto the bourgeois fathers of his time, with the idea of having the civilized superego (the general maxim that one "must not" do something) subdue the id (the individual desire to "want" to do something), collapsed in a way that he had never intended. This is because, in a late capitalist society where even sex has become a standardized consumer product, individuals are forced and "commanded" to enjoy life to develop the culture-industry. To paraphrase in Freudian terms, here the id and the superego are not in conflict, but the id itself becomes the superego (id "must" fulfill desires). As is well known, Marcuse called this reversal *repressive de-sublimation*, that is, a reversal of the Freudian model of repressive sublimation. In a society where the creation of money by driving desires is paramount, the moral authority of the ascetic bourgeoisie is lost. In such a society, the people's attention is not drawn to classical "adult" authorities who want to be a role model for the people as leaders but to agitators who appeal to the ressentiment of the masses, saying, as mentioned in the previous section, that Jews and other capitalists are monopolizing their "fun." Here the agitators are "childish" narcissists who fill themselves with paranoid feelings that they are victims just like the masses. According to Benjamin, with the father disappearing from society in such manner, Adorno and Horkheimer instead aimed to return to Freud's ideal, that is, to the archetype of the classical father who restrains himself and behaves thoroughly intellectually.[29] However, if this was not appropriate, asks Benjamin, where did they go wrong?

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28 *Ibid.*

29 See, Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (Pantheon, 1988), 246.

Based on the findings of developmental psychology and object relations theory, Benjamin states that Freud's explanation of the intimate relationship between mother and child in the pre-Oedipal stage, which asserts the dominance of the pleasure principle and the mother's unilateral control over her child, is mistaken. Just as the infant is not simply a subject of desire, the mother is not simply an object of desire either. What actually occurs between mother and child is a mutual relationship of physical contact and play that includes not only conformity but also repulsion, such as imitating the other's facial expressions, getting the other to imitate one's gestures, or disrupting the other's rhythm and trying to involve them in one's own.[30] In this mutuality, desire is also a matter of recognition. This is because what the infant seeks is not only the mother's body from the neck down (i.e., her breasts), as Benjamin puts it, but also her gaze, which allows the infant to confirm that their existence is accepted, and this is the same for the mother.

Benjamin further states that Freud overlooked the fact that this *struggle for recognition* between mother and child is a mutual act that fosters sociality/sociability. The same is true of *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, which argues that woman/nature has long been positioned as "the substrate of never-ending subsumption on the plane of ideas and of never-ending subjection on that of reality."[31] Women are either sacred as objects of comfort obtained at the end of labor or viewed as enemies as objects of pleasure that interfere with labor. For Odysseus, the former is his wife Penelope, and the latter is the Siren goddess. In either case, for the authors of *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, women are, at best, subjects who suffer and express suffering, but not subjects who act, make decisions, or accomplish something on their own. Men either respect women or disregard them, but do not consider them as equals. Of course, Adorno and Horkheimer criticize the injustice of this gaze, but the structural issue of how this gender imbalance, which is allegorically read into the tale of Odysseus' adventures, came about is not discussed any further.

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30 See, Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 25ff.

31 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 87.

Adorno's Wager: Exaggeration, Performance, and Dialectics

Let me paraphrase part of Benjamin's explanation of the structural problem discussed above.[32] During the Oedipal stage, children become sensitive to gender and power relations, and due to the influence of various social systems that emphasize gender differences, the balance between independence and dependence that was precariously maintained in their relationship with their mother begins to collapse. Benjamin sees this as *separation*. What happens when separation progresses to an extreme? In this case, to distance themselves from dependence and approach independence, children (especially sons) seek in their fathers the ideal of a subject who manages and dominates everything on their own (projective identification as idealization). At the same time, they associate dependence with a state of surrendering one's will and being dominated, and further equate this condition with the feminine, trying to eliminate it from themselves (Julia Kristeva called this *abjection*). The image of parents with clearly separated roles is, ironically, nothing more than a "retroactive" projection onto each target (mother/the dependent and father/the independent).

In this case, the image of the feminine is more complex. For women are either hated by men as powerless, irresponsible subjects who depend on everyone, or desired as infinitely controllable objects because of their dependency, while at the same time praised as subjects who endlessly heal and accept the anxieties of men/lonely rulers. However, for Benjamin, no matter how much men sadistically dominate the feminine, or how much they masochistically depend on maternal power, which is nothing more than the exact negative of paternal dominance, a sadomasochistic subject who reduces the mutuality between subjects to a purely power relationship of dominating and being dominated will never encounter a truly independent Other. This is because such an Other is the "you" who cannot be controlled by the "I" and must be acknowledged as an entity

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32 See, Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, Chap. 2; 4.

beyond the subject's power. In any case, as Benjamin says, women never appear as such an Other in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*.

However, Benjamin's argument misses some points. Let me point this out in three parts. "Adorno finds no possibility of a reconciliation between reason and nature,"[33] she says. She interprets Adorno as saying that love and desire are objects of control but are not essential elements for maintaining the richness of humanity. However, it is difficult to believe that Adorno would willingly accept such Kantian rigorism. This is also evident from his thorough criticism of Kantian idealistic morality, which he made in various places.[34] Unlike Kant, who sharply distinguished between humans and animals, Adorno discusses morality by focusing on the physical aspects, such as animalistic gestures and children's play, like Jeremy Bentham, who saw a commonality between humans and animals in empathy with pain. As one memorable passage in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) states, "The only morality for an individual is to try to live in such a way that he can believe that he was a good animal."[35] Similarly, in *Minima Moralia* (1951), Adorno not only criticizes psychoanalysts as authority figures who force social conformity and "false reconciliation" on their patients, but also portrays paranoid and hysterical patients who resist such moves and struggle in search of the truth in a positive light. The problem is by no means simple (1).

More puzzling, in her essay *The End of Internalization*, subtitled *Adorno's Social Psychology*, Benjamin refers to a very limited number of Adorno's texts. Important works such as *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics* are not included. In fact, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* itself is not examined in detail. If one reads carefully, there are several cases where it is Horkheimer, not Adorno, who is denounced as a conservative authoritarian. In short, there is a discrepancy between the title and the content

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33 Benjamin, "The End of Internalization," 43.

34 Perhaps the most enlightening is Adorno's reading of Kant titled *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, which he gave as a summer semester lecture in 1963.

35 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*. Vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Suhrkamp 2003), 294.

of the paper. Of course, if the problem is Adorno's social psychological discourse, there may be no need to cover his literature extensively. However, Benjamin's intention to position him as a Kantian rationalist goes far beyond the framework of social psychology. In this essay, Benjamin repeatedly points out that Adorno's discourse, which authoritatively portrays the Freudian ideal of the father, contradicts the criticism of authoritarianism he developed in *The Authoritarian Personality*.[36] However, Adorno is not as Freudian as Benjamin thinks. If his argument appears self-contradictory, then, possibly, there is a problem with the very framework for understanding Adorno that she assumes (2).

According to Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer were skeptical of reason, but their hatred of weakening of the ego and de-individualization led them to regard reason as the final authority for the individual to be an independent being. All that was left was the maxim of self-criticism, that is, to be strict with oneself. This certainly anticipates the points that Habermas would later make in his criticism of *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. According to him, a one-sided criticism of reason that does not acknowledge the results of the rationalization process of society shows that the perspective on which such criticism is based is narrow and overly simplistic. To put it metaphorically, Adorno and Horkheimer only see their own "shadow" and deliberately treat it as their enemy.[37] Later, Honneth's criticism of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in *Critique of Power* also followed this Benjamin–Habermas line faithfully. However, in the 1990s, Honneth virtually withdrew from this line (more on this below). This is because the continuous Adorno studies carried out during this time demonstrated that Benjamin had overlooked his adoption of a specific "method" in the critique of reason, and therefore failed to fully grasp the very dialectical character of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (3).

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36 See, e.g., Benjamin, "The End of Internalization," 42, 45, 61.

37 See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, Bd.1* (Suhrkamp, 1981), 453–534; *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Suhrkamp, 1985), 130–157.

Adorno asks what is necessary to notice the distortion of the logic we normally rely on. For this, it is not enough to simply compensate for the flaws and inadequacies of logic through discussion, as in the style of Habermas. The problem is the sense of security that distorted logic usually gives us. As the difficulty of refuting conspiracy theorists shows, it is not effective to simply contrast correct logic with distorted logic from the outside. On the contrary, Adorno tries to make the logic itself speak eloquently of the distortion. In other words, similar to Socrates' dialogue or Hegel's dialectic, we first accept the other person's logic as it is. Or we should accept it "too much." In this way, we exaggerate the other person's logic to the extreme, saying, "If I were to expand on your opinion, would it be like this?" It is only at this point that we notice the violence contained in the logic, become uneasy, and are forced to distance ourselves emotionally from the logic in question because of its eeriness. This strategy is a gamble, an attempt to put oneself in a dangerous situation where one might go out for wool and come home shorn. It is similar to Freud's idea that the dreams themselves, which make the dreamer feel uneasy, contain hints that lead to a truth that the dreamer does not realize. In fact, Freud saw dreams as condensations of the patient's feelings, such as worries about parent–child relationships, which are indirectly expressed through symbolic scenes and allegorical plots. Adorno also left behind the famous thesis that "in psychoanalysis, only exaggeration is the truth,"[38] and one could even say that his texts are themselves intentional and performative productions of such condensation and exaggeration.

In his essay entitled *The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism* (2000), Honneth focuses on three rhetorical methods employed in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*; narrative description (1), chiasmus/reversal of the order of words (2), and exaggeration (3), which expose the uncanny

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38 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben.* Vol. 4 of *Gesammelte Schriften,* edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Suhrkamp, 2003), 54.

nature (*das Un-heimliche*) of the familiar world (*das Heimliche*) and high-light the "pathology" of society. Specifically, Adorno and Horkheimer calmly recount the fate of Odysseus as an example of self-discipline that ultimately collapses (1), and symbolically show the fate of culture that falls into "industry," the exact opposite of its original goal, with the neol-ogism *culture-industry* (2). By emphasizing the standardized behavioral patterns of modern people, they show how similar our lives have become to the "stimulus–response" scheme of animals (3). Honneth analyzes that what two authors are attempting is, so to speak, "therapeutic self-criti-cism,"[39] which gets the sick person to talk about their illness and become aware of it. Does this not prove how close the method of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is to the Freudian so-called *talking cure*?[40]

There are many other studies that focus on Adorno's narrative tech-nique, but here I would like to introduce the point made by Tilo Wesche.[41] According to him, there are several techniques of criticism. For example, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is classified as *indirect criticism through expression*. Specifically, this work does not contain any preachy moral discourse; but by persistently depicting the protagonist who yearns for chivalry as humorous, it succeeds in appealing to the reader how outdated medieval values are. Excessive dedication to description has the effect of indirectly encouraging the reader to change their attitude when reading it. Artistic expression that refrains from straightforward value judgments may at

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39 Honneth, *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit*, 81.

40 The following texts are helpful in discussing Adorno's rhetoric and dialectical thinking in relation to psychoanalysis: See, e.g., Jan Baars, "Kritik als Anam-nese: Die Komposition der Dialektik der Aufklärung." In *Die Aktualität der Dialektik der Aufklärung: Zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne*, edited by Harry Kunneman and Hent de Vries (Campus, 1989); Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, "Den Schmerz wegsprechen, das Leiden beredt werden lassen. Psychoanalyse als kritische Theorie – Alfred Lorenzer." In *Inszenierungen des Unbewussten in der Moderne: Alfred Lorenzer heute*, edited by Elisabeth Rohr (Tectum, 2014); Julia König, "Hermeneutik des Leibes und der Vorrang des Objekts." In *Sprache und Kritische Theorie*, edited by Philip Hogh and Stefan Deines (Campus, 2016); Allen, *Critique on the Couch*.

41 See, Tilo Wesche, "Reflexion, Therapie, Darstellung. Formen der Kritik." In *Was ist Kritik?*, edited by Rahel Jaeggi and Wesche (Suhrkamp, 2019), 211ff.

first glance appear to maintain a "neutral" position, but this is literally just a pretense. That is, dense description contributes to revealing the distortion of values that accompanies such neutral expression. This is precisely what *expression* itself is attempting. According to Wesche, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* follows the narrative style of *Don Quixote* in that it deliberately simplifies and exaggerates things to "forcefully" make the reader experience the madness and humor that lie within them.

Challenges and Legacy: The Dialectical Experience of Shudder

Finally, I would like to reconsider the argument Benjamin develops within the various feminist attempts to reshape the concept of the *subject*, and Adorno's contribution to this debate from our perspective.

In her 1999 essay titled *Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation*, Benhabib proposes an intersubjective *narrative* model as an alternative to Butler's *performative* subject model. Perhaps behind this is her intention to defend the normative value of the communicative act theory proposed by Habermas/her mentor against the deconstructionism of Butler/Derrida. This is therefore, so to speak, a proxy war between Derrida and Habermas, or between postmodernism and modernity. Of course, Benhabib does not deny the postmodern claim that there is no universal model of human growth (so-called *master narrative*) that all members of society agree on and follow as an example. Rather, she emphasizes that we have no choice but to talk about ourselves on the premise that we are caught up in the stories of others who are different from us in every way. Here, a story can be described as a network of meaning generations in which the "I" and others inevitably encounter each other, share experiences while constantly redrawing their boundaries. "Others are not just the subject matters of my story; they are also tellers of their own stories, which compete with my own, unsettle my self-understanding, and spoil my attempts to mastermind my own narrative."[42] Immediately after this statement, Benhabib refers to Benjamin

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42 Seyla Benhabib, "Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation." *Signs*, no.2(1999), 348.

and suggests that this narrative model coincides with Benjamin's thinking. But would Benjamin herself agree with this?

Earlier, Benjamin had criticized Benhabib for not taking the issue of the Other seriously.[43] It seems likely that she will repeat the same criticism of this narrative model. For, while emphasizing the positional value of the Other for the "I," Benhabib states that the "I" is indeed constructed by the story that is also the Other's but is not "determined" by it.[44] Here, she asserts the consistent autonomy of the subject. In other words, the "I," who is the subject of the meaning of a story, can always normatively distinguish between "my" story and the story that is not "mine," and extract, recall, and select only the former. Nonetheless, how does this reconcile with Benhabib's own earlier claim that the Other is a being that shakes "my" attempt to speak about myself at will and my self-understanding? Benjamin's argument was that it is impossible to speak of the Other without such a "threat." Similarly, she argued that the Habermasian model of intersubjectivity, which focuses on the regularities of language and the normativity of communication, is unable to address the question of why the Other appears to "me" as an ambivalent being that brings about not only security but also a sense of anxiety—in other words, as a competing opponent.[45]

Butler's analysis has much to teach us about the Other, who deeply intervenes in the existence of the "I." According to her well-known argument in *Gender Trouble* (1990), the subject/ "I" is constituted by the very subjective attitude toward the Other, who repeatedly calls out "You are…", and who inevitably determines the state of the "I." The awakening of the "I" as a subject paradoxically begins with the "I" recognizing itself as reflected in the gaze of the Other/mother, who calls out to "me" that how cute you are. Expanding on this insight, Butler argues that the uniqueness and essence that the "I" seems to naturally possess is merely a performative effect of the sharing and repeated use of certain discours-

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43 See, Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, 85.

44 See, Benhabib, "Difference and Collective Identities," 354.

45 See Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 191; *Shadow of the Other*, 93.

es containing value evaluations (e.g., "Because you are a woman, loud self-promotion is not appropriate," etc.) within a community or group. This is easy to understand when we consider how the word *man*, once appropriated and used by men, has come to be accepted as a neutral, universal concept that transcends gender differences and represents the human species itself. However, Butler finds in this very repeated performance the potential to betray the essentialist pretensions that the performative effect itself makes possible. Aesthetic performance brings about a certain "displacement." For example, the performance of an overtly exaggerated femininity, through its extreme intrusiveness, makes us aware that the femininity we expect in our daily lives is merely a kind of convention that cannot be established without social approval. Parody/pretense reveals that there is no universal essence or idea behind it, as Plato claims.

To reiterate, the strategy of acting or parody is to take advantage of the fact that "my" identity is determined by something other than the "I," exaggerating and parodying the very identity to undermine it from within. Interestingly, this strategy is a central feature of Adorno's own philosophical discourse. According to Martin Jay, his thought has an aspect of "reworking without entirely duplicating many of his friend's most arresting ideas."[46] As Adorno himself states, "the movements of the [human] mind are constantly haunted by imitation, play, and the desire to be different from the status quo,"[47] Jay says that we should pay attention to the performative implication of Adorno's style, which rejected the originality of thought—that is, his rejection of being a thinker who claims to be the essence and origin of something.

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Let us summarize. Adorno often uses the terms constellation or configuration (*Konfiguration*) to describe his practice of non-systematic thinking. He first sees the text as a site where various forces intersect and jostle. He

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46 Martin Jay, "Taking On the Stigma of Inauthenticity. Adorno's Critique of Genuineness." *New German Critique*, no. 97(2006), 30.

47 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 174.

then intervenes with an "unbalanced" reading that is overly concerned with detail, which disturbs the identity of the text as a whole and brings unexpected aspects of it to light. The unorthodox, "unserious" reading reveals what the text itself unconsciously tries to hide. Adorno likens configuration to a child's game of combining various images and shapes to discover unexpected *figures*, and it is precisely this kind of dialectical play that he is attempting.

Benjamin would be familiar with this practice, for she too sees the dialogue between the complaints of the patient/analysand and the responses of the doctor/analyst as a field of forces colored by sympathy and refusal. Here, the patient may project onto the doctor the image of the person who has hurt and traumatized them or may identify themselves precisely with that "aggressor" and re-enact the trauma they experienced from the position of the perpetrator. However, whether in the position of the perpetrator or the victim, by repeating this re-enactment, the patient can gain a sense of having survived the trauma and rebuild the subjectivity that was once destroyed. The re-enactment is not an exact repetition of the same thing because in the repeated complaints and responses, the patient is able to recognize the emotions they had suppressed and make a "legitimate" assessment. Based on this evaluation, the patient can narrate the experience in a different way even if the outline of the plot remains the same. Here, patients are no longer one-sided victims who are hurt without understanding the implications. Moreover, sharing the realization that they have survived the traumas with another person (the doctor) enables patients to adopt a perspective that is compassionate and affirming for themselves (Benjamin calls this *the Third*).

Likewise, Adorno's texts clearly record the "shudder" of identity touched and mediated by the other (non-identical) too.[48] It is this inherent

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[48] Regarding shudder (*Schauer*), the following passage from Adorno's unfinished work *Aesthetic Theory* is well known. Although somewhat lengthy, I will quote from Hullot-Kentor's English translation. "What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder's own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the

oscillation in the text itself that has repeatedly attracted many feminists to Adorno. Here, I would like to point out that, although Benjamin rejects the classical model of the self-reflective subject, there are also moments of self-reflection through the other within her. A strong, masculine ego is certainly not assumed here. But Benjamin expects the subject to be tenacious enough to endure the irreconcilable conflict while allowing various emotions to coexist within oneself.[49] She often uses the example of mother–child interaction; the mother often responds to her anxious child by imitating their anxiety with "exaggerated" gestures. It is like sending a message to the child that "I understand your anxiety. I don't deny it. At the same time, I want you to know that I am prepared for that anxiety." This allows the child to "double" themselves, so to speak, and imagine another self that encompasses the anxious self. This kind of "meta-response" is precisely what can be called embodied dialectical practice. By accepting and returning the other person's negative emotions while subtly dispersing pain-points, without completely denying them, the dichotomy of attacker–received is prevented from being reproduced. This approach is becoming increasingly important not only in clinical practice but also in political dialogue, and it is precisely this approach that Benjamin has long sought as a possible

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spell. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness. That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it." (Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 331.) In most cases, shudder is discussed as an aesthetic experience—both by Adorno scholars and by Adorno himself. However, the implication of the matter here far exceeds the narrowly defined realm of aesthetics. As is evident from the quotation, shudder in this context is considered to be connected to the formation of subjectivity. Moreover, as in the case of Jessica Benjamin, the subjectivity in question demonstrates a dialectical "duality." In other words, subjectivity cannot exist without contact with the other, but this does not mean that subjectivity entirely surrenders itself to the other. To shudder is a free and subjective response to shudder itself—an attempt to transcend the shudder that has seized the subject, which is performed, paradoxically, in the very form of shuddering.

49　See, Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*, 101.

form of mutual recognition between Israel and Palestine.[50]

Unlike Benjamin, Adorno does not often assume a relationship between subjects. Rather, what he often imagines as the subject of imitation are animals and nature as "others" that remove the epistemological framework of the isolated individual from the subject and relieve the burden of being an individual. There is also a glimpse of a romanticism that could be called Rousseauian: wanting to immerse oneself in nature. However, the erotic starting point of discovering oneself fascinated by the other is also a premise that, to some extent, is common to feminists who have studied dialectics. As Butler states in her Hegelian essay, "Self-consciousness comes out of itself when faced with the Other, where 'ausser sich' in German not only denotes coming out of oneself, but ecstasy as well as anger."[51] It is not difficult to imagine that this reflects women's long-standing experiences of their own existence being constructed and determined by the others/men. Dialectical thinking, which seeks to "shake up" such experiences, can only be born from acknowledging subordination to the others, for better or worse. However, have the men of critical theory since Adorno, namely Habermas and, more recently, normative Kantians such as Rainer Forst, taken such women's shudder and anger seriously? Even the Hegelian Honneth may appear to feminists as setting and fixing as if *a priori* the norms by which the subject should be recognized as an individual, that is, without taking sufficient account of influences from outside the self. In one dialogue with Honneth, Butler points out, in a clearly critical tone: "In my view, the ethical relation among people depends on acknowledging and struggling against the threat of destruction, and that aggression is part of psychic and social

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50 See, e.g., Benjamin, " 'Moving Beyond Violence:' What We Learn from Two Former Combatants about the Transition from Aggression to Recognition." In *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory*, edited by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (Barbara Budrich, 2016); *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (Routledge, 2018), 215ff.

51 Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France (Columbia University Press, 1999)*, 48.

life. But for you, negativity is conceptually separated from recognition, and you hold that negativity does not properly belong to the Hegelian elaboration of social relations."[52]

In summary, the "Hundred Years' War" between the Frankfurt School and feminists can be described as a proxy war between "Kant and Hegel." Then, what about the second round? We are yet to know its beginning.

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52 Butler *et al.*, *Recognition and Ambivalence*, 50.

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Contemplation as Critique: Han's Elaboration of a Fundamental Theme in Critical Theory

Nathan Ross[1]

Abstract: This essay departs from the work of Byung-Chul Han to examine the role of contemplation in critical theory. Early critical theorists recognize the redemptive potential of contemplation—whether in aesthetic experience, remembrance, or the flâneur's gaze—while questioning its passive and metaphysical undertones. Han situates contemplation as a critical response to crises of late capitalism: hyperactivity, fragmented attention, data-driven notions of truth, and the erosion of meaningful relations to objects and others. Through a reconstruction of Han's project and its resonances with past thinkers, the essay proposes six theses on contemplation: as a fruitful mode of inactivity; as deep attention that intensifies experience; as a relation to the timeless in art, nature, and memory; as a disciplined resistance to reactive stimulus; as mimetic immersion in indeterminate spaces; and as the source of authentic writing and critique. Contemplation emerges as a counter-force to epistemic mythologies and the temporality of production. Ultimately, the essay situates contemplation within contemporary critical theory as a practice indispensable for truth, originality, and social critique, while clarifying its relation to praxis and aesthetic experience.

> "…obdurate thought cheats itself of the element of receptivity,
> without which it is no longer thought."[2]
> —Adorno

The contemplative moment plays a striking role in early critical theory, whether it be Benjamin's description of the flâneur as someone whose glance lends a soul to the commodified world, Adorno's discussion of 'spiritual experience,' or the way in which both writers find some-

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2   Adorno, T.W., *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by R. Hullot-Kentor. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 346.

thing fundamentally redemptive in Proust's project of recovering time through remembrance. Nevertheless, early critical theory also expresses ambivalence about contemplation, suspecting that it lies too far outside the scope of modern life, aligns with traditionalist metaphysics or entails an overly passive relation to what is given.[3] This contemplative aspect is less prevalent in the subsequent generation of critical theory, where intersubjectivity, deliberative rationality and communicative action play more prominent roles, although some scholars have done work to unearth this theme.[4]

In recent philosophy, Byung-Chul Han seeks to place contemplation back on the program, urging a 'revitalization' of the contemplative element throughout his oeuvre. Contemplation provides a point of resistance to a whole series of ongoing crises that Han diagnoses in his works: a mental health crisis brought on by frantic overwork; shortening attention spans; a loss of 'truth' due to oversaturation by bits of fleeting information;[5] a politics in which we are fragmented into isolated con-

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3   The ambivalence of the first generation of critical theory to contemplation can be noted in a number of foundational texts. According to Horkheimer, 'mere contemplation' is generally associated with the 'classical' approach to theory that he distinguishes from critical theory. Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (London: Continuum, 1975), 216. In Adorno's aesthetic theory, he writes of the 'contemplative' approach to art as one that has been left behind by the developments of modern art. Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot Kentor (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998), 333. We can also analyze this ambivalence of contemplation in terms of the conflict between concentration and distraction in Benjamin's work, where modern conditions generally promote 'reception in a state of distraction' and a 'shock effect.'

4   A very direct thematic exploration of contemplation in the work of Adorno: Martin Seel, *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2004). This work argues that contemplation makes up the tacit positive value behind Adorno's ethical, aesthetic and epistemic thinking. Another key study is Roger Foster, *The Recovery of Experience* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008). Although the work focuses on a broader conceptual term, *Erfahrung*, much of what it says can be transposed into the theme of contemplation. As we will see, Han relates his notion of contemplation to the term *Erfahurng*. The work also does much to trace the origins of Adorno's concept in Benjamin and Proust.

5   These first two themes are especially elaborated in Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, transl. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). For the latter

sumers;[6] a decline of meaningful relations to a world of objects.[7] His writings make us aware of an eclectic line of thinkers who inform his understanding of contemplation, from Basho and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin. His texts allow us not only to reconstruct a history of the concept of contemplation, but also to place contemplation into a critical relation with the present.

This essay aims for a definition of contemplation that situates it within the terrain of contemporary critical theory. The concept 'contemplation' will prove itself useful for diagnosing systematic features of contemporary capitalism that capture our attention, distort our priorities and rob us of time. But even more, it will also be crucial to explicate the concept of contemplation in epistemic terms that do not bind it to untenable metaphysical assumptions, indeed, in terms that make it useful for deciphering even some newer forms of epistemic mythology. The first generation of critical theory takes epistemic mythology as a term for the uncritical acceptance of rationalistic structures that rest on dubious metaphysical assumption and undermine critical insight.[8] Today we see new or at least updated epistemic mythologies: for example, the reliance on data and information as exclusive criteria of truth, as well as the discourse surrounding 'artificial intelligence.' When it comes to the latter, we find an ideological definition of intelligence according to its most predictable results. In short, artificial intelligence lacks not only embodiment and feeling, not only attunement, but the power of contemplation. Without contemplation, there can be neither truth nor real originality, as we will see from Han's treatment.

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theme, see page 12.

6   See especially Byung-Chul Han, *Infokratie* (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2021).

7   See especially Byung-Chul Han, *Non-things*, transl. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2022)

8   This notion of epistemic mythology is dealt with first and perhaps most clearly in Walter Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' in *Selected Works* Vol. 1 ed. Eiland and Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 100-110. In this work, Benjamin diagnoses limitations in the dominant reception of Kantian epistemology in his time. However, this project of critiquing dominant epistemic practices of the time also deeply infuses the works of Horkheimer and Adorno, especially in their approach to logical positivism.

A philosophy of contemplation will thus have to answer several questions. What is meant by contemplation? What role does it play within human life? What unique modes of truth does it make possible? What metaphysical and anthropological assumptions does it entail? In transitioning to contemporary critical theory we can ask: what is the fate of contemplation in our modern, capitalist social system? How does contemplation relate to the project of transforming society through praxis? And to the extent that critical theory grants art a critical status as a medium of social critique, what is the role of contemplation in attending to and deciphering works of art?

The early theses will generally explicate the notion of contemplation according to terms familiar from the writings of Han. The latter theses will turn more towards the works of early critical theory, with the goal of providing further dimensions that are consistent with Han's program.

Thesis 1: Contemplation is a fruitful mode of *inactivity*.

Contemplation recognizes the value in inactivity. Inactivity is not just a privation or failure to act. It is also potentially a space from which to critique dominant modes of activity. This critique of activity has various sides: activity can be excessive. It can impose a cost on us in terms of effort, distraction or stimulation that dulls our senses. It can be so repetitive and habitual that it keeps us from seeing chances to break the cycle of repetitive behavior and do something more creative. A mode of activity can become an end in itself such that it lacks the ability to posit ends freely. Indeed, activity can descend into a pattern of reactivity that makes it the opposite of activity, namely passivity.

Han develops the term hyperactivity to describe a mode of action that becomes a blind force of reproducing the status quo. In fact, he develops this notion of hyperaction through a critical reappropriation of the dialectic of labor and action in Arendt. To the extent that we labor, we end up in a cycle of effort and consumption, that is, we end up feeding human need in order to reproduce life. Political action is needed in order to break the cycle and create new human meanings. Borrowing from her

premise, but critiquing her terminology, Han writes: "Even action itself must contain moments of pausing in order not to freeze into mere labor."[9] For Han, there is not a clear distinction between labor and action, unless it is founded on this contemplative moment. He continues this critique elsewhere:

> What eludes Arendt in the dialectic of being active is that hyperactive intensification leads to an abrupt switch into hyperpassivity. . . In a pure state, activity only prolongs what is already available… Although delaying does not represent a positive deed, it is necessary if action is not to sink to the level of laboring.[10]

It may seem as if Han is giving an uncharitable reading that fails to grasp the distinctive meaning that Arendt gives to action, its political and intersubjective valence.[11] A more generous reading of both thinkers would be that Han seeks to salvage the Arendtian distinction between labor and action by distinguishing a mode of action that has reflection internal to it from one that falls prey to laborious overactivity. That is, he allows us to enrich the *vita activa* with the *vita contempletiva*. If we want to conceive of action as a truly creative potential for beginning anew, we must endow it with a reflective dimension. Here he calls this a 'delay': "Although hesitation is not an act itself, it is constitutive of the act."[12] This pause stands in a dialectical relationship with praxis: it intervenes in a mode of activity that falls short of praxis, so that it can restore the possibility of praxis.

Adorno provides a comparable conceptualization of the relation between contemplation and praxis: "Without the contemplative element (*Moment*), praxis degrades itself into mere busyness lacking in concept

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9   Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time*, transl. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 105.

10 Han, *The Burnout Society*, 22.

11 It is noted even by those who give generous attention to Han's philosophy that he is not always at his strongest in his rendering of the work of other thinkers. See *Byung-Chul Han: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Steven Knepper, Ethan Stoneman and Robert Wyllie (Cambridge: Polity, 2024).

12 Han, *The Scent of Time*, 105.

(*begrifflosen Betrieb*); yet if meditation is cultivated as its own special domain, it hardly fares better."[13] In general, Adorno has an even far more developed suspicion about the emphasis on 'action' in modern political discourse,[14] seeing calls to action as generally doomed to repeat the very patterns of behavior scripted for them by the system that they are trying to overcome.

But what distinguishes Adorno's thought from the previous quote by Han is that it also views the contemplative moment as running its own concurrent risk of becoming isolated and hence a mere diversion that guards against true reflection. Just as Han critiques Arendt by posing the danger that action turn into hyperactivity, Adorno here critiques contemplation by posing the risk that it becomes disembodied as its own special domain.

There is another, perhaps more fruitful way of thinking of how contemplation relates to action: as corrective. Nietzsche gives us the classic formulation of this:

> From the lack of repose our civilization is turning into a new barbarism. At no time have the active, that is the restless, counted for more. That is why one of the most necessary corrections to the character of mankind that has to be taken in hand is a considerable strengthening of the contemplative element in it.[15]

Nietzsche is not invoking contemplation as an ascetic withdrawal from the world of action. Yet he is a thinker who holds his own time of indus-

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13 Theodore W. Adorno, '*Anmerkungen zum philosophischen Denken*' in *Gesammelte Schriften* 10 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1969), 16. My translation.

14 In the opening of *Minima Moralia*, he sees the subject itself largely reduced to a function within the process of production, claiming that action itself become largely doomed in a context where it is scripted by a set of limited options: 'als ob sie überhaupt noch als Subjekte handeln könnten, und als ob von ihrem Handeln etwas abhinge' (as if they could still act as subjects, as if anything could actually depend on their action). Theodore W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 7-8.

15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All too Human*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133

trialism, mass education and drum-beat nationalism in relative contempt compared to the image of humanity that he takes from his classical studies. To the extent that there is a future affirming element in Nietzsche's thought, it does not rest on the mere acceleration of those forces gaining steam in his time. This thought of contemplation as a corrective to the spirit of the time also places it squarely within the methodology of critical theory:[16] in this sense, one cannot speak of what is valuable about contemplation without placing it as a counterforce to modes of activity that disempower us.

This first thesis considers contemplation as a moment of pause within activity, or alternately, as a necessary corrective that has the power to restore activity's freedom, force or creativity. Nevertheless, there is a limitation in thinking of contemplation only in this way as a pause or corrective that restores the power of practice. When we think of contemplation as a sort of rest that restores the power to act, this makes even rest into an activity that serves a purpose to reproduce labor. Han writes of the 'power nap' as a problematic invention of our culture: taking a nap is only justifiable to the extent that it gives more power to action.[17] Rather than only thinking of inactivity as pause, he argues it should be conceived of as a *radiance*.[18]

What would it mean to conceptualize contemplation not merely as a pause but as a radiance? Rather than a pause within action that gives it more power, we could think of contemplation as a dimension within praxis that grounds it in truth.[19] Following this suggestion, the subsequent theses will aim to describe contemplation more on its own terms as a mode of attention that makes certain relations to objects uniquely possible.

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16 Seel uses this idea of contemplation as corrective to explain its role in Adorno's thinking: contemplation as a corrective to praxis, rather than as a self-sufficient ideal. Martin Seel, *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation*, 38.

17 Han, *Vita Contempletiva*, transl. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2024), 8.

18 Ibid. 2.

19 Seel, 39.

There is a further problem with defining contemplation exclusively through inactivity: such a definition runs the risk of equating contemplation with rumination. Both contemplation and rumination may be marked by a lack of pragmatic engagement, but how do we distinguish them? In order to make this distinction, it proves necessary to focus on the unique way in which contemplation relates to an object, as well as its transformative power on the subject. The subsequent theses will focus on these object-oriented and transformative dimensions of contemplation, and in so doing, they will help to discern the difference between disempowering modes of inactivity and contemplative ones.

Thesis 2: Deep attention, giving an experience extra time, leads to a heightened intensity of experience.

Contemplation is not merely inactivity, but a lingering that gives extra time to an experience. More specifically, it is a mode of attention that takes a longer approach than is needed to react or gather information. This extra time needs to be thought not just quantitatively as a slowness, but qualitatively as a transformative depth. In order to grasp this intensity of experience that is brought about by lingering, Han questions two concepts that have become central to our current way of life: productivity and information. The productive process aims to accelerate time. Information atomizes time. And the two concepts reinforce each other: information is production's approach to making knowledge available. The imperative towards productivity will seek to atomize knowledge into pieces of information that can be communicated and processed seamlessly, without any ambiguity or great need for interpretation.

Production and productivity seek to accelerate time. "Acceleration names today's temporal crisis. Everything becomes faster."[20] The goal is to make time itself into a measure of productivity. We measure the productivity of time by its output, which means making the experiential process itself as quick as possible. The less time is used to look, ponder

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20 Byung-Chul Han, *Kapitalismus und Todestrieb* (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2022), 103.

or question, the more time can be filled with production. There may be a process of learning and thought that goes into production, but this process is converted into information and thus incorporated into the production process as one not involving any extra attention. Information can be processed and absorbed immediately, yet the learning that it offers is only bound to this moment of its absorption. When we learn information, it demands that we absorb it, store it and make use of it. But such information is lacking in truth, as Han argues.[21] This lack of truth derives from its very temporal quality of immediacy: information is interchangeable and fleeting in a way that does not allow it to establish any coherent, durable relation to our world.

With such acceleration of our life processes, Han argues that we lose any sense of something durable (*Dauer*) that underlies our experience. He argues that some forms of time cannot be accelerated: for example, a melody or a ritual. They cannot be accelerated without sacrifice of their quality, because they depend on their ability to stretch time and give it a meaningful arch: "Meaning establishes duration."[22] They do not simply slow time, but they make it linger in a way that is valuable. But without contemplation as a basic mode of attention, they cannot last.

Han gives us the tools to connect this general diagnosis of acceleration with our current crisis of learning and attention span. In much of education, the emphasis is placed on a performance in which the students acquire information and then give back this information seamlessly: the productivity of the education sector depends on its ability to measure such information acquisition so that productivity can be assessed. Following Han's suggestion in works such as *The Burnout Society* this loss of attention span is not merely a weakness of the young generation or a lack of discipline, but rather a response to the very pressure placed on us by our achievement culture. In such a culture, we all take on the role of factory foreman trying to get as much work as possible out of the worker, except that we internalize this pressure and apply it to ourselves

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21 Han calls information in general 'deficient in truth.' Han, *Infokratie*, 74-75.

22 *Kapitalismus und Todestrieb*, 103.

at all times. Han gives us to reflect on the overall view of knowledge and culture that underlies this crisis:

> We owe the great cultural achievements of humanity. . . to deep, contemplative attention. Culture presumes an environment in which attention is possible. Increasingly, such immersive attention is being displaced by an entirely different mode of attention: hyperattention. A rash change of focus between different tasks.[23]

He considers the rise of multitasking as a prime instance of such hyperattention. And yet Han also notes that this kind of hyperattention represents a regression to a much more primitive mode of animal existence, like that of a squirrel that must eat while scanning for dangers. "In the wild, the animal is forced to divide its attention between various tasks. This is why the animal is not capable of contemplative immersion."[24] Multitasking is not merely more common today than in past times: it is built into our devices, our work processes and our assumptions about what is needed to participate in society. Such multitasking may make for greater productivity in one sense—an ability to remain engaged in more projects and relationships within a limited time. And yet it creates a mode of attention that is lacking in the intensity required to experience something completely.

If we evaluate contemplation by the standards of production it seems wasteful, less productive, not productive at all. Yet Han demonstrates an inverse mode of evaluation: rather than evaluating contemplation by the standards of productivity, it is more worthy to evaluate productivity from the standpoint of contemplation. Such an evaluation introduces an altogether new standard, in which production itself appears lacking in meaning. Production demands speed, but this speed occurs in a repetitive way, which leads to more of the same. "Without time, without catching a deep breath, the same continues."[25] The time of contemplation

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23 Han, *Burnout Society*, 23.

24 Han, *Burnout Society*, 14.

25 Han, *Vita Compleativa*, 18.

may be agonizingly slow when measured against the logic of accelerating production, but it can also be astoundingly fast when considered from the perspective of transformative or creative action. Revolutionary transformative action requires a vision that produces startling and sudden events, and such moments will never be brought about through a mere acceleration of the productive features of society. "Inventive people live altogether differently from active ones: they need time, so that purposeless, unregulated activity occurs."[26]

While production aims to accelerate time and information aims to atomize time, what contemplation does is intensify time. The intensification of time accomplishes what the acceleration of time cannot, for it actually brings more depth to the lived moment. But it brings depth to the lived moment not by atomizing it but by placing it into an intensive contact with the rest of time.

> The atomization of time renders it radically mortal. It is above all this particular mortality, which causes a general restlessness and urgency. This nervousness may appear to indicate a general acceleration. But in reality, what we see is not a real acceleration of life. Rather all that has happened is that life has become more rushed, less perspicacious and more directionless.[27]

Instead, what is needed is a way of transforming time that fulfills it,[28] as for example, in the temporal structures of ritual, narrative and melody taken up by Han. But more fundamentally, it is a matter of discerning different ways of looking at things, different modes of attention. Drawing from Walter Benjamin, Han observes terminological distinction between two kinds of experience, *Erfahung* and *Erlebnis*:[29] "Experience (*Erfahrung*)

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26 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Vol. 9 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972), 24.

27 Han, *Scent of Time*, 11.

28 Han, *Scent of Time*, 34.

29 Benjamin makes this distinction most clearly in the text 'On Some Themes in Baudelaire', and the terms *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* have been much discussed and debated in his work. The context of this distinction is far more complex in Benjamin's work than what we see here in Han: while Benjamin diagnoses the loss or withering of richer 'experience' in his age, he also regards the loss of this kind of experience as

encompasses a vast temporal space. It is highly time intensive, as opposed to lived experience (*Erlebnis*), which is point like and time poor."[30] Contemplation allows for an experience of time that is intensive, in the sense that it establishes connections across wide expanses of time: Benjamin calls this kind of experience constellational. Such a sense of time makes up a central dimension of the writings of Marcel Proust, where the slightest trace of sensation can set this moment into a process of remembrance that recalls the past in new, revelatory contexts of meaning.

This thesis considers contemplation through the instance of giving extra time to an experience, so as to transcend the whole framework of processing useful information in order to get something. Yet it does not suffice to think of contemplation simply as an additional quantity, as a mere slowing of experience. "A reduction in speed does not by itself transform the *being* of things."[31] This thesis rests on the relation between added time and *intensity* of experience. That is, contemplation needs to be thought of not just as a slowing down or a multiplication of the layers of experience. Rather, it entails a relation to what is timeless, even if this timelessness is itself ephemeral.

Thesis 3: Contemplation directs itself at what is timeless, but not by abstracting from change or becoming. Instead, it focuses on what remains valuable independent of human intervention.

According to Aristotle, contemplation (Theoria) is the most blessed way of life because it places us into the company of the immortal gods and lifts us outside of time. Where there is contemplation, there is a relation to the timeless. This relation to the timeless gives a greater dignity

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a precondition for much of modern art. He often discusses key modernist innovations as efforts to forge a new path given the loss of experience. And yet, Benjamin certainly has much room for rich notions of contemplative attention, such as his famous discussion of the flâneur as a contemplative relation to the city. See Nathan Ross, *Walter Benjamin's First Philosophy: Experience, Ephemerality and Truth* (New York: Routledge, 2021), especially 32-61.

30 Han, *Scent of Time*, 6.

31 Han, *Scent of Time*, 93.

to what is known through contemplation, and it gives its practitioner a happiness much deeper than what we could gain from any kind of action. In reading Han, we find that such a relation to the timeless need not be thought as a mere abstraction from everything that involves process, change and life.

Han uses the metaphor of scent to extend our notion of time. A scent is not an instantaneous experience that goes away the next moment: it lingers and has some duration. Additionally, scent is the sensation that has the deepest relation to our memory, even connecting to those parts of the brain that store distant memories. Those memories that are lost to conscious recollection, involuntary memories, come back to us with scent. There are thus two key concepts in Han's work that allow us to relate the timeless to time: first, duration (*Dauer*) and secondly, memory.

Contemplation demands that we relate to what is stubborn, material, what remains stable amidst our actions and desires. Even an experience in time, such as music, can have duration, as contemplation can give to music a temporal arch that slows time and burns it in our memory. Yet the supreme object of such contemplation is nature. Although nature is subject to change, decay, damage and subsumption to industrial exploitation, it nevertheless has its specific value precisely where it remains untrampled, or at least, where it retains a form that is not completely converted to serve instrumental values. Such value is not directly related to the production of something that serves a human desire, and yet it gives us something to behold that is above need. In the realm of art as well, we can encounter a work as something lasting once we get beyond the expectation that we should be able to move from one item of entertainment to the next, once we encounter art as something that can be looked at repeatedly, enjoyed from different perspectives. Such relations to nature and art provide the basis for contemplative aesthetic experience. "The term vita contempletiva is not meant to invoke, nostalgically, a world where existence originally felt at home. Rather it connects to the experience of being in which what is beautiful or perfect does not change

or pass—a state that eludes all human intervention."[32] Nature and art give us a relation to the timeless, not because they are outside of time or change, but because they have value that lasts independently of what we might add or change.

However, the experience of what endures, what remains independent of change can also be found in the realm of personal memory. The simple recollection of something from our own distant past, coming to light across years and decades after being forgotten, can also be a source of aesthetic pleasure. Such experiences of memory form the basis of Proust's work. It is one thing to retain information, but quite another to recover some moment of the past that had been lost, some fleeting sense of personal significance. This notion of deep memory bears a special relation to the notion of contemplation: Han calls reminiscence an act of 'contemplation' in what follows. "'Immediate enjoyment' is not capable of experiencing beauty because the beauty of things appears 'only much later', in light of another thing, or even through the significance of reminiscence. Beauty is owed to duration, to a contemplative synopsis."[33] We need to distinguish between an act of enjoyment that is tied to an immediate, passing experience, and a pleasure that emerges with greater nuance and depth as something appears to us in the past, now supplemented by a greater awareness of its relation to subsequent experience. Contemplation looks not just at distant past memories to find what is enriched by memory: even when it contemplates what is present, it looks for what might not be evident until later. It expects that by not immediately consuming or dismissing whatever it sees, it may find something subtle that will reveal more upon later consideration.

Thesis 4: Resisting stimulus from an object allows us to see it more fully in its truth content.

Contemplation is not so much a refraining from all action, as it is a refraining from *reaction*. This discipline must be learned, a discipline that is

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32 Han, *The Burnout Society*, 14.

33 Han, *The Scent of Time*, 48.

as much a negation of the self as a negation of the object. However, this negation of the reactive relation to the object serves something else that is deeper, the truth of the object. Nietzsche summarizes this in a classic articulation:

> I put forward at once… the three tasks for which educators are required. One must learn to see, one must learn to think, one must learn to speak and write: the goal of all three is a noble culture. Learning to see—accustoming the eye to calmness, to patience, to letting things come to it; postponing judgment, learning to go around and grasp each individual case from all sides. That is the preliminary schooling for spirituality: not to react at once to a stimulus, but to gain control of all the inhibiting, excluding instincts.[34]

Contemplation is here a precondition for thinking, writing and original expression—a point taken up in the final thesis. But more fundamentally, such contemplation requires an education because it entails working against those habits of perception that respond to the object immediately. Our relationship with objects is not naturally or inherently contemplative, as it is more natural to relate to the world through the filter of what Nietzsche calls here stimulus, that is, our desires, and even more essentially our habits.[35] Of course, Nietzsche is aware that the way of seeing against which we must work is conditioned not only by instinct, but even more by our culture, and, as Han will demonstrate, the state of our technology.

In Han's terms, contemplation requires that we set a 'no' in opposition to the object: we must understand this 'no' to be not a destructive negation of the object for our own sake, but a 'no' to the impulse that radiates out from the object. Throughout his work, Han provides many instances of new experiences created by our culture, in which we are

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34 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge Universoty Press, 2001), 190.

35 "The vita contempletiva is not a matter of passive affirmation and being open to whatever happens. Instead, it offers resistance to crowding, intrusive stimulus. Instead of surrendering the gaze to external impulse, it steers them in a sovereign fashion." Han, *Burnout Society*, 21.

drawn towards excessive reaction that overstimulates us. "We are now in the habit of perceiving the world in terms of attraction and surprise."[36] In this discussion of negation and discipline towards perceptual overstimulation, we find a meeting point between two key themes in Han's work: contemplation and eros. While Han's notion of contemplation posits the need for the subject to place a 'no' in opposition to the stimulus of the object, his discussion of modern love posits the need for the subject to negate itself for the sake of the object.[37] But these two thoughts are not so opposed as they seem. In contemplation, the 'no' that we posit in relation to the object is really an act of discipline and self-negation that allows us to educate ourselves through an authentic encounter with what is new and exceptional in the object.

In his own discussion of eros, Adorno offers a quite remarkable formulation that allows us to see contemplation as a culmination of eros:

> The long contemplative glance, though, to which alone things and people unfold themselves, is always the one in which the drive towards the object is broken, reflected. Contemplation without violence, from which all of the joy in the truth comes, is inherently connected with this, that the subject does not consume the object: proximity in distance.[38]

This formulation brings together several thoughts captured in other theses: the length of the gaze; the urge to do justice to the truth content of the experience; and resisting the immediate response, here the 'drive.' The contemplative relation to the object requires distance, but this distance enables true 'proximity.' That is, no really deep proximity to things is possible when we respond to an immediate impulse that radiates out

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36 Han, *Non-things*, viii.

37 The work of Robert Wyllie on Han allows us to relate this disciplined aspect of contemplation to Han's critique of the achievement culture: "So many modern people now believe that nothing can be learned from pain, that beauty gives us nothing to see beyond pleasure, and that we lose nothing by replacing objects with all their significance with information." Robert Wyllie 'Against Achievement Culture' in *Byung-Chul Han: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Steven Knepper, Ethan Stoneman and Robert Wyllie (Cambridge: Polity, 2024).

38 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 54.

from them, for the impulse leads us either to move on to something else or to consume them. A lingering gaze brings us closer to things by giving them their proper time and distance. Such a notion of the contemplative gaze remains implicit in Adorno's critical account of aesthetic experience. The hallmark of such an experience is that it resists the comfortable, self-centered attitude of the consumer.[39]

If contemplation is a mode of receptivity, it is the kind that entails discernment and discipline in refraining from impulsive reaction. Such receptivity is a precondition for writing well, according to Nietzsche, or thinking deeply. Adorno writes: "obdurate thought cheats itself of the element of receptivity, without which it is no longer thought."[40] Aesthetic experience provides a model for the relation between contemplation and thinking: unlike thinking, contemplation is a state of receptivity.

Thesis 5: Contemplative immersion finds indeterminacies and empty spaces, to which it responds with mimetic attention to the possible movements opened by the space.

When we look at things closely, noticing more details and seeing more layers, they do not necessarily become more definite. Quite the opposite, we may become more convinced of how difficult it is to define them based on comparison or known conceptual schema. Rather than an obvious or definite interpretation, we begin to see a multitude of interpretations from which to choose, and competing reasons to embrace them. Yet if contemplation goes deeper and gives up the posture of the scholar weighing such a variety of meanings, it begins to see a space that is neither completely empty and without structure, nor prescriptively defined

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39   "Preartistic experience requires projection, yet aesthetic experience—precisely by virtue of the a priori primacy of subjectivity within it---is a countermovement to the subject. It demands something on the order of self-denial of the observer, his capacity to address or recognize what aesthetic objects themselves enunciate and what they conceal. Aesthetic experience first of all places the observer at a distance from the object." Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot Kentor (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998), 346.

40 *Aesthetic Theory*, 346.

by any given perspective. With this way of looking, it gains the freedom to enter into the space it is seeing and thereby gain a new space for play.

Han writes of 'images of absence' in order to explore a mode of aesthetic experience that is especially evident in classical Chinese painting. He draws a contrast to the hermeneutical practices that have grown up around classical Western paining. In general, what defines the approach to classical Chinese painting is the space it leaves the viewer or collector to interact with it. One such practice is called 'seals of leisure.' The painting leaves empty space for owners, critics or important viewers to provide poems or seals that complement the painting in some way. Unlike the signature on a classical Western painting, such seals do not testify to the authority of the author or mark the work as finished. Rather, they make the painting into an evolving, socially creative artifact, enabling it to show its history of response and interpretation on its surface. More generally, he defines classic Chinese landscape painting as images of absence: "Chinese images of absence are, by contrast, without soul. Neither authorship nor bearing witness attaches them to identity."[41] These images are not lacking in content or detail, but they do lack a definite perspective from which we are looking at the landscape. The work is not defined either by its author or by its interpretation.

In the prior theses we considered contemplation as a precondition for creativity. One must break free from overly prescribed need to act in order to find a chance for original action. Now with this thesis we find that contemplative immersion actually involves looking for free spaces ('Spielraum') within an image, within nature. Yet such free spaces disclose themselves as truly free only to a contemplative gaze. It is not a matter of looking at an image to find what one can add of one's own prior values or convictions to complete it. Rather it is a matter of truly valuing the open space as a distinctive occasion for new creation. Such a gaze is characterized by patient immersion rather than immediate response.

Han finds the perfect coda to this discussion of the Chinese image of absence in a story from Walter Benjamin's childhood memories: this is a

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41 Han, *Shanzai*, transl. Phillippa Hurd (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 55.

story of a Chinese painter who invited observers to watch him put the finishing touches on a landscape painting, depicting a river and trail. Yet at a certain point these observers looked around and found him missing, only to notice that he had disappeared into the painting.[42] In response to Benjamin's story, Han writes: "Here the primary experience of the picture is not an idea of the picture that originates with the subject, but a mimetic distortion that moves into the picture–a contemplative emptying of the subject. The viewer empties himself, subjectlessly entering the picture."[43] The painter does not so much finish the work as culminate its process by entering into it. Han sensitively fuses his discussion of the Chinese 'image of absence' with a key theme from Benjamin's philosophy, mimesis. To contemplate means entering into the space opened up by the image, and yet it is not so much passive surrender as mimetic response. The essence of mimesis is to give expression to what one perceives by becoming similar, in one's own way. Earlier in the section from which Han quotes here, Benjamin writes: "The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically."[44] This quote from Benjamin allows us to bridge the concept of contemplation, as an object-oriented attention, with creativity. Just as the painter in the story enters into the painting because he has found the emptiness or indeterminacy that would leave a space, Benjamin brings forth childhood memories in which his environment seems full of mystery and space for play.

Such a model of contemplation can be found in the following meditation, which fuses Benjamin's childhood experience of getting lost in the city with his later penchant for wandering aimlessly:

> Not to find one's way in a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. . . This art I acquired rather late in life; it ful-

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42 Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, transl. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 134-135.

43 Han, *Shanzai*, 56.

44 Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 131.

filled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting paper of my school notebooks.[45]

For the urban wanderer, getting lost is in fact an art and an accomplishment. The urban environment is full of structures, human purposes, advertising, institutional spaces and historically codified meanings. Amidst all of these, one can fail to navigate properly and grow frustrated. Yet Benjamin writes here of a schooling, a discipline of contemplating the city as if it were a forest, a space in which to wander freely. He remembers as an adult what it was like to wander the city as a child, his 'impotence before the city' and yet he sees in this inability to navigate the city a rich set of experiences, dream images of later philosophical discoveries that are embodied in things. The flâneur is not the kind of city person who is 'in the know.' Rather, the contemplative side of the city only reveals itself to someone who can approach it as a wilderness, a place that has been rendered wild by an excess of human intentions and histories.

In order for there to be a possibility of immersion, there has to be indeterminacy. Otherwise, contemplation would be projection. Where Han writes of 'entering the picture' 'subjectlessly' above, he gives expression to the idea that contemplation only gains creative freedom at the moment where it is animated by a mimetic relation to something. It only gains the freedom that it is able to find in the object.

Thesis 6: Writing is to be understood and critiqued according to its ability to present the contemplation that brought it forth.

Contemplation stands in an important and yet problematic relation to writing. Even well before the advent of generative AI, it was possible to bring forth a text without any contemplation. And yet it is arguably contemplation that gives a text its originality and value: only such a text can bear within it the freedom, receptivity, originality and truth content that was discussed in prior theses, and it can be written in a form that makes us aware of these qualities. Contemplation alone does not pro-

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45 Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood*, 53-54.

duce a text; indeed, insofar as any writing process aims at productivity, it ceases to be contemplative. Yet a text has the power to *represent* a process of contemplation. Alternately, the act of reading may be contemplative or not. For example, one may read a text quickly to gather and memorize its content, without any contemplative approach. Yet if this reading is discerning, critical, then what it must discern is whether and what kind of contemplation is embodied by the text. As such, the act of critique is essentially a matter of coming to terms with the contemplative potential embodied and presented by a text.

Today we face the disorienting experience of reading texts with the suspicion that they may not even be a product of a human writer. This leads to a number of other questions: Is it worth asking students to write? Will my own writing do more than train an algorithm that uses my work? Would I not better communicate with others if I let a tool write for me or at least rewrite what I have written? Those of us who believe in writing recoil at these questions. It is still possible to find joy in reading and contemplating what we have read. And we still have thoughts that we want to write down. In these senses, writing remains a feature of the tradition of our culture that we cannot wish to be done with. When we read a text and estimate its value we have to ask—is this an honest text? But more fundamentally, do I recognize the contemplative experience from which this text has come forth? The critique of anything written has to proceed from this principle—to discern whether this text succeeds in its presentation of an act of contemplation. Presentation is mimesis—it is the achievement in one medium of what first occurred in another medium. Critique discerns presentation and relates it to the act that brought it forth. Based on the prior theses, contemplation is valuable and insightful on its own terms, and does not stand in need of any text in order to bring it forth. Yet we also recognize that the memory of experience intensifies and adds to the joy of this experience. If writing has any need, it is to enhance contemplation by allowing us to remember it through a representation, to rediscover contemplation in different times, in different places, in different media.

It is Nietzsche, arguably, who most succinctly articulates this relation between contemplation and writing. Earlier, we noted that he regards the contemplative act of seeing as a precondition for thinking and writing. Yet he approaches this theme of contemplation and writing provocatively in his views on walking. He critiques books and authors based on how much their work emerges from walking.

> All truly great thoughts are had while walking.[46]

> Sit as little as possible; do not believe any idea that was not born in the open air and of free movement—in which the muscles do not also celebrate a feast. All prejudices come from the intestines. – Sitting still (I said it once already) – the real sin against the Holy Ghost.[47]

According to Nietzsche, it is only the text conceived while walking that has value in the utmost sense. He notes one cannot actually write much while walking: one generally needs to sit. And yet the text that is fully conceived of during a seated writing process will, according to Nietzsche, bear within it a spirit that is damaged by this mode of conception (cramped intestines). What qualities might we expect from a text conceived of while walking versus one conceived of while sitting? The seated text will have a fixed view, while the walking one will discover new vantage points as it goes. The seated text will obey a prior purpose that it has set itself, that is, it will be 'work'; the walking text will come upon a sudden insight that it did not intend. It is impossible to walk without keeping an eye out, and a leisurely stroll will allow the gaze to wander as it goes. Such a wandering and yet attentive gaze will engender thoughts that have receptivity and improvisatory creativeness. In short, walking that is contemplative will lead to a free process of reflection that will sometimes dictate a new thought be set down.

This line of thoughts by Nietzsche certainly has something to say about the mind body connection: the quality of our thoughts might depend on whether our muscles are cramped or moving. Or it could be interpret-

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46 Nietzsche, *The Antichrist, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, 171.

47 Nietzsche, *The Antichrist, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, 84.

ed, rather unphilosophically, as a statement about writerly process and inspiration. But even more, it says something quite critical about the relation between writing, thinking and the process of producing texts, or more generally, the relation between the *activity* of writing and a kind of fruitful *inactivity*. According to this last interpretation, a text can be designed and executed according to a productive activity, or it can bear within it the spirit of a contemplation that is freely and physically engaged with its world. As a reader, one must learn the difference between the two. That is, Nietzsche argues, the critical process must be sensitive to these fundamentally leisurely, receptive and roving qualities in a text.

To be fair, Nietzsche's thoughts about walking rest more on a biographical, or at best incidental connection between one mode of activity and another. It is Walter Benjamin who most clearly develops the conception of writing and critique upon which this thesis rests. In his first book, he expounds a concept of critique where it is not a matter of evaluating a text, but of unfolding its own reflective core.[48] Citing the Romantic philosophers, he posits that critique occurs within a 'medium of reflection.' Such a critic takes the work as a moment within a process of development, a presentation of a subjective reflection on the world. Rather than judging the work according to a given standard, the critic observes and reenacts. Rather than enjoying or testing the object for its satisfaction, the critic lives through the work, places it within a continuum of others and assimilates to the work. Later, as Benjamin becomes more affiliated with the political tendencies of Marxism, he proposes a formula for the political critique of literature: that the political tendency of any literary text depends upon its literary tendency. It is not a matter of looking for the orthodox party view or the right political message, but a matter of finding texts that liberate us from cliché through their use of original means of expression. Critique relates primarily to the form of a text rather than its political message, and critiquing a form of writing is

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48 Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Art Criticism in Early German Romanticism* in *Selected Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Eiland and Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

a matter of discerning it's 'tendency.' As different as this idea of literary critique might seem, it supports the view that critical reading essentially involves a discerning awareness of the subjective, receptive and creative moment embodied in texts.[49]

Such a notion of critique is particularly timely today: as we confront a world of technically regenerated and reproduced texts, texts which may draw from human sources but are composed according to algorithms designed to satisfy our queries. Before we decide whether such tools have value, we must decide whether there is value in the kind of writing that derives from contemplation, the writing that struggles with incomplete thoughts, the writing that sometimes goes silent, and at other times feels an urgent need to capture something fleeting.

To be fair, reading texts is not the only mode of contemplation; and writing is not the only way of presenting contemplation. One can consider the possibility of a contemplative conversation; a teaching that presents and enables contemplation; painting as a presentation of a contemplative process; even a more or less contemplative architecture, or photography. Each of these would entail its own critical process, but in each case, one can consider it a matter of discerning the relation between a mode of productive action and a mode of nascent contemplation. It is possible to teach, make buildings, take pictures without the least contemplation: but we can consider the value of each of these in relation to the problems and theses weighed in this article. All of these things—texts, photos, buildings, teaching—are quite often also embedded within our practical way of life and its purposes. Some aspects of this way of life will be thoroughly hostile to contemplation. And yet the purpose of these theses has not been merely to draw a boundary between contemplation and our practical way of life, but even more to consider contemplation as a faculty for discerning opportunities for freedom, critique and truth within our world of practice.

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49 Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in *Selected Works* Vol. 2.2, ed. Eiland and Jennings, 768-769.

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Remembering Nature in the Subject: Adorno and the Freudian Uncanny[1]

Justin Neville Kaushall[2]

Abstract: In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno writes that, in modernist works of art, a "non-violent synthesis of the diffuse" may be achieved through radical form.[3] Scholars have raised the question, however, of how such a synthesis may be achieved given the dominating and constitutive nature of subjectivity, evidenced by the dialectic of enlightenment.[4] In this paper I argue that the difficult question of how subject and object may interact non-violently may be at least partially resolved through Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny.[5] The uncanny allows the co-existence of pairs of opposites that unsettle each other, thus allowing the haunting experience of absence within presence, or materiality within agency. I connect the experience of the uncanny to Adorno's concept of non-violent synthesis and to the concept of the "remembrance of nature in the subject," discussed briefly in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[6] The latter phrase, I argue, is crucial because it defines the subject's capacity to become aware of the fact that materiality grounds and limits reason itself. Thus, through the experience of the uncanny, the subject may become aware of the fact that subject and object, or reason and nature, may be intertwined: a fact that instrumental reason must repress.

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3   Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 189.

4   Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*, and Allen, *Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*.

5   Freud, *The Uncanny*.

6   Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 32.

Introduction

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno writes: "aesthetic form is the objective organization within each artwork of what appears as bindingly eloquent. It is the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually an unfolding of truth."[7] These lines strike at the heart of Adorno's approach to philosophical aesthetics, metaphysics, and ethics. They also allude to his conception of non-constitutive subjectivity. One of the central issues in Adorno's philosophy is how to retain critical subjectivity while reducing, as far as possible, the drive to constitute and discursively dominative particularity. Since Adorno views modern experience as in crisis, these problems are neither abstract nor ahistorical.[8] Certain scholars interpret Adorno's theoretical position, however, as mired in paradoxes that defy resolution.

For example, Joel Whitebook argues that Adorno fails to give a coherent account of nonviolent synthesis, and that his concept of noncoercive ego integration results in an impasse: "Adorno's aporetic impasse is determined by his restricted concept of synthesis. […] like Lacan, Adorno… cannot visualize synthesis otherwise than as violence."[9] However, Amy

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7   Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Continuum, 1997), 189. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a lecture course 1965/66*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Polity Press, 2008), 23: "Is negative dialectics at all possible? […] what is the product of the neg[ation] of the neg[ation]. My reply: always a bad positivity. Index falsi. – The gravest reservation to concept of synthesis."

8   Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Stanford University Press, 2003), 428. See Martin Jay, "Is Experience Still in Crisis? Reflections on a Frankfurt School Lament," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 129-147.

9   Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (The MIT Press, 1995), 152. For another psychoanalytic account of Adorno's Critical Theory, see Judith Frederike Popp, "Theory and Practice of Self-Reflection: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory and Psychoanalytical Thought," in *The 'Aging' of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: Fifty Years Later*, Samir Gandesha,

Allen maintains, against Whitebook, that Adorno and Horkheimer do not view "ego integration as inherently violent and coercive": rather, it is merely a particular historical and social formation—one that is responsible for the repression of inner nature and the domination of external nature: "the target of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique is not the ego or the self per se, but the form of ego integration required under bourgeois capitalism."[10] Allen notes that Adorno and Horkheimer appear to want to both negate and preserve the rational ego, which leads apparently to a thorny paradox: "How can we envision an account of psychic integration that is not only noncoercive and nondominating but that also allows for the possibility of resistance, autonomy, and critique?"[11] This question is crucial, because Adorno returns to the problem of how to rescue a robust conception of subjectivity without retaining its violent and repressive aspects (namely, its Idealist features, such as transcendental structures of constitution, and the drive to abstract from material particularity). For example, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that rational cognition is a double-edged sword—capable of both damaging and rescuing materiality:

> Thought as such…is an act of negation, of resistance…. Thought forms tend beyond that which merely exists, is merely 'given.' The point which thinking aims at its material is not solely a spiritualized control of nature. While doing violence to the object of its syntheses, our thinking heeds a potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously obeys the idea of making amends to the pieces for what it has done. In philosophy this tendency becomes conscious.[12]

Johan Hartle, and Stefano Marino, eds. (Mimesis International, 2021), 191-215.

10 Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 64.

11 Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, 67. Adorno is aware of this apparent paradox. He maintains that only philosophical reason can critique and transform instrumental reason. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (The MIT Press. 1999), 73: "Only through reflection can reflective thought get beyond itself."

12 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Routledge, 1973), 19.

Allen asserts, in an excellent analysis, that Melanie Klein's work may offer a path out of the impasse that Adorno and Horkheimer find themselves in.[13] She refers to Adorno's article "Revisionist Psychoanalysis," in which Adorno refers to the coherence of the ego as illusory: "The totality of the so-called 'character' is fictitious; one could almost call it a system of scars, which are integrated only under suffering, and never completely."[14] In other words, the apparent unity of the subject is an effect of the suffering that has left traces of damage on the ego. The suffering is caused by the historical violence that society and instrumental reason have committed against the self (and the unconscious and mimetic impulses that animate it) in the name of the domination of nature and the grounding of subjectivity. Allen concludes that, for Adorno, a "nonreified logic of psychic integration" might be a state in which "subject and object are distinct and differentiated but able to communicate and participate in one another in a peaceful, nondominating way."[15] Allen's account is helpful because she acknowledges the non-hierarchical and non-progressive nature of Klein's depressive position, and because she discusses in depth Adorno's conception of the subject as reflective and coherent, while preserving difference, contradiction, and division.[16]

In this paper, however, I want to discuss the possibility of nonviolent synthesis through another psychoanalytical concept: the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*).[17] Allen (and some other scholars) do not fully consider the question of how nature inheres within subjectivity—or, said otherwise, how nonidentity provides the ground of identity.[18] In *Dialectic of Enlighten-*

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13 Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, 72-81. See Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and other works, 1921-1945* (Vintage, 1998).

14 Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, 60; Theodor W. Adorno, "Revisionist Psychoanalysis," trans. Nan-Nan Lee, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2014), 326-338, see 328.

15 Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, 83.

16 Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, 80-84.

17 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, Adam Phillips, ed. (Penguin Books, 2003), 121-162.

18 For an excellent account of nature in Adorno's philosophy, see Deborah

ment, Adorno and Horkheimer refer to "the remembrance of nature in the subject."[19] This phrase raises a few questions. If Adorno and Horkheimer believe, with Hegel, that all experience is mediated through and through by discursivity, and that nature is irredeemably damaged by rationality, then what could possibly rescue such a conception of nature from Romanticism—or, at worst, ontological speculation in the manner of phenomenology?[20] In addition, how does the nature within the subject interact with the structures of subjectivity itself without becoming silenced by them? In other words, how can inner nature find its voice without becoming reduced to muteness by constitutive subjectivity? Finally, how might subject (reason) and object (nature) interact in a way that allows for non-coercive integration while still preserving the differences and contradictions that compose subjectivity in modernity? That is, how can nature exist at all if the self is a mere "system of scars"?[21] Donald Burke argues that "If culture has been a process of forgetting internal nature, then the 'remembrance of nature within the subject' (*DE* 32) can bring about a reconciliation of culture and nature."[22] For Burke, this reconciliation occurs through the experience of natural beauty.[23] While I appreciate Burke's account, I think that reconciliation ought to remain a speculative possibility. For this reason, I wish to go in another direction.

I argue that Freud's concept of the uncanny may provide a conceptual frame for thinking through the noncoercive and nonviolent synthesis

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Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Acumen, 2011).

19 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, ed. (Stanford University Press 2002), 32.

20 For a comprehensive account of the Romantic roots of psychoanalysis, see Robert Snell, *Uncertainties, Mysteries, Doubts: Romanticism and the Analytic Attitude* (Routledge, 2013).

21 Adorno, "Revisionist Psychoanalysis," 328.

22 Donald Burke, "Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality: On the Dialectic of Natural and Artistic Beauty," in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, Andrew Biro, ed. (The University of Toronto Press, 2011), 166-186, see 171.

23 Burke, "Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality," 172.

of reason and nature, or subject and object; and their unsettled relationship to one another.[24] The uncanny thus has metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological significance beyond the aesthetic domain to which it is often consigned—or, rather, the aesthetic itself indicates possibilities for metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological experience that have not been fully investigated. In this way, I hope to show that the concept of the remembrance of nature within the subject holds promise for the concept of non-constitutive subjectivity. The aesthetic and metaphysical nature of the uncanny also indicates how the subject might reflect on materiality without dominating it—and how subject and object may exist alongside each other in an unsettled, and unsettling, relationship. The uncanny even disrupts, then, the relationships between aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, and ontology.

In his book *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher writes that the Freudian uncanny concerns the chiasmatic relationship between the strange and the familiar—or, we might say, between otherness and the self: "Freud's *unheimlich* is about the strange *within* the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange—about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself."[25] The absence of coincidence may also be described as a loss of identity, or as the sudden appearance of contradiction or even dissolution. Fisher suggests that the eerie, which he contrasts with the weird and the uncanny, and which he connects with issues of agency, itself is bound up with issues of identity and difference: "There is no inside except as a folding of the outside; the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was."[26] The eerie thus "concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence."[27] The uncanny is also freighted

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24 Freud, "The Uncanny," 121-162.

25 Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), 10.

26 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 11-12. See Arthur Rimbaud, *Selected Poems and Letters*, translated and with an introduction and notes by Jeremy Harding and John Sturrock (Penguin, 2004), 238.

27 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 12.

with metaphysical considerations, such as: the relationship between past and present; the status of the future; and the presence of unconscious impulses within the ego. The constitutive enigmaticalness of the uncanny raises these questions in an experiential, rather than in a merely theoretical, manner.

David Lomas writes that Surrealist fragmentation has consequences for the concepts of identity and subjectivity:

> A displacement or an estrangement (*depaysement*) that seems at first to bear only upon the world of objects also affects us and the relation that we maintain with ourselves. We become, as it were, strangers to ourselves. Julia Kristeva, in a book of that title, offers a new and compelling rereading of Freud's essay 'The "Uncanny"' which relocates the problem of the uncanny not in the world of objects but within the subject itself: Kristeva observes that 'if anguish revolves around an object, uncanniness, on the other hand, is a *destructuration of the self*.'[28]

That is, for Lomas and Kristeva, the uncanny unsettles the apparently fixed architecture of the subject, so that otherness irrupts from within identity.[29] We will see that this conception of the uncanny resonates with Adorno's concept of nature within the subject. As the subject recollects the materiality that grounds reason, the rational ego's self-assurance that its domination of nature is a necessary sacrifice is itself unsettled and shaken. Adorno's description of the "ambivalence" of aesthetic experience—and in particular the Kantian sublime—indicates the power of the uncanny to fracture the subject's narcissistic illusion of coherence: as "a trembling between nature and freedom" that shuttles between mimesis

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28 David Lomas, *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity* (Yale University Press, 2000), 95.

29 Lomas, *The Haunted Self*, 95. Traumatic experience may also give rise to an experience of the uncanny. For instance, the blurring and terrifying experience of the past in the present—or the present's disappearance and the unending repetition of the past—may be described as uncanny. In psychoanalytic practice, the client's experience of post-traumatic stress disorder may be experienced in uncanny terms because it involves the blurring of subject and object, past and present, and agency and passivity.

and spirit.[30] For Adorno, there is a dialectic of subject and object in aesthetic experience that mirrors a nonviolent integration of identity and nonidentity: "The expression of artworks is the nonsubjective in the subject."[31]

The uncanny is often assumed to be a regressive and archaic residue of pre-rational subjectivity. For instance, Kristeva maintains: " 'The archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous and unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien double, uncanny and demoniacal.'"[32] Kristeva names the ancient logic through which the infantile, developing, and pre-rational self seeks to project outwards those aspects of experience that are intolerable, unable to be acknowledged, or terrifying. This is the same defense mechanism (projection) by which instrumental reason demonises nature so that its brutal practices of domination and renunciation may be justified. However, the experience of the uncanny need not repeat these archaic modes of defense.[33] Indeed, I argue in what follows that the concept of the uncanny has value because it elucidates how subject and object may interact dialectically; for this reason, the uncanny promises that another relationship between reason and nature is possible.[34]

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30 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148; Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, 60-64.

31 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148.

32 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 183; quoted in Lomas, *The Haunted Self*, 120, footnote 120.

33 Nancy McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process, Second Edition* (The Guilford Press, 2011).

34 See Robert G. Beghetto, *Monstrous Liminality; or, the Uncanny Strangers of Secularized Modernity* (Ubiquity Press, 2022). According to him, "the uncanny seems to be a by-product of a teleological, secularized modern world. Terry Castle (1995), Mladen Dolar (1991), and Anthony Vidler (1992) all argue that the rise of the uncanny is directly related to both secularization and modernity" (12). Beghetto continues, "The uncanny arose from the Enlightenment and modernity's 'psychic and cultural transformations', its 'aggressively rationalist imperatives…[which] also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse' (Castle 1995: 8)" (12-13).

The Freudian Uncanny

I will now discuss Freud's concept of the uncanny, and how it relates to Adorno's philosophy. I will argue that the subject, when confronted with the uncanny (in everyday life and in art), most often experiences psychological regression: that is, the uncritical repetition of infantile states of mind. The experience of the uncanny is often regressive because the latter involves the compulsive repetition of traumatic experiences; the return of repressed past experiences; and the death drive.[35] However, as will become evident later, the uncanny in experience may provide a model for thinking about Adorno's concept of non-violent synthesis, and the remembrance of nature in the subject.[36]

Freud completed the first draft of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1919.[37] The final draft was published in 1920.[38] The latter work provides

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35 Freud, "The Uncanny."

36 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 189; Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 32.

37 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Essays*, trans. John Reddick, Adam Phillips, ed. (Penguin, 2003), 45-102. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (The MIT Press, 1995), 9: "Freud only completed "The Uncanny" in May 1919, a month or two after he drafted *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; it was this text that provided the catalytic concept for the essay. There exists, Freud now argued, an instinctual compulsion to repeat, to return to a prior state, 'a principle powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle'; and it is this compulsion that renders certain phenomena 'daemonic': 'whatever reminds us of this inner repetition-compulsion is perceived as uncanny.'"

38 See Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late Twentieth-Century Theory* (State University of New York Press, 2011). According to Masschelein, Freud's essay was affected by both historical and psychological events: "[Freud] was umable to finish his research due to the war. On the other hand, having survived his own death—he superstitiously believed he would die at 62—and having suffered general and personal losses in the First World War, Freud's preoccupation with death also leaves its traces in 'The Uncanny'" (164-165, footnote 31). In his Introduction to the *Penguin Freud* series, Hugh Haughton also notes that Freud's essay, which itself is composed of different genres, and which recounts Freud's own personal experiences of unsettling repetition, is also a sign of the traumatic origins of modernity

a philosophical ground for the concept of the uncanny (the essay was published in 1919). Freud remarks, for instance, that the death drive, or Thanatos, in contrast to the pleasure principle, or Eros, involves a distinction between consciously remembering past events or impulses and the unconscious repetition of them: "The patient is unable to remember all that is repressed within him…. Instead he is driven to *repeat* the repressed matter as an experience in the present, instead of *remembering* it as something belonging to the past."[39] The difference between conscious recollection and unconscious repetition will become especially evident in the experience of the uncanny, in which repressed unconscious thoughts and feelings return to the subject, thereby causing fear and dread.[40]

Freud writes: "the compulsion to repeat is attributable to the unconscious *repressed* within him [the patient]. […] most of what the compulsion to repeat makes the patient relive necessarily causes the ego unpleasure, since it brings out into the open the workings of repressed drive-impulses….".[41] Freud posits the existence of a drive wholly separate from the pleasure principle—the death drive—to explain why patients compulsively repeat patterns of thought, action, or emotion that do not cause pleasure, and which are regressive. The repetition compulsion aims to unveil "repressed drive-impulses" from the past that need to be worked through so that the subject may develop; however, the nature of the compulsion is unreflective.[42]

(Freud, *The Uncanny*, xlix). The suffering, shock, and mass death of the war, and the helplessness evoked by compulsive repetition, is a central feature of the essay's circular and unsettled nature, and of its subject matter (Freud, *The Uncanny*, lii-lv)).

39 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 56.

40 Sigmund Freud, "Repeating, Remembering, and Working Through." In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick, Adam Phillips, ed. (Penguin Books, 2003a), 31-42, see 36. See also Freud, *The Uncanny*, 123.

41 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 58.

42 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 58.

Freud connects the experience of the uncanny with the phenomena that are connected to the death drive: the compulsion to repeat; the return of repressed impulses; and the desire to return to the zero-point of inanimation.[43] The uncanny "evokes fear and dread."[44] However, it is the peculiar origin of the uncanny that is so striking: "the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar."[45] In the first section of his essay, Freud analyses the different meanings that accrue to the German word *Heimlich* and to its antonym, *Unheimliche*, respectively.[46] The dictionary also employs F. W. J. Schelling's definition: "'Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open.'"[47] This latter remark provides evidence for Freud's conviction that the uncanny involves the return of repressed impulses.[48]

In the second and third parts of his essay, Freud emphasizes the regressive aspects of the uncanny: the fact that, for instance, the experience of the uncanny involves the apparent doubling of the self, which operates as a "defense against annhilation"; the fact that the uncanny belongs to a "primitive phase in our mental development"; and the fact that the uncanny recalls the time of primary narcissism, when self and other seemed to be in a state of identity with each other.[49]

Freud describes the phenomenon of the double as occurring when the subject's identity is thrown into doubt through identification with

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43 For a thought-provoking article discussing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Psychoanalytic aesthetics, see Andrea Gyenge, "Between the Toy and the Theatre: Reading Aesthetics in Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics* (Number 75, June 2019), 9-26. See J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (Norton, 1973), 97-103.

44 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 123.

45 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 124.

46 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 123-124.

47 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132.

48 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132, 134.

49 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 142, 143.

otherness.[50] In other words, the phenomenon of the double questions and threatens the integrity of the self because it allows the individual to become lost in another. In this sense, the self undergoes a kind of annihilation, in which identity is ruptured. The double is characterised by Freud as being bound up with regression because it recalls the "primary narcissism" of the infant: the double is a "defense against annihilation… [which] arose on the soil of boundless self-love, the primordial narcissism that…becomes the uncanny harbinger of death."[51] The double places in question the distinction between subject and object. Instead of being opposites, subject and object appear to become each other. The merging that occurs in the uncanny, according to Freud, "belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development, a phase that we have surmounted."[52] The subject—through overcoming the Oedipus complex and developing a Super-ego through internalization—gradually overcomes the infantile longing for undifferentiation. The desire for undifferentiation is regressive because it recalls the baby's intuition that the mother's body and psyche are indistinguishable from her own.[53]

Since Freud maintains that repressed impulses cause fear, the return of the repressed is a terrifying experience—and thus the uncanny also involves terror and dread.[54] Further, the uncanny involves confronting an object that was once unconscious, but is now conscious: "for this un-

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50 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 142.

51 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 142.

52 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 143.

53 Stephen A. Mitchell, *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis* (Basic Books, 1993), 16-17. See also Rosalind Minsky (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Gender: An Introductory Reader* (Routledge, 1996), 6-7.

54 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 147. See also Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal (Second Edition)* (Polity Press, 2006), 11-12: "The symptoms, dreams and parapraxes ('Freudian slips') that turn up in the course of this process represent the 'return of the repressed', a mechanism that marks both the emergence of the forbidden wish and the resistance to it. Within the unconscious, the flow of energy becomes bound up with certain memory-traces, developing the character of unconscious wishes that strive continually to break through against the counterforce exerted by the ego."

canny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed."[55] Thus, the uncanny involves both the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Many scholars who write about the uncanny consider it to be a regressive and terrifying experience. I will argue that the uncanny also has the potential to allow the subject to confront the materiality and finitude within her subjectivity.[56] The uncanny may thus enact a non-violent synthesis between nature and reason, or subject and object.[57] This is because the uncanny involves the eruption of otherness within the subject, thus necessarily breaking the hold of instrumental rationality, which strives to master difference.[58] Moreover, I argue that the experience of the uncanny involves reflecting on difference, rather than reacting blindly against it, thus transforming the relations between reason and nature. The uncanny should not be considered a wholly regressive concept because it is dialectical: it participates in both reactivity and reflexivity. My argument will proceed via Adorno's concept of the mindfulness of nature in the subject. Since the uncanny is bound to the death drive, it tends to dissolve subjectivity; however, the uncanny also has the potential to allow reflection upon the materiality within reason itself. Such a mediated, reflective, and reciprocal relationship between subject and object allows for an experience of the uncanny that does not merely cause the subject's dissolution; rather, it allows for a dialectical mode of subjectivity in which difference exist alongside identity.

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55 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 148.

56 For discussions of this in the context of Adorno, see O'Connor, 2013; Cook, 2011; and Burke, 2011.

57 Non-violent synthesis is a speculative mode in which identity is conceived of dialectically, as otherness that co-exists within subjectivity, and as agency that animates materiality. Thus, non-violent synthesis implicitly refers to uncanny experience, since it embodies the diffuse blurring and co-regulation of subject and object.

58 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (Continuum, 1999), 188-243.

Most scholars who write about the uncanny argue otherwise.[59] For instance, Nicholas Royle, in his comprehensive book about the uncanny, argues that the latter experience can best be explained through recourse to the method of deconstruction; and, that the phenomenon illuminates both modernity and postmodernity.[60] Royle argues that

> Both [psychoanalysis and deconstruction] can be described as uncanny modes of thinking, uncanny discourses. Psychoanalysis is uncanny… [because of] its capacity for 'laying bare… hidden forces'…it brings to light things that perhaps should have remained hidden or repressed. […] Deconstruction makes the most apparently familiar texts strange…it shows how difference operates at the heart of identity, how the strange and even unthinkable is a necessary condition of what is conventional, familiar and taken-for-granted.[61]

Although Royle provides a detailed account of the uncanny, he fails to understand the dialectical nature of the phenomenon. Royle argues that the uncanny is a fundamental instability caused by the groundlessness of textuality and narrative—and he argues that these textual tremors cause the abyssal depths of the self to open in a self-reflexive chain.[62] While the uncanny certainly unsettles subjectivity—indeed, conceptualised as a tremor between nature and freedom it is a modern iteration of the Kantian sublime—I think that it would be a mistake to conceive of the uncanny experience as an annihilation of the self.[63] Rather, the uncanny may impart crucial insights to modern subjects concerning the materiality of the self: the fragility of identity; the repetition of modern capitalism and industrial society; the potential for freedom; and the potential for recognition in nature.

For instance, according to Elizabeth Wright, the uncanny may be re-

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59 For an excellent analysis, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, 2014), 71-92.

60 Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 24.

61 Royle, *The Uncanny*, 24.

62 Royle, *The Uncanny*, 94-95. See also Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, 95-107, for a discussion of Hélène Cixous's important work on the uncanny.

63 Ellison, 2001, p. 53: "The uncanny is the sublime for our age. […] Modernism (and beyond?) cannot be studied independently of its figuration in the uncanny."

conceptualised in a more positive fashion: "According to more recent readings of the uncanny, Freud's understanding of it is unduly pessimistic, for Surrealism reveals a strongly subversive element: the disturbance of the structure of our old desires can also be a sign that it is time to think about changing self and world."[64] In other words, according to Wright, the experience of the uncanny may provide a catalyst through which the subject might overthrow "old" or conventional desires in order to make way for a new mode of seeing the world.[65] The return of repressed impulses, in this case, might not merely drag the subject back into a regressive mode of being; rather, it could provide the opportunity for another new way of thinking or experiencing the self and the world. She continues: "The uncanny…[suggests] the possibility of intervention, of changing a part of the world and the self, a moment of desymbolization where there is a shift of the old order and a chance to resymbolize […] The uncanny may thus be seen as a basis for a positive aesthetic, a moment when new possibilities, new meanings, may emerge."[66] While I agree that the uncanny may provoke a radical shift in consciousness, I think that Wright is overly optimistic about the possibility of creating "fresh symbols."[67] The uncanny may act to catalyse new awareness and to push the subject to perceive the world anew; however, the mode through which the subject may alter her awareness—and resist the regressive force of the uncanny itself—is through thinking reflection. Thus, no "positive aesthetic" is automatically attained through the uncanny; rather, the subject gains the possibility of reflecting critically about her own experience.[68]

Dianne Chisholm notes an important feature of the uncanny that I will discuss later: the fact that the experience of the uncanny interrogates the distinction between life and death: the "figure of the doll," for instance,

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64 Elizabeth Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism," in *Modernism and the European Unconscious*, Peter Collier and Judy Davies, eds. (Polity Press, 1990), 265-282, see 275.

65 Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism," 275.

66 Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism," 281.

67 Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism," 281.

68 Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism," 281.

"uncannily subverts the familiar border which divides life and death, exposing a gap in the unity of reality" in which death appears.[69] The uncanny, then, brings about a certain transgressive movement: the disrespecting of limits. It is precisely this unsettling motion between life and death that will prove to be most conducive for philosophical reflection, and for the conception of non-violent synthesis. The experience of the uncanny causes the surface of reality to tear, exposing the repressed otherness that provides the ground of identity. Chisholm further elaborates on Julia Kristeva's notion of the uncanny as abjection:

> Abjection is the horror of not knowing the boundaries distinguishing 'me' from 'not-me', a primary uncanny which precedes and conditions the horror of castration, and which is generated by the repulsive fecundity and generative power of the maternal body as sensed by the embryonic superego. Fear and dread of being overwhelmed by that body give rise to feelings of abjection….[70]

Chisholm develops Kristeva's account of how the dissolution of boundaries may prove horrifying to the subject. Kristeva's account is also helpful because it relates to Adorno's argument that subjectivity and objectivity are in a dialectical relationship with each other, and that the nature within the self has been repressed.[71] The violence that such repression causes, and the shock that the subject experiences when the repressed impulses reappear, cause the uncanny to take on its horrifying aspect. The horror arises, writes Chisholm, because the ego wants to retain a narrow conception of rationality.[72] The experience of the uncanny may be considered

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69 Diane Chisholm, "The Uncanny," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, Elizabeth Wright, ed. (Blackwell Reference, 1992), 446-440, see 437.

70 Chisholm, "The Uncanny," 439.

71 Chisholm, "The Uncanny," 437-439.

72 See also Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock, Adam Phillips, ed. (Penguin Books, 2002), 25, 28: "In recent generations the human race has…increased its control over nature…. With the help of the telephone he can hear sounds from distances that even the fairy tale would respect as inaccessible. Writing is in origin the language of the absent, the house a substitute for the womb—one's first dwelling place, probably still

a means to critically negate the subject's resistance to non-identity, and non-violent synthesis. The experience of the uncanny may also allow the subject a way of reflecting on the fact that her narrow instrumental reason is itself grounded in material nature. Furthermore, the uncanny may allow the subject to realise that subject and object are related dialectically. Finally, the experience of the uncanny may allow the subject a way to reconcile subject and object with each other while preserving and honouring their differences—and without merely collapsing one term into the other.

The Memory of Nature in the Subject: Adorno and Horkheimer

Now, I would like to argue that Adorno's concept of the memory of nature in the subject is itself the return of repressed trauma that ought to be considered an uncanny experience. Furthermore, Adorno's argument for the dialectical motion between nature and reason may provide evidence that the experience of the uncanny is not a wholly regressive experience; rather, the uncanny may provide reflective insight into how subject and object are intertwined with each other. Since the act of remembering nature involves reflective thought, the experience of encountering nature within the subject does not merely throw the individual back to an archaic experience that transcends reason.[73] Since remembering nature within the subject allows agency to develop dialectically, the uncanny encounter is a revolutionary rather than a reactionary experience. Thus, the uncanny may become a method through which the subject may reflect on the materiality of her subjectivity.[74]

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that reason, which proclaims itself to be autonomous, and the bearer of enlightened subjectivity, has regressed to a position of irrational heteronomy,

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longed for, where one was safe and felt so comfortable."

73　Ute Guzzoni, "Hegel's Untruth: Some Remarks on Adorno's critique of Hegel," in *Theodor W. Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume I*, ed. Simon Jarvis (Routledge, 2007), 84-89.

74　Gunther Figal, "Natural Beauty and the 'Representative' Character of the Work of Art," trans. Nicholas Walker, in *Theodor W. Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume I,* Simon Jarvis, ed. (Routledge, 2007), 65-83.

in which rational subjectivity is determined by natural impulses.[75] The desire to control nature manifests itself in reason's instrumental function: "In thought, human beings distance themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered. […] the concept is the idea-tool which fits into things at the very point from which one can take hold of them."[76] Ironically, enlightened reason's attempt to master and control nature ends with reason itself being subjected to the determination of nature's blind irrationality.[77] In an echo of Freud's late work *Civilization and its Discontents*, Adorno and Horkheimer write that the formation of autonomous subjectivity necessarily involves deforming, and doing violence to, inner nature:

> Enlightenment is more than enlightenment, it is nature made audible in its estrangement. In mind's self-recognition as nature divided from itself, nature, as in prehistory, is calling to itself…as something blind and mutilated. In the mastery of nature, without which mind does not exist, enslavement to nature persists. By modestly confessing itself to be power and thus being taken back into nature, mind rids itself of the very claim to mastery which had enslaved it to nature.[78]

In other words, autonomous subjectivity develops through the repression of instincts and drives, which results in reified subjectivity. Such repression, however, causes reason to become irrational, because it cuts the latter off from its ground.[79] Only the subject's realisation that it is itself nature will break the spell that causes "enslavement" to materiality (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 31). Adorno and Horkheimer note that the subject receives flashes of insight in which she realises fleetingly

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75 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 23-44; and *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory*, Volume 9, Number 2 (July 2025), "Special Issue: Dialectic of Enlightenment at 80: New Readings."

76 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

77 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

78 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

79 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

that reason is itself part of nature. This insight is expressed when the subject recollects the co-determining relationship between subject and object:

> Each advance of civilization has renewed not only mastery but also the prospect of its alleviation. However, while real history is woven from real suffering…the fulfilment of that prospect depends on the concept. For not only does the concept, as science, distance human beings from nature, but, as the self-reflection of thought—which, in the form of science, remains fettered to the blind economic tendency—it enables the distance which perpetuates injustice to be measured. 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…. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 32)

In this passage, Adorno and Horkheimer detail the potential that reason might liberate itself from its instrumental tendencies through reflection. The authors also assert that the "remembrance of nature within the subject" is attained through "self-reflection" that recognises the "distance" or alienation between subject and object.[80] The act of remembrance also enables the subject to realise the "truth" of "culture": namely, that civilization is built on repression. I argue here that the act of remembrance is a deeply uncanny experience for the enlightened modern subject. The act of recollection is a form of reflection in which philosophical reason interrogates its historical past, and its own conditions of possibility. Recollection thus is dialectical.[81] The process of recollection is also, as Adorno and Horkheimer make clear, informed by the experience of unity with materiality; thus, recollection is a somatic experience in which the subject both knows and feels that her reason forms a unity with nature—even if that unity has been broken historically, and even if the process of es-

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80 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 32.

81 Anthony Cascardi, "The Consequences of Enlightenment," in *Theodor W. Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume II*, ed. Simon Jarvis (Routledge, 2007), 254-293, see 276. See also James Hellings, *Adorno and Art: Aesthetic Theory Contra Critical Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7.

trangement cannot be reversed.

The experience of the uncanny manifests itself in Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of recollection because the latter constitutes a process through which the subject realises that she harbours material nature in the depths of her subjectivity. The enlightened, civilised subject experiences such materiality as deeply foreign and frightening.[82] Further, Adorno and Horkheimer make clear that enlightened reason is shadowed by extremely strong natural impulses, which demonstrate that the subject is directed by unconscious forces.[83] The natural compulsion of apparently rational thought constitutes another unbreakable link to the experience of the uncanny. Since the uncanny commonly appears in phenomena in which agency and mechanism are indistinct, the dialectical bond between reason and nature itself constitutes an example of the uncanny in modern subjectivity. As Adorno and Horkheimer make clear, any attempt to evade nature will fail, because subject and object co-constitute one another in modernity.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that enlightenment involves the repression of mimesis—the other-directed process of cognition in which the ego is dissolved, thus attaining a mode of experiential and non-discursive knowledge. For instance, the authors aver:

> The chaotically regular flight patterns of the lower animals, the patterns of swarming crowds, the convulsive gestures of the tortured—all these express what wretched life can never quite control: the mimetic impulse. In the death throes of the creature, at the furthest extreme from freedom, freedom itself irresistibly shines forth as the thwarted destiny of matter.[84]

This passage may be interpreted as a description of the uncanny's capacity for horror, irrationality, freedom, and resistance. Because the uncanny is a variant of mimetic comportment, which is a dialectical concept, it may exhibit both horror and freedom in equal measure. For instance,

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82 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418-419.

83 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

84 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 150-151.

the mimetic experience of struggling to survive while death shadows the self is an example of the disturbing synthesis of the animate and the inanimate. The authors indicate the different valences of mimetic comportment—as a mode of resistance to suffering and inanimation, on the one hand, and as a potentially irrational mode of action on the other. The experience that Adorno and Horkheimer characterise as the remembrance of nature in the subject ought to be classed as a potentially redemptive mode of knowledge that remains dialectical because it allows for an understanding of internal contradiction and alienation, and for the potential to regress as well as develop. The uncanny exhibits the processual nature of subjectivity.[85]

One might object that Adorno characterises the uncanny as primarily a mode of irrationality that results from the convergence of Enlightenment and authoritarianism in modernity. For instance, consider the following chilling passage from *Minima Moralia* in which Adorno observes the psychological mechanisms of fascism:

> The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze—'after all, it's only an animal'—reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure that it is 'only an animal', because they could never fully believe this even of animals.[86]

In other words, the fascist projects his own damaged nature onto the hated other—to purify himself and objectify the other. His "defiance" constitutes a refusal of the mimetic act of self-divestiture (relinquishing the ego to the unconscious drives).[87] The subject's experience of the uncanny is different—the unsettling blend of animate and inanimate is not repressed but embraced and open to reflection. For instance, in section 128, Adorno recounts the song of two rabbits who "were shot down by

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85 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10-11.

86 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, section 68, 105.

87 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, section 68, 105.

the hunter, and, on realizing they were still alive, made off in haste."[88] Adorno concludes that "sense can only endure in despair and extremity; it needs absurdity, in order not to fall victim to objective madness. […] The capacity for fear and for happiness is the same, the unrestricted openness to experience amounting to self-abandonment in which the vanquished rediscovers himself. What would happiness be that was not measured by the immeasurable grief at what is? For the world is deeply ailing."[89] That is, mimetic comportment necessarily involves the blurring of life and death: the experience of the uncanny. According to Adorno, the capacity to receive the object's particularity—to achieve "openness to experience"—involves fear as well as happiness, because both involve an acknowledgement that the object remains non-identical to the discursive concept that claims to capture it.[90] Experiential openness or receptivity involves a proximity to materiality—which allows, for instance, the rabbits to rediscover their own life in the midst of death. The subject who defends herself against traumatic experience erects certain defense mechanisms (such as repression or dissociation) against the knowledge of materiality and suffering. The opposite of dissociation might be a mode of dialectical knowing, in which self and other are acknowledged to be nestled in one another.[91] In the same way, the uncanny unlocks the memory of nature—which involves self-relinquishment (the momentary death of the rational ego), allowing the subject to experience materiality (for instance, the unconscious impulses that rise to the surface of subjectivity when inhibition is lifted).

Adorno and Horkheimer concede: "Human beings have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature and its subjugation to the self."[92] The uncanny provides an alternative to this binary. The authors

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88 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, section 128, 200.

89 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, section 128, 200.

90 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, section 128, 200.

91 Elizabeth F. Howell and Sheldon Itzkowitz, eds. *The Dissociative Mind in Psychoanalysis: Understanding and Working with Trauma* (Routledge, 2016).

92 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 25.

describe the traumatic origin of instrumental rationality—which accords with Freud's description of the genesis of modern civilization: "Humanity had to inflict terribly injuries on itself before the self—the identical, purpose-driven, masculine character of human beings—was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood."[93] If nature is experienced as a process that resides within subjectivity, animating it, and if subjectivity (mimetic comportment and philosophical reason) is known to be another process within nature, then the uncanny blend of subject and object need not be entirely destructive. The self is composed of both non-identity and identity.[94]

The uncanny is another way of describing the Kantian sublime, which involves a shuttling back and forth between spirit and nature.[95] Such attraction and repulsion indicates, for Kant, the ascendence of mature, enlightened subjectivity, and the triumph of reason over materiality; for Adorno, however, the Kantian sublime is the hallmark of the subject's repressive renunciation of instinct (inner nature).[96] Adorno's reinscrip-

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93 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 26.

94 See J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, 2001), 191: "*Because*, in virtue of our embodiment, we are parts of nature, albeit intensely historicized parts, then the circumambient nature which is the proximate object of our doings is historical nature. And it is this historical nature—the nature whose appearing to us is conditioned by our belonging to it…whose constitutive role in thought and practice has been dominated or repressed to the point of cognitive disappearance. It is, precisely, anthropomorphic nature that is explained away in the progress of enlightened knowing and supervened upon in the rationalization of social practices."

95 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Hackett, 1987), Sections 23-29, Ak. 245-278, 97-140. See also Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1994); and Jeffrey Librett, ed., *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* (State University of New York Press, 1993).

96 According to Adorno, Kant's Critical method involves imposing a rigid control over nature to transform otherness into knowledge. In other words, the uncanny terror of nature is mastered through cognition. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors aver: "The mastery of nature draws the circle in which the critique of pure reason holds thought spellbound. […] Philosophical judgment, according to Kant, aims at the new but recognises nothing new, since it always merely repeats what reason has placed into objects beforehand"

tion of the Kantian sublime is the shudder, as other scholars have noted.[97] The shudder is a response not only to external objects (such as modern art) but also to *internal* processes (the mimetic impulses that animate pre-rational subjectivity: inner nature). In addition, because the shudder involves an unsettling and fluid synthesis of anxiety, pre-rational experience, and rational reflection, it constitutes an experience that may be described as an admixture of life (animation) and death (reification), reason and nature, and subject and object.[98] For these reasons, the shudder may be described using the terms of the uncanny—which refuses to reconcile opposites in a dialectical manner which emphases the dynamic interaction of the opposing terms. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes:

> Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be described as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image. What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder's own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness. That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge.[99]

In this passage we can see several currents of Adorno's ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics intertwine. First, although Adorno names the shudder as a mode of "aesthetic comportment," the phenomenon is more complex: the shudder is a mimetic response to otherness internally and externally.[100]

(Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 19-20).

97 See Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 238-241; Huhn, "The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Violence"; Singh, "The Aesthetic Experience of Shudder: Adorno and the Kantian Sublime," 129-143.

98 See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418: "Yet feeling and understanding are not absolutely different in the human disposition and remain dependent even in their dividedness."

99 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418-419.

100 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418.

This is clear in Adorno's assertion that "life in the subject is nothing but what shudders," which suggests that the act of shuddering is a somatic response to animation and agency that is struggling for expression—just as it is about to be sacrificed by reason in order to achieve an apparently developed subject.[101] The shudder in terms of the development of subjectivity is a pre-rational and somatic form of agency that involves both life and death—because it is bound up with reason and materiality. Viewed from this angle, Adorno's statement that the shudder is what "stirs" in the self before subjectivity has fully developed means that it is an interaction between various parts of the self: reason, the understanding, the instincts (or in Freudian terms: the Superego, the Ego, and the Id).[102] The shudder must be considered as a mode of experience that both forms and undermines reason from within; thus, as mimetic comportment, it grounds the capacity to remember nature. The latter experience involves acknowledging the scars wrought by instrumental reason upon nature. But remembering nature in the subject also entails a non-synthetic, but still reconciliatory, return to the mimetic impulses that have been subject to repression. As we have seen, Adorno writes: "Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it."[103] The shudder, then, is a model of how rational subjectivity may recollect nature in an age of total reification. The assimilation is not a totalising identity or integration, of course, but an acknowledgment of the contradictory and dissonant presence-within-absence that the shudder as an experience expresses. In this way, Adorno's concept of the shudder and the phenomenon of recollecting nature in the subject exist in an unsettled togetherness: non-identity within identity. We can note, finally, that the shudder involves recognising that subject and object may relate to each other in a non-violent manner: an assimilation rather than mere subordination.[104] This also connects the shudder to the experience of the uncanny, which

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101 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418.

102 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418; Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 103-149.

103 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418.

104 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 419.

strives to reduce hierarchical stratification and the violence of absolute rational control.

The Uncanny and the Death Drive

Many scholars since Freud make clear that the experience of the uncanny is bound up with the death drive.[105] For instance, Hal Foster argues that Surrealism is dictated by the uncanny, and therefore that Breton's focus on the marvellous is misplaced (because it remains committed to Idealism).[106] Foster asserts: "The paradox of surrealism…is this: even as they work to find this point [the identity of subject and object; the resolution of contradiction] they do not want to be pierced by it, for the real and the imagined, the past and the future only come together in the experience of the uncanny, and its stake is death."[107] Foster refers to Breton's desire to sublate contradictions in a reconciled whole.[108] According to Foster, such a desire stems from the death drive, and is thus regressive.[109] Sarah Kofman writes that "[t]he uncanny can also give rise to a masochistic type of pleasure, a satisfaction (*jouissance*) arising from the very source of

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105 See Rabaté, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Psychoanalysis*; Fong, *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Royle, *The Uncanny*, 84-106; Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*; Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester University Press, 1992); Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism"; and Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, 136; Linda Ruth Williams, *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject* (Edward Arnold, 1995). Williams writes: "Laplanche reads the death drive in these terms, its importance being that it demonstrates that aggression is not primarily turned outwards against the other but (primarily) toward the self" (174).

106 See Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, xvii: "I want to locate a problematic in surrealism that exceeds its self-understanding…. I believe this concept to be *the uncanny*, that is to say, a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order. In my argument the surrealists not only are drawn to the return of the repressed but also seek to redirect this return to critical ends."

107 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, xix.

108 See André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (The University of Michigan Press, 1972) 14, 47.

109 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, xix.

anxiety itself; a pleasure which also leads back to the death instinct since it is linked to return and repetition."[110] Kofman connects the uncanny to Freud's initial observation that the repetition compulsion governs the death drive, connected with the experience of the uncanny as the reappearance of repressed contents.[111] Finally, Linda Ruth Williams observes: "Freud focuses on this too [the death drive] when he writes that it is to 'goal' of all life to return to the 'natural' world of the inorganic, and that life is only a circuitous route back to quiescence in the grave. We come from nature and, through the benign influence of disease, we return to it."[112] The repetition involved in traumatic neuroses, and in the experience of the uncanny, thus inspires a regressive desire for dissolution; however, the materiality that appears through the traumatic compulsion—that is, nature—may provide a means through which the subject may attain a non-regressive, and reflective, attitude towards her own subjectivity, and the formation of the self. If the subject is aware of the nature within her she may be able to take up a different relationship towards materiality, which does not involve a merely reactive attitude of repression.

Since the recollection of nature in the subject recalls the finite materiality of the self, it inevitably involves the desire for (and fear of) death—which is also present, to a degree, in the experience of mimesis.[113] The repression that marks the painful transition from nature to culture is deeply damaging; however, when such repression is briefly

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110 Sarah Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. Sarah Wykes (Polity Press, 1991), 123.

111 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 145-148; Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 71-72, 78-82.

112 Williams, *Critical Desire*, 177.

113 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 144-147; Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (The MIT Press, 1991), 111; Rudiger Bubner, "Can Theory Become Aesthetic? On a Principle Theme of Adorno's Philosophy," in Simon Jarvis, ed., *Theodor W. Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume I* (Routledge, 2007), 14-39, see 28-29; Michael Cahn, "Subversive Mimesis: Theodor W. Adorno and the modern impasse of critique," in Simon Jarvis, ed., *Theodor W. Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume II* (Routledge, 2007), 342-370; and Tyrus Miller, *Modernism and the Frankfurt School* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

lifted through recollection—that is, when the subject becomes aware of the material conditions that ground rationality—another relationship to nature is possible. Thus, the uncanny need not be mired in a nihilistic desire for dissolution.

If the remembrance of nature in the subject is considered as a recognition that materiality grounds reason—and if the subject's encounter with finitude involves reflection—then the uncanny may be an experience of non-violent synthesis that re-orients the subject around the material ground of reason: nature. Adorno's reflections on the dialectic between subject and object lends evidence to the idea that the uncanny may provide another way of reflecting on the intertwining of nature and reason: "If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. […] Peace is the state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other."[114] The materiality within reason is apparent within the uncanny experience; however, the memory of nature may serve a redemptive function: namely, to bring the subject to awareness of the presence of materiality within herself, and the presence of living structure in what appears to be dead nature. Thus, the uncanny experience may allow a kind of differentiated or contradictory integration to occur.

It is notable that both Adorno and Freud remark on the longing for the maternal. The child's necessary separation from the mother might be considered an early experience of loss that the subject strives continually to overcome. Freud remarks:

> A jocular saying has it that 'love is a longing for home', and if someone dreams of a certain place or a certain landscape and, while dreaming, thinking to himself, 'I know this place, I've been here before', this place can be interpreted as representing his mother's genitals or her womb. Here too, then, the uncan-

114 Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, trans. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (Blackwell Publishing, 2000) 137-151, see 140.

ny ['unhomely'] is what was once familiar ['homely', 'hom-ey']. The negative prefix *un-* is the indicator of repression.[115]

Adorno also muses: "Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being en-compassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother."[116] This statement must be read dialectically: that is, not as an admission of the subject's conservative longing to restore or relive the past, but as the critical longing for a different future, and a richer experience in the pres-ent. True experience occurs when subject and object are bridged (without merely being identified) through an "after-image" of an original that re-mains, and must remain, forsaken.[117] Arguably, the subject's longing for a lost object might develop into a critical awareness of how reason has damaged nature through disenchantment. The uncanny has the poten-tial to shock the subject into another mode of experience.[118] Recollecting the non-identity within subjectivity allows the subject the possibility of a different mode of experience. In this sense the damage that repression uncovers may be used as a critical tool towards another mode of experi-ence, knowledge, and feeling.

Conclusion

I have argued that the uncanny may be viewed as a negative model of non-violent synthesis that illuminates how nature inhabits reason. While the phenomenon is often experienced as a ghostly, nearly empty pres-ence, the uncanny experience need not be merely regressive; rather, it

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115 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 151.

116 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Section 72, 112.

117 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Section 72, 112.

118 See Natalya Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 2007). Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 92: "Freud suggests that automa-ta are uncanny precisely because they remind us of the return of something from an earlier period of time, either an infantile narcissism or a primitive animism, which should have been overcome in the course of social and in-dividual development. The uncanny is therefore that which should have re-mained repressed and part of the unconscious but which has resurfaced. [...] The doll and the mask thus become harbingers of death [...] It is within this schema that the familiar can become unfamiliar and terrifying."

may revitalise the subject, through revealing the limits of reason, and presenting the materiality that grounds subjectivity. The uncanny may provide a model of the unsettled nature of the contradictions and ruptures that inhabit reason, and the non-identity that inheres within identity itself. Viewed through a metaphysical lens, the experience of the uncanny is a mode of philosophical experience that is necessary so that the subject may know the limits of reason while also gesturing negatively to what lies beyond it. In an age of alienation, violence, repression, and rational domination, such dialectical remembering ought to be considered a valuable philosophical tool for encountering nature and subjectivity non-violently. Hopefully the possibility of non-violence will provide a measure of redemption to both reason and nature—in their inseparability and in their difference.

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