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The Passing Away Of Nature: Two Essays On Natural History

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Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

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Abstract

This thesis begins by examining the natural-historical character of Theodor Adorno's thought and corpus, 1931–1969, by way of engaging the centennial of the October Russian Revolution. In the first three chapters we attempt to read Adorno's corpus as *écriture* or writing whereupon unconscious writing of history is transcribed. This literary-driven approach to Adorno's work highlights the primacy of history for his thought, whence his late-Marxism issues that culminates in what we call a politics of experience. Given the historical experience we seek to make legible heretofore, in chapter four we briefly turn to the hyper-object of ongoing and future anthropogenic global warming and ask how to narrativize the entangled trajectory of environmental politics and countenance its outcome in light of the broader history of the Left stemming from the early 20th century and leading to the present. Throughout we will attend to themes including the inheritance of the ruin of German Idealism as well as the failures of Marxism and the Left; the historical compulsion of a post-Hegelian negative dialectics and its relation to a metacritical engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis; the quandary of late-Marxism's cul-de-sac and broad turn to aesthetics; the interdisciplinary humanities as a form of critical object-dependence; the constitutive non-identities of history, experience and criticism; the citational disclosure of history and its relation to pedagogy and the demos; a poetics of natural history; and finally, the non-identical claims praxis makes upon theory.

Keywords

Interdisciplinary Humanities, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Russian Revolution, Climate Change, German Idealism, Negative Dialectics, Natural History.

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—Thank you to Andony Melathopoulos and Jeremy Arnott for their correspondences

—In warm memory of Clark Fitzgerald and Moishe Postone

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Abbreviated Works

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*: *AT*

Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz?:* *COL*

Adorno, *Critical Models*: *CM*

Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*: *LND*

Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*: *ND*

Benjamin, *Origin of the German Tragic Drama: Trauerspiel*

Buck-Morss, *Origins of Negative Dialectics*: *OND*

Hanssen, *Benjamin's Other History*: *BOH*

Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*: *TBR*

Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism*: *LWC*

Melathopoulos and Stoner, *Freedom in the Anthropocene*: *FITA*

Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*: *CCR*

*** indicate section breaks; the end of the section is denoted by ***

Preface

Fittingly belated from the outset, the topical occasions and impetuses for the composition of this thesis have now receded from the present moment. This thesis was originally written between September 2016–May 2017 in the form of three discrete but interrelated long-form essays; however, due to new program length requirements only the first two studies are presented here, with the first essay subdivided into three parts and the second essay condensed. The original third essay—a metacritical application of Theodor Adorno’s philosophical aesthetics on what I have termed contemporary post-Sandy literature, which was written partly on the occasion of the 2017 *Communal Presence: New Narrative Writing Today* conference at UC Berkeley and delivered there on the topical publication of Andrew Durbin’s novel *MacArthur Park* (2017)—has been omitted altogether. This final study was intended to finally address the present by crystallizing the two preceding historico-philosophical essays, and to thereby offer resolution to the foregoing nonsynchronicity.

Some parts of chapters 1–3 were written and rewritten for the 2017 *Legacy of the Russian Revolution* conference held at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia. In this conference paper I make the overarching case that Adorno is to the Russian Revolution what Hegel is to the French Revolution, the latter as per Rebecca Comay’s *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (2010). I attempt to capture in this conference paper how Adorno’s corpus may itself be regarded as a ‘dialectical image’ forged out of the aftermath of 1917.

Introduction

Many of the seed-germs of this thesis were born while studying Adorno’s posthumously published lectures on Kant and the ‘problems of moral philosophy’ from the 1960s with Susan

Buck-Morss at the CUNY Graduate Center in February 2015. However, this thesis formally began as an investigation into the idea of ‘natural history’ in the works of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel, a thesis topic originally recommended to me by Tilottama Rajan. Along the way, more concerns and matters migrated into this already capacious research topic.

A central underlying impulse of this thesis, one that is perhaps contrarian at first blush, is to highlight and bring into the fold what might otherwise pass as a blindspot when one operates within this specific context. Here my concern is not with ‘praxis’ (i.e., practice informed by critical (non-identical) thinking) *as such*, but more specifically, with what Adorno in the above lectures calls the “great inroads into theory” “made” by “praxis.”¹ “Praxis” here used, in the context of the lecture, in reference to what Adorno calls “the celebrated unity of theory and praxis implied by Marxian theory and then developed above all by Lenin.”² As we will soon explore, however, Adorno will want to cleave this “unity” and stress the non-identity of theory and praxis. As indicated above, in this thesis ‘critical’ will often be equated with ‘non-identical,’ which is intended to mirror the (historical) dialectics at a standstill or antinomies that give rise to the emergence and apparent necessity of Critical Theory.

Despite the thematic primacy accorded to praxis in this thesis, the idea of natural history nevertheless serves as a more instructive organizing-principle for grouping the two essays presented here. With regard to Adorno’s work specifically, which will occupy us chiefly throughout the thesis, natural history is primarily employed by him as a *critical* idea, a certain

¹ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 4. In a different lecture and context, Adorno will profess, “I believe one must extrapolate theory from the most advanced tendencies of development, not vice versa” (Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 84).

² Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 4.

“dialectical way of seeing.”³ By contrast, Benjamin’s usage of the idea, for instance, is much more complex and variable, as has been studied at length by Beatrice Hanssen in *Benjamin’s Other History* (2000).

In its broadest sweep, the idea of natural history is something of a dialectical image for Adorno’s philosophy of history and, as I will venture, his entire thought proper. Against a progressivist view of history of self-overcoming and transformation, Adorno’s corpus captures both explicitly and negatively how decay and disintegration preponderantly inform processes of history and thought (e.g., intellectual history) itself. Such a view of history, I will argue, emerges not only out of Adorno’s critical engagements with Benjamin and his metacritiques of Kant, Hegel, et al.—and much less stems from an imputed ‘negative pathos’ or otherwise—but was informed, first and foremost, by his own lived, historical and critical experience, 1903–1969. In my first three chapters I attempt to trace how such lived experience—both peripheral and immediate—informed Adorno’s thought.

If there is a central motif or thought-figure running throughout Adorno’s work it is the breakdown of dialectics into unsublatable antinomies. This motif will be explicated most forcefully in and through what we will call Adorno’s late-Marxism, whose chief cipher is the antinomy that obtains between theory and praxis in his work. This antinomy, I will argue, ultimately culminates in what we call a politics of experience that is operative and implicit in his corpus.

As I seek to demonstrate in chapters 1–3, the encroachment of history upon Adorno’s thought causes his thought and corpus to become themselves natural-historical: bearing the marks of stasis and decay. Framing my engagement with Adorno through the lens of the centennial of the October Russian Revolution will prove to heighten these dimensions of his

³ Pensky, “Three Kinds of Ruin,” 66.

work. If Adorno's oeuvre is natural-historical, then history may be understood to constitute its proper *Ur-text*—an archi-writing that is made legible through his own object-dependence to history. Adorno's corpus can thus be regarded as a coded text whereupon unconscious writing is transcribed that opens onto that which exceeds it. Finally, my historical and literary-driven reading of Adorno will prove to be speculative insofar as it addresses the whole of his corpus so as to explore how history informs it.

In his essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2010), Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that "the crisis of climate change calls on academics to rise above their disciplinary prejudices, for it is a crisis of many dimensions."⁴ In the space that remains for a final chapter, our heretofore broad engagements with Adorno and Benjamin's methodologies and interdisciplinary models of criticism assist us in reckoning with—and even perhaps speculatively redressing—the hyper-object of anthropogenic global warming through a prism of empirical-hermeneutical and critical-speculative lenses. Chapter four, a critical reading of Melathopoulos and Stoner's 2015 *Freedom in the Anthropocene: 20th Century Helplessness in the Face of Climate Change*, attempts to allegorically constellate two historico-political trajectories, the history of the Left and environmental politics. In the interest of wordcount limits, the essay is composed of a series of thematic notes and places stylistic emphasis on historiographic citation.

Within this chapter we understand the broader history of the Left as constituting the proper 'prehistory' of environmental politics, whence recognizable eco-politics and -movements are grasped as emerging alongside and out of the New Left between the 1960s–80s in North America and Europe. More generally, the essay queries how to narrativize the trajectory of eco-politics and address its outcome, concerns which emerge from a more fundamental and pressing question, I argue, of how to countenance contemporary environmental politics in light of the

⁴ Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 215.

encompassing history of the Left stemming from the early twentieth century and leading to the present: from the traditional (1848–1910s) to the post-political ('80s–contemporary) Left—a trajectory we sketch in the first three chapters. From here, we seek to address the unsublatable extremes and antinomies that animate contemporary eco-politics (on the levels of both theory and praxis) in constellation with deeper historico-philosophical problematics that originate out of, and tragically plague, the so-called history of the Left.

1. Looking Back on Adorno's Late-Marxism (On the Centennial of the Russian Revolution)

The delayed thinking of praxis always has something inappropriate about it, even when it puts it off out of naked compulsion.
—Adorno⁵

I. '1917'—100 Years On? (A Ruse)

Lenin—“*Who, him? / His name is so strange. From the eagle it draws imperial or historic power*”; Lenin, whose very name has become synonymous and even conflated with the portentous year of 1917—taking on a life of its own as ‘1917’; Lenin wrote in 1920 of the October Russian Revolution’s “international significance” as lying in the “inevitability of a repetition, on an international scale, of what we in Russian have gone through,” a repetition that the fortuitous centennial of 1917 occasions us *here* to raise and hold open, as Lenin does in 1920:

understanding international significance [of the Russian Revolution] to mean the international validity or the historical inevitability of a repetition on an international scale of what has taken place in our country, it must be admitted that certain fundamental features of our revolution do possess such a significance.⁶

The closure of the tendential world-shaping revolutionary praxis that issued from the October Russian Revolution of 1917, caused not the least by a preponderance of geopolitical

⁵ Adorno, *ND*, 244.

⁶ Derrida, *Glas*, 1; my emphasis; Lenin, *LWC*, 7. See Lenin’s invocation of Ivan Krylov’s fable *Eagle and the Hens* in “Notes of a Publicist.”

counter-revolutionary social force, occasioned Lenin's—and, as we will see, many others' who shared his orientation—turn from concrete politics to a broader, more diffuse politics of experience, evidenced in Lenin's own remarkable late works, such as "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920) and "Notes of a Publicist" (1922).⁷ Already engaging in preserving the emancipatory project he participated in unleashing, Lenin would speculatively if tentatively write in 1920, "we already have considerable international experience which very definitely shows that some of the fundamental features of our revolution have a significance which is not local, not peculiarly national, not Russian only, but international."⁸

What the repetition of 1917 *here* (and in 2017) entails is not so much ourselves revisiting the event (—much less repeating Lenin's gesture) as it consists of 'history' imposing itself upon us via repetition. Being subject to this exogenous repetition, 1917/2017, we run the risk of not being ready on account of our anxiety vis-à-vis an object we are not in control of. This 'object' is history, understood here (minimally) as the alien, quasi-autonomous unfolding of an immanent necessity despite its determinacy as emergent under conditions of capitalist modernity. History in this former sense continues apace despite past postmodern attempts to declare the 'end of history,' utterances which emerged distinctly in the late-twentieth century with the thawing of the Cold War and the final collapse of the Soviet Union, among other trajectories and historical junctures. If 9/11 did not falsify this master-narrative, then the 2016 election of Donald Trump, Brexit, the recrudescence of neo-nationalisms and the political crisis of late-neoliberalism have proven—in no matter how mystified a manner—that the course of history is still reroutable and,

⁷ In Luxemburg's final writings, we also encounter a turn to speculation in response to defeat; see Luxemburg, "Order Prevails in Berlin" (1918).

⁸ Lenin, *LWC*, 7.

more fundamentally, that the world can be other than it is and has been.

That the relevance and legacy of 1917 has to be actively retrieved and construed in our contemporary moment seems to be the greatest indicator of what the Russian Revolution means for the present, in 2017. What 1917 ‘means’ for the present, I would argue, is fundamentally obscure and unclear. When approaching this immense event today, one experiences the *prima facie* distance and dissociation of our contemporary moment from arguably the most profound attempt to change the modern world that has ever taken place. 1917 can thus be understood allegorically as a mirror that reflects the present; it reveals this present, for instance, as not revolutionary—as perhaps not even emphatically reformist; worse, maybe even sub-reformist, with no sight of emphatic social transformation on the horizon. Even the profundity of 1917, it seems, has become obscured; and so this incomprehensibility forces us to work our way back into the problem of inheriting its legacy. As I will seek to explicate, Adorno’s life-work, which he described in terms of “messages in bottles” (*Flaschenposten*), offers us one line to this past.⁹

Lenin engaged in what Adorno calls “open thinking” when he wrote above on the universal significance of the Russian Revolution in 1920, amidst his and early Soviet Russia’s retreat from world revolution into geopolitical isolation, culminating in the Thermidorian adaptation to and internalization of defeat via Stalin’s putative socialism in one country.¹⁰ (*—Here we keep open the gap that has been closed shut again and again.*) Lenin leaves the international importance of the Russian Revolution vague—and purposefully so. Indeed, while Lenin asserts the universal significance of the dwindling experience to which he bears witness and reconstructs in “*Left-Wing*” *Communism*, he nevertheless acknowledges the “tremendous

⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 209.

¹⁰ Adorno, *CM*, 293; Lenin, *LWC*, 7.

difference between backward Russia and the advanced countries of Western Europe.”¹¹ Thus in retracing the Bolshevik experience to uncover its truth content while still grasping the particularity of the Russian experience, Lenin echoes Kant for whom “critique means less to call into question than to establish the universal principles for how something is possible.”¹²

Along with “Notes to a Publicist” and other of Lenin’s late works before his death in 1924, “*Left-Wing Communism* is a work of auto-critique and, more modestly, self-clarification during retreat after the failure of “world revolution” ca. 1917–1919/23.¹³ Lenin spoke of but did not mystically predict the repetition of this event; indeed the title of the opening chapter of “*Left-Wing Communism* is explicitly reflexive: “In What Sense Can We Speak of the International Significance of the Russian Revolution?” Nevertheless, Lenin comes close here to almost speaking in a prophetic, eschatological tone; the “Russian model,” he writes, “reveals to all countries something, and something very essential, of their near and inevitable future.”¹⁴

Adorno’s final published essay “Resignation” (1969) echoes Lenin’s “*Left-Wing Communism* most notably¹⁵ in one of its closing passages:

Whatever has once been thought can be suppressed, forgotten, can vanish. But it cannot be denied that something of it survives. For thinking has the element of the universal. What once was thought cogently must be thought elsewhere, by others: this confidence accompanies even the most solitary and powerless thought.¹⁶

Such a gesture of holding open that which has been previously thwarted is expressed

¹¹ Lenin, *LWC*, 7.

¹² Wayne, *Red Kant*, 1.

¹³ Lenin, *LWC* 84.

¹⁴ Lenin, *LWC*, 7.

¹⁵ Adorno’s “Resignation” also echoes Lenin’s critique of the anarchist and so-called ‘left-wing communist’ tendencies that emerged in the wake of the October Russian Revolution and the closure of world-shaping praxis. In “*Left-Wing Communism* Lenin is speaking topically to the regression of Marxism into anarchism that resulted from the historical failure of Marxism. As Adorno writes in “Resignation,” “formerly progressive organizations that now in all countries of the earth are developing the characteristic traits of what they once opposed. Yet this does not invalidate the critique of anarchism. Its return is that of a ghost. The impatience with theory that manifests itself in its return does not advance thought beyond itself. By forgetting thought, the impatience falls back below it” (Adorno, *CM*, 292).

¹⁶ Lenin, *LWC*, 19–20.

earlier by Adorno and with greater intensity in his *Negative Dialectics* (1966) in a passage that could be taken as an instance of the imputed ‘left melancholy’ or “a priori pain” of Adorno’s thought:

Those who chide theory [as] anachronistic obey the topos of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted...What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.¹⁷

What this sore might lead us back to if approached immanently, I will argue, is what is at stake in Adorno’s self-described “messages in a bottle.” In a manuscript that was begun in 1942, Adorno and Horkheimer would write of their collaborative work as a “message [*Rede*]” addressed to an “imaginary witness...to whom we can pass it on—lest it perish with us.”¹⁸ In 1956, Adorno and Horkheimer further clarify their project of disseminating messages in a bottle:

[Horkheimer]...two sources of uncertainty are involved, if we continue to operate in the realm of theory. Firstly, because what is produced in the way of theory no longer has anything in common with Marx, with the most advanced class consciousness; our thoughts are no longer a function of the proletariat. Secondly, it seems then as if we are working on a theory for keeping in stock.

[Adorno] In the best case, it is theory as a message in a bottle.

[Horkheimer] In stock. Perhaps the time will come again when theory can be of use. A theory that has ceased to have any connection with practice is art. What we need to respond to is the question of whether we are doing philosophy as pure construct.¹⁹

¹⁷ Sloterdijk, *CCR*, xxxiii; Adorno, *ND*, 144.

¹⁸ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 277. “In view of what is now threatening to engulf Europe...our present work is essentially destined to pass things down through the night that is approaching: a kind of message in a bottle” (Horkheimer quoted in Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 262). Adorno will reiterate this image in his work on Kafka and *The Hunter Gracchus*, expressing here the tendency for such disseminated messages to themselves decay: “The best, which is forgotten, is remembered and imprisoned in a bottle like the Cumaean sibyl. Except that in the process it changes into the worst: ‘I want to die,’ and that is denied it. Made eternal, the transient is overtaken by a curse” (Adorno, *COL*, 219). We should note the resemblance between Adorno and Horkheimer’s image of messages in a bottle (symbolic of theory divorced from praxis) and Paul Celan’s account of the poem after Auschwitz: “A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are under way: they are making toward something” (Celan, *Paul Celan*, 115). Ingeborg Bachmann similarly expresses this situation of language in her poem “Waiting Room”: “Language no longer unites. / What we share is waiting. / A chair / a bench / a window / through which light falls / into our room / onto our hands / onto our eyes / and also / onto the floor. / Heal our eyes / so that we again find words, / bright ones that I can say to you” (Bachmann, *Darkness Spoken*, 353).

¹⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?”, 59.

As we will explore, these cryptic utterances—much like those of Lenin above—are ones of preservation as much as they are of retreat; they are expressions of preservation amidst retreat.²⁰

Nietzsche insists in “On the Uses and Abuse of History for Life” (1873) that we must come to see the work of “historical writing,” which *a priori* revisits and thus repeats, as potentially creative:

as long as the past must be written about as worthy of imitation, as capable of being imitated, with the possibility of a second occurrence, history is definitely in danger of becoming somewhat altered, reinterpreted into something beautiful, and thus coming close to free poeticizing.²¹

Indeed, following Benjamin’s idea of origin (*Ursprung*) as a “maelstrom” (*Strudel*) that emerges out of the “flow of becoming,” to recover the complex emergence (*Entstehung*) of a past event *a priori* implicates us in its potential repetition—however far removed or distantly echoed and transmuted this reiteration may be.²²

II. Last Gasps for Air

Lenin’s German counterpart²³ Rosa Luxemburg was spared from living through the barbarism she presaged if, as she warned, proletarian socialism—over and against petty-bourgeois democracy, or worse—was not attained.²⁴ The barbarism she foresaw would result in but would not be restricted to the blossoming of fascism across Europe, another World War and

²⁰ Lenin’s self-conscious retreat is expressed, for instance, in his turn to allegory to express early Soviet Russia’s cul-de-sac; see “By Way of Example” in “Notes to a Publicist.”

²¹ Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*.

²² Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 45; Samuel Weber amended trans. “[T]he gesture which tries to recover, distances from-by itself, it grows ever more distant...Identification is a difference to itself, a difference from-with itself” (Derrida, *Derrida & Education*, 56).

²³ See Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Mass Strike*, “What is German Bolshevism?” and other writings on the Russian Revolutions.

²⁴ Luxemburg quotes Engels in “The Crisis of Social Democracy” (1915): “Friedrich Engels once said, bourgeois society confronts a dilemma: either the transition to socialism or relapse into barbarism. What does a ‘relapse into barbarism’ mean at our height of European civilization?...This world war—this is a relapse into barbarism” (Luxemburg quoted in Adorno, *CM*, 386).

the unspeakable horrors of the twentieth century. While her own gruesome death had little effect on the then-dwindling German Revolution, Shane Haffner describes her murder as the most “historically potent event in the drama of the German Revolution” in his detailed history *Failure of Revolution: Germany 1918–19*: “viewed now from almost a century later [her death] has acquired something of the uncanny, incalculably far reaching effect of the event on Golgotha—which likewise seemed to make little difference when it happened.”²⁵ Despite the posthumous caricatures that have taken hold of Lenin and Luxemburg (authoritarian and voluntarist, respectively) both figures, through their post-histories, have become allegories and signposts to the respective but interrelated German and Russian revolutionary experiences, which were ultimately abortive.²⁶

Bolshevism advanced, but did not solve of course, the twin crises of Marxism (as a politics) and imperialist global capitalism (the latter evidenced by the lead-up to, outbreak, and aftermath of the First World War) by seeing these crises as opportunities for transformation. Lenin’s call to turn the world war amongst capitalist nation-states into a global “civil war” between classes, and therethrough into a “world revolution,” sought to work through the failures of the Second International (which had developed up until the outbreak of WWI, from 1889–1914)²⁷ by radicalizing Marxism via Bolshevism in changed conditions.²⁸ This, to be sure, is Lenin’s great, ambivalent gesture²⁹ of seeing such defeat and crisis as—however

²⁵ Haffner, *Failure of Revolution*, 140.

²⁶ See Trotsky’s “The Transitional Program” (1938) and his other writings on the assessment of the failed German Revolutions.

²⁷ “‘Since August 4, 1914, German Social-Democracy has been a stinking corpse’—this statement will make Rosa Luxemburg’s name famous in the history of the international working class movement” (Lenin, “Notes of a Publicist”). In *Lenin*, Lukács remarks how “the different attitudes of the various socialist currents in 1914 were the direct, logical consequences of their theoretical, tactical, and other positions up till then” (Lukács, *Lenin*, 40; no emphasis). See Joll, *The Second International* (1955).

²⁸ Lukács, *Lenin*, 49; Lenin, *LWC*, 84.

²⁹ By ‘gesture’ I mean a delimited but irreducible act that calls to be grasped in both its becoming—i.e., its movement or tendential opening-out-onto—and also its being-cut-short in becoming, i.e., its incompleteness. Gesture here and elsewhere in this thesis is also intended to emphasize the interpenetration of practice and theory, or action

counterintuitively—opening up the space for advancing and deepening the crisis of capitalism, and for pursuing possible transformation and potential freedom.

In 1919, two years after the Bolshevik seizure of state power, the prospect of socialist world revolution would be firmly closed off by the failure of the German Revolution and the symbolic murder of Luxemburg, leading to increased Soviet isolation. Bringing to a halt the ‘permanent revolution’ that Trotsky and, following him, Lenin postulated as the condition of possibility for a successful world revolution in the tendential direction of socialism, the failure of the German Revolution marked the beginning of the end of ‘classical Marxism.’ The latter can be defined as the historical continuity that spans from Marx and Engels (ca. 1848³⁰) to Lenin, Luxemburg and ends roughly with Trotsky’s assassination in 1940—a continuity which these later figures could still lay claim to and cite.³¹ Yet of course Trotskyism had already become an untenable form of revolutionary politics before the time of Trotsky’s tragic death.

In the wake of such defeat, Trotskyism and Frankfurt School-Critical Theory would both assume the task of sustaining the moment of crisis and heightened critical (i.e., non-identical) consciousness that was attained in 1917. Both would attempt to work through the crises and failures of Bolshevism and the German Revolution,³² and more broadly, Marxism ca. 1914–1924, albeit in different and divergent forms and settings, and in radically changed geopolitical circumstances. In his retrospective essay “Those Twenties” (1963), Adorno explicitly voices a perspective of tendential world revolution that aligns with the revolutionary purview of Lenin,

and self-understanding, in the supercharged historical ‘moment.’ This gestural character of action is invoked when one speaks of, for instance, ‘Lenin in 1917.’ Addressing Lenin thus, Lukács writes, “[i]t was left to Lenin to make the step from theory to practice; a step which is simultaneously—and this should never be forgotten—a *theoretical advance*” (Lukács, *Lenin*, 46). See Slaughter, “What is Revolutionary Leadership?” which elaborates Lenin’s developments for both Marxian theory and praxis.

³⁰ In the essay “Society,” Adorno describes the critical concept of society as originating “around 1848” (Adorno, “Society,” 10–11).

³¹ See Luxemburg, “On the Spartacus Program” (1918).

³² See Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, xi–xii.

Luxemburg and Trotsky:

Already in the twenties, as a consequence of the events of [the failure of the German Revolution in] 1919, the decision had fallen against that political potential that, had things gone otherwise, with great probability would have influenced developments in Russia and prevented Stalinism.³³

III. Late-Marxism: Separation Anxiety

It is always the case that whenever thinkers as powerful as Marx or Hegel or Kant arrive at an impasse it is not a good idea to be too clever in resolving the resulting antinomies. In general, it is far better to assure oneself of the necessity of such antinomies.

—Adorno³⁴

In the unraveling of Marxism as a distinct, recognizable and *sui generis* form of politics³⁵ (Lenin and Luxemburg, as both Korsch and Lukács argue (1923), offering some of the most compelling embodiments of this breed of politics), which took place leading up to and surrounding the outbreak of WWI and the resultant splintering of the Second International—of which the politics and writings of Lenin and Luxemburg stand as two departures and radical immanent critiques—Marxism is transmuted (minimally) into a problem of theory and praxis, whose coerced unity (e.g., socialist realism, Diamat, etc.) represents the regression of this form of non-identical politics, which from here enters into deep crisis. (As we will explore below, the works of Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer ca. 1940–42 offer historical contextualizations of this crisis, a crisis admittedly much deeper than that contained within the static theory/praxis antinomy.) To be sure, constellating (in theory) ‘theory and praxis’ is necessarily an echo and reduction of what historically constituted a dynamic exchange between (broadly speaking) theory and praxis, e.g., as seen in Lenin and Luxemburg’s lived politics and writings. Such a

³³ Adorno, *CM*, 43.

³⁴ Adorno, *LND*, 51.

³⁵ “[D]istinguished from the greater 19th century history of socialism, from the Utopians to Proudhon, Blanqui, Lassalle, Bakunin, et al. that had developed in the preceding period, from 1875–1914” (Cutrone, “The Century of Marxism,” 1).

decoupling, resulting from the above historical break, will compel late-Marxian theory to remark upon its own ipseity and insufficiency in the face of its categorical antithesis, praxis, which Adorno argues “appears in theory merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot.”³⁶

In a strong sense, amidst this dwindling (to critical consciousness) crisis, theory and praxis become in disagreement following the historical failure of Marxism (minimally, the historical self-consciousness of the Left) and thereby the Left. Adorno will write that “[t]hey [theory and praxis] stand in a polar relationship.”³⁷ In their antinomy, each pole gnaws on its antithesis; yet Adorno does not lament this “separation”³⁸:

If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the Romantics and denounced in their wake by the Socialists—except for the mature Marx.³⁹

Holding the historically determinate and fluctuating poles of theory and praxis together, along with their respective demands, allows us to preserve, if only in altered and transmuted form, the minimal structure of this historical dialectics at a standstill. (All the while not forgetting spontaneity and what Adorno calls the “spontaneous moment”: “theory and praxis are neither immediately one nor absolutely different...their relation is one of discontinuity. No continuous path leads from praxis to theory—what has to be added is what is called the spontaneous moment.”⁴⁰)

³⁶ Adorno, *CM*, 278.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁸ In “Little Hans” from *Minima Moralia*, Adorno portrays the work of bourgeois intellectuals as being marred by this contradiction.

³⁹ Adorno, *CM*, 266. The “separation” or contradiction between these poles, it should be stressed, “cannot be settled by reflection; it is the constitution of reality that dictates the contradiction”—thus pointing to the necessity of changing reality, social reality, itself (Adorno, *CM*, 4).

⁴⁰ Adorno, *CM*, 276; see Adorno’s *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* on Luxemburg, spontaneity and organization. We should note here that Adorno’s late work, such as “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” brings to the fore not only what is latent in Adorno’s corpus but also the stakes of his thought. Both are also evident in his late letter correspondence with Herbert Marcuse, where the figures engage in a debate over the politics of the Institute for Social Research, and Critical Theory more broadly. While Marcuse argues the contemporary (late ‘60s) tasks of

The above standstill can be expressed figuratively by the passage from Marx *back to a* constellation of Hegel with Kant, with Marx nevertheless on the speculative horizon. More precisely, philosophy can preserve Marxism, which is itself one step removed—as classical Marxism understood it⁴¹—from philosophy, but only through a constitutive breakdown and decoupling: through the regression of dialectics to (unsublatable) *antinomies*, which late-Marxian critique seeks to bring to light and express as moments of a regressive social totality, containing nevertheless—however latently—emancipatory potential by way of the nonsynchronous working through of such reified forms of appearance. Through its misfire, Marxism is forced to become a problem *of* philosophy and thereby becomes entangled with the latter. Such an entanglement is expressed in Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* on the disagreement of Marxism and philosophy, and Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, which can be understood as a further retreat into philosophy from Korsch’s suspension of Marxism *and* philosophy.⁴²

IV. Turn to Immanence

Having failed on world-historical proportions, Marxism is compelled to undergo immanent criticism, which is the work Hegel classically assigned to philosophy vis-à-vis religion

Critical Theory are discontinuous with those of the ‘30s (when the Institute for Social Research was founded)—writing, “our (old) theory has an internal political content, an internal political dynamic, that today, more than ever before, compels us to concrete political positions...we have to write and act differently today than in the thirties”—Adorno, by contrast, affirms such continuity (Adorno & Marcuse, “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” 129). Marcuse, in a later letter, would acquiesce to Adorno’s position, writing, “[a]ll that may not amount to very much, but there is no revolutionary situation in the most advanced industrialized countries, and the degree of integration simply delimits new, very unorthodox forms of radical opposition” (Ibid., 133).

⁴¹ See, for instance, Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886).

⁴² Like Korsch, Adorno holds open the possibility that philosophy can abolish itself; in so doing he claims inheritance of the tradition of Marx and Marxism. Adorno’s famous opening line from *Negative Dialectics* reiterates Korsch’s contention in *Marxism and Philosophy* that “[p]hilosophy cannot be abolished without being realized” (Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 97).

and art in his *Aesthetics*.⁴³ This historically conditioned self-comprehension of Marxism would crucially incorporate psychoanalysis, the language and discourse of unconditional suffering under conditions of modernity wherein ostensibly anything can and should be said (by anyone).⁴⁴ Such a critical employment of psychoanalysis was purveyed by figures such as Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch and most forcefully by Wilhelm Reich, whose early work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) prefigured much later late-Marxism in its dialectical intertwining of social theory (the philosophy of history, Marxism, sociology, etc.) with psychology (psychoanalysis, social and group psychology, etc.).⁴⁵ This specific interdisciplinary constellation would later be classically articulated in Adorno's "Sociology and Psychology" (1955). The psychoanalytic turn in and resultant psychoanalytic dimension of Critical Theory was codified with Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) which undertook, among other projects, a deep archaeology of the modern bourgeois subject in response to the barbarisms of the early twentieth century.⁴⁶

Minimally, and to recapitulate, Adornian negative dialectics is an attempt to both preserve the problem of the historical and geopolitical failure of Marxism (implicating thereby the entire preceding history of the Left stemming from 1848) and to hold open and point, perhaps, to Marxism's reconstitution and reinauguration as a tendential revolutionary politics. However, again, like *History and Class Consciousness* and *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), Adornian negative dialectics is a theoretical exploration of this problematic, and hence finds

⁴³ Marxism lives on because its proper task of bringing about a post-capitalist society remains unfinished, compelling it, as Adorno writes, "to criticize itself without restraint" (Adorno, *LND*, 183).

⁴⁴ See Derrida, "Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul" and Bloch, "Heritage of our Times."

⁴⁵ See specifically Reich's essay "Ideology as Material Power." Adorno will note, echoing Reich, that "[w]ithout psychology, in which the objective constraints are continually internalized anew, it would be impossible to understand how people passively accept a state of unchanging destructive irrationality and, moreover, how they integrate themselves into movements that stand in rather obvious contradiction to their own interests" (Adorno, *CM*, 271)

⁴⁶ As Robert Hullot-Kentor reminds us, Adorno "was among the first to address the philosophical dimensions and implications of psychoanalysis" (Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 10).

itself already bound up in the historico-philosophical (and however distantly, political) unraveling of the tenuous “umbilical cord” Marx posited between theory and praxis, which already led Marx himself to appropriately underscore in his “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845) “the this-sidedness of...thinking” in the face of praxis.⁴⁷

In the long aftermath issuing from 1917, Benjamin—before his own premature and tragic death in flight of the Nazis (agents of the counter-revolution, and worse)—would contemplate and engage in writing history from the vantage of the vanquished; and not simply the working class as such but from the purview of those who had struggled to overcome capital but had failed and/or had been betrayed in their attempts to do so. Of the latter, Rosa Luxemburg would be the most tragic case, whom Benjamin would cite in his “On The Concept of History.” Benjamin’s provocation of writing history from the standpoint of those who had failed to transform the world would be recast by Adorno throughout his work, in critical objectification and more hermetically, as “the unconscious writing of history.”⁴⁸ To be sure, reading history against the grain means, for both of these figures, reading history pathologically, i.e., through the lens of a symptomatology that professes an avowed object-dependence to natural-historical regression. Beyond these tasks of critical historiography (to be sure, a form of anti-historiography), Adorno would also notably import Benjamin’s insights into the domain of philosophy proper, arguing that “knowledge must [also]...present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat.”⁴⁹

In spite of the seductions of dogmatic left-hermeneutics and the eschatologies of a certain ‘vulgar’ type of Marxism, the present is not legible in its entirety via a philosophy of the history of the Left, seeing the tradition of the Left has, historically, privileged and thus excluded certain voices over others. Nevertheless, it seems that any serious attempt to understand the

⁴⁷ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 59; Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 144.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *AT*, 261.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 152.

intransigence of the present, that is, the world as praxis-resistant (to speak nothing of the regressive social forces that seem well at work today, not only on subjective and neo-national but also on geopolitical levels), must work through this troubling and deep unconscious history of the Left in the twentieth century that leads to the present. From the perceived need of such an immanent history of the Left, which philosophical history methodologically and epistemologically makes possible, Adorno's corpus will be of historical interest to us (and as we will also see, of an interdisciplinary and therefore unconditional interest), insofar as his work seems to dialectically register, both explicitly and negatively, the decline of world-shaping praxis and thereby the decline of the Left.

We should note, however, that Adorno's work is not uniquely singular in this above historical dimension. A similar case could be made for the corpuses of Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin, for instance, as they also critically register the post-1914–1923 historical experience and its long aftermath, as well as the emergence of new forms of Left politics that draw and/or break from past forms of such politics. For our purposes here, however, Adorno's negative dialectic productively stands at a certain historical crossroads, cresting with his death in 1969 before the post-'60s–70s/New Left emergence of postmodernism and the global transformations of neoliberalism took hold, but whose proper historical experience reaches as far back as the 1910's and '20s. In Adorno's turn to immanence and philosophy (as we have seen, for instance, to inherit and comprehend the failure of Marxism) the external world is refracted in his work, yet only negatively—thus necessitating further criticism to decode such immanence, which will constitute our task here.

V. Dialectics of Defeat

In terms of Adorno's contemporary reception, one of the most fruitful and provocative engagements with his work has come from the Platypus Affiliated Society (PAS), an organization originating from the University of Chicago and the courses of the late Moishe Postone that is avowedly founded for "the reconstitution of Critical Theory."⁵⁰ One of the PAS's central theses that draws from Adorno is its so-called "dialectics of defeat," which seeks to make legible the decline or natural history of the Left over the course of the twentieth century, on the levels of both social being and consciousness.⁵¹ (In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno would describe the "objectivity of historic life" as "that of natural history," in other words, a history that tends toward sedimentation rather than self-overcoming.⁵²) Of its many stages and moments of devolution and decomposition, the parallel constructed between Adorno-Critical Theory and Trotsky-Trotskyism is one the PAS's most compelling and productive analyses—a historical constellation we have already begun constructing above.

By the 1930s, Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács—arguably the two most important theoreticians of not only the post-1914–19 crisis and failure but also of the inroads made by Lenin and Luxemburg on the levels of both theory and praxis—had either become fervently anti-Soviet (Korsch), or had weakened and adapted to Stalinism (Lukács).⁵³ Yet Trotsky and his movement stood standing in their attempt to reroute the failed world revolution and thereby claim fidelity to the Russian Revolution; and the Institute for Social Research, founded in the wake of the failed German Revolution, laid claim at its outset to the politics of Korsch and Lukács' works from the early '20s, approaching both of them (unsuccessfully) to head the

⁵⁰ Leonard, et al., "The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century," 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵² Adorno, *ND*, 354.

⁵³ See Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 94.

Institute. Adorno (arguably the Institute's most robust representative) and Trotsky thus become, as myth has often had it, last men standing: Trotsky, the last defender of the Russian Revolution; and Adorno, the lone champion of Hegelian-Marxism within German philosophy and sociology. Indeed, Adorno's work from beginning to end⁵⁴ sought to sustain the insights of the earlier Hegelian-Marxist tradition of Lukács and Korsch, which were born of what Korsch called "the crisis of Marxism" and the abortive revolutions of the early twentieth century.

The distant but nonetheless affirmed affinity between Adorno and Lenin⁵⁵ lies in the former's attempt to sustain the moment of crisis for critical consciousness and to hold in constellation the once-empathic mediation, now broken-down, between theory and praxis that Lukács and Korsch also sought to sustain in the immediate wake of Lenin and Luxemburg, 1914–1919/1924. Trotskyism is in many ways the torn half of Adornian Critical Theory. What Trotskyism displays on the level of praxis—in its long disintegration: the becoming-impossible and -farcical of this putatively revolutionary politics, as a result not the least of the counter-revolutionary effects of international capital—is what Adorno's corpus inversely registers on the level of theory: the retreat from praxis into the strongholds of theory. More broadly, however, Adorno's work indexes the natural-historical becoming-ossified of *both* theory and praxis into the antinomy we have posed hitherto. As Adorno explicates, "[t]here is much to speak for the

⁵⁴ See fn. 40.

⁵⁵ In his discussion with Horkheimer apropos a possible rewriting of the *Communist Manifesto*, Adorno expresses his intentions directly: "I have always wanted to...develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin"; Horkheimer responds affirmatively, "Who would not subscribe to that?" (Adorno & Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?" 103). To be sure, it is crucial to strive to comprehend what such pithy utterances presuppose. Several letters from Adorno to Horkheimer and Benjamin in the late '30's evidence Adorno's positive attitude towards to Lenin, such as when Adorno writes Benjamin, "I would offer you the slogan 'Leninist Auto-critique'" (Adorno & Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 181). Chris Cutrone has argued that "[o]ne clear explanation for Adorno's 'Leninism' was the importance of consciousness in Adorno's estimation of potential for emancipatory social transformation" (Cutrone, "Politics of Critical Theory," 3). In a letter to Horkheimer concerning Erich Fromm's work, Adorno writes, "I would strongly advise him to read Lenin," adding that Fromm's work poses a "real threat to the line...which the [Institute for Social Research's] journal takes" (Adorno quoted in Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, 266). In his 1936 epistolary response to Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, Adorno describes it as "among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory that I have encountered since I read [Lenin's] *The State and Revolution*" (Adorno & Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 132–3).

fact that cognition, whose possible relation to a transforming praxis is at least momentarily crippled, would not in itself be any sort of blessing. Praxis is put off and cannot wait; theory, too, ails from this.”⁵⁶

Adorno’s retreat and resultant cul-de-sac⁵⁷ are registered, for instance, in his argument that it is in the “interest of praxis itself” “that theory should win back its independence.”⁵⁸ Yet here Adorno’s retreat into theory (over and against praxis) should not be confused with a Heideggerian, let alone the post-Heideggerian, retreat into thinking contra institutionalized/academic philosophy. Upon general-historical consideration, Adorno’s work becomes salient and productive the extent to which it understands itself dialectically as only theory, or *weak* theory. Perhaps what is most remarkable about the objectivated historical experience that is latent in Adorno’s corpus is not its how’s or why’s but its very *availability*.

VI. Adorno as Archi-Writing

To reiterate, Adorno’s work now appears to trace and capture, however liminally or indirectly, the problematic of the introjection of failure and defeat of self-determining subjectivity and world-shaping collective praxis by means of his dialectical intertwining of critically applied psychology and sociology. Through such tarrying (or being-beside-oneself), Adorno’s corpus (in hindsight) appears to disinterestedly register—in the *longue durée*—the decline of the Left in the twentieth century and thereby at the same time stands as a path by which to recuperate this entropic history. (Such recuperation, as we will see, is made possible not in the least by Adorno’s (like Benjamin’s) assimilation of the concepts of decay and transience—

⁵⁶ Adorno, *ND*, 245.

⁵⁷ See Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 150, on the antinomies of Adorno’s cul-de-sac.

⁵⁸ In “The Authoritarian State,” Horkheimer also signals a provisional retreat into theory when he writes how “[t]hought itself is already a sign of resistance, the effort to keep oneself from being deceived any longer. Thought is not absolutely opposed to command and obedience but sets them for the time being in relationship to the task of making freedom a reality. This relationship is in danger” (Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State,” 116–7).

and more broadly, a philosophical concept of experience—into his thinking.)

Crucially, Adorno's work registers not only how objective circumstances (for instance, failure and defeat) can foreclose subjective possibilities via psychic introjection, but also how subjective states-of-affairs can close off—on account of hypercathected psychic entrenchments and calcified libidinal investments—subjective possibilities and psychic availability and thereby objective, worldly possibilities. This is why psychoanalysis became essential for Adorno—to overcome such sedimented enclosures wedded to a non-negotiable past, which molds the present and future tenses. In his critical embrace and employment of psychoanalysis, Adorno's work indicates that self-determining collective praxis may be unthinkable without self-constituting, 'strong' subjects. As he would put it grossly but succinctly in his essay "Is Marx Obsolete?" (1968), "the signature of the age [late-capitalism] is the predominance of the relations of production over the forces of production."⁵⁹ This thought-figure expresses, in Marxian categories, the problematic of the regression of consciousness: minimally, that consciousness can adapt and adjust itself to its objective social circumstances, instead of pushing the envelope further.

Yet how, might we ask, can a figure who is so clearly not emphatically Marxist or openly leftist have anything meaningful to say about the history of the Left and/or Marxism? To be sure, Adorno's imputed Marxism or leftism lies not in a manic or critical heroism. His pertinence for putative Left politics rather lies in his work's eloquence and the *prima facie* cryptic character of his work, which points beyond the said proper to the *saying* itself via equivocal enunciation.⁶⁰ An Adornian Marxism/leftism may thus seem a mere academic eccentricity, destined for only further hermeticism and compounded esotericism. But this might only appear to be the case so

⁵⁹ Adorno, *COL*, 119.

⁶⁰ See Adorno, *Hegel*, 116.

long as we have not received his disseminated messages. As we will explore, Adorno's work is compelling first and foremost as a certain dialectical preservationism which is nevertheless concerned primarily with the emergence of the new.

While Adorno's meditations on non-identity and theory and praxis may not seem to relate *prima facie* in any clear way to the history of the Left, a more heretical reader of Adorno such as the art historian T.J. Clarke has argued that Adorno's entire "lifetime [was] spent" "building ever more elaborate conceptual trenches to outflank the [later] Third International," i.e., the Stalinized Third International. (As Adorno writes in "Resignation," speaking to the effects of the Stalinization of the Left, "formerly progressive organizations...now in all countries of the earth are developing the characteristic traits of what they once opposed"⁶¹). Similarly, the radical Marxist critic of Adorno, Chris Cutrone has boldly if perhaps grossly contended that Adorno "considered his work—indeed, his entire life experience—to be a function of the aftermath of this failure of Marxism that conditioned subsequent history"; more precisely, a function, Cutrone writes, of "the defeat of the global uprising of 1917–19 at the end of World War I in which avowedly Marxist political organizations took part, the series of revolutions in Russia, Germany, Hungary and Italy."⁶²

Yet the politics of Adorno's work, much like those of Benjamin's, are no doubt cryptic and *weak*—and avowedly so. Their collective works do not heroically profess an overt politics (a tendential worldly orientation) but rather embody and proffer a pre-politics concerning the very conditions of im/possibility for emancipatory politics. Politics *where* self-determining subjects form collectives and democratically act in concert with one another; politics *when* "those who

⁶¹ Clarke, "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?", 41; Adorno, *CM*, 292. Cutrone notes how the '30s witnessed "the transformation of Marxism in Stalinism...Stalinism [would] flourish as the Marxism of the post-World War II period...[which Adorno] regard[ed] as a sign of the regression of Marxism itself" (Cutrone, "Politics of Critical Theory," 4).

⁶² Cutrone, *Adorno's Marxism*, 137–8.

‘have no’ time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signaling pain.”⁶³ To be sure, decoding the imputed politics of Adorno’s corpus is as difficult as attempting to identify, for instance, the precise political content of Benjamin’s unfinished *Arcades Project*. Given these hermeneutical difficulties, Osborne and Charles’ following account of the politics of Benjamin’s work will also be instructive for approaching those of Adorno’s:

Benjamin remarked that his break from the Youth Movement did not constitute the abandonment of this earlier thought, however, but its submergence into a ‘harder, purer, more invisible radicalism.’ This in part accounts for what T.J. Clark describes as the ‘cryptic’ character of—what Adorno termed—the anthropological materialism of *The Arcades Project*, where, Clark comments, it is ‘as if such a politics were being actively aired and developed elsewhere.’⁶⁴

By reading Adorno’s own ‘invisible’ politics “associatively,” we will attempt to grasp—as Adorno wrote apropos Hegel—“the compelling force of the objective phenomena that have been reflected in his philosophy and are sedimented in it.”⁶⁵

VII. Politics of Experience

In order to decipher and unfold the politics of Adorno’s work, his work must be approached immanently. This is not the least to guard against the common tendency to hijack his messages in a bottle, by means of which all disparate roads apparently lead to Adorno’s Marxism. As Benjamin would write Adorno in a letter dated July 17, 1931, “it is a question not simply of ‘applying’ Marxism like a coat of fresh paint, but rather of working with it, and that

⁶³ Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 25.

⁶⁴ Osborne & Matthew, “Walter Benjamin.”

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Hegel*, 54.

means, for all of us, struggling with it.”⁶⁶ Our posing the question of Adorno’s disseminated messages has not been and will hopefully not be a pretext for us to reassert or surreptitiously retrieve a master metanarrative of history. Further, by thematizing what I will call a politics of experience we will also attempt to move beyond the twin pitfalls of objectivism/voluntarism by taking an immanent approach—thereby also allowing us to skirt the trappings of leftist dogmatism, Heideggerian/authoritarian new ontology, and a manic hijacking of the object, epitomized by accelerationist thought, wherein subject and object are collapsed. A politics of experience, which we may also use to offset the seductions of Adorno’s Marxism (along with these other above thought-predilections) is no doubt an emphatically weak ‘politics,’ much in the sense in which Benjamin speaks of a “*weak* Messianic” power that the present holds in relation to past unredeemed suffering.⁶⁷

In the post-1914–1923 aftermath, Marxism as a *sui generis* form of politics loses its self-evidence and hence cannot be claimed and inherited without undergoing immanent critique. In light of the eclipse of the political and its subsequent inversion and perversions, late-Marxism would come to assume the historical task of developing an eloquent politics of experience, one that places emphasis on critical experience if only so as to make possible emancipatory politics as such. Adorno’s writings, as I will attempt to demonstrate, are avowedly pre-political in the sense that they seek primarily to disclose a sedimentary experience of history and of what Benjamin calls *Lehre* (teaching, doctrine) by gestically preserving and disclosing in writing certain critical and to be sure *recurrent* aesthetic-artistic, psychological-sociological and philosophical-historical experiences (among other forms of experience). Adorno grasps this experiential manifold as transpiring under conditions of late-bourgeois society and capitalist

⁶⁶ Adorno & Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 9.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 254.

modernity, both of whose mutual historical contradictions⁶⁸ mark a shared form of unfreedom and constraint: minimally, the unfolding of an immanent necessity. In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin would describe the particular freedom inherent in “education” as that of “tradition becoming visible and *free*.”⁶⁹

Addressing Horkheimer in a transcribed dialogue, Adorno expresses the pre-political dimension of their collaborative work in terms of its “pre-dialectical” character:

what we are doing is pre-dialectical, a leaping out of the dialectic...Today...where everything is included and the world constitutes a unity as far as one can see, the idea of ‘otherness’ is one whose time has come. We might almost say that the dialectic, which always contains an element of freedom, has come to a full stop today because nothing remains outside it. What Hegel and Marx called utopianism has been rendered obsolete by the present stage of history.⁷⁰

Even Adorno’s most ostensibly political works, essays and utterances—consider the above 1956 discussion with Horkheimer apropos a rewriting of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*—are eminently pre-political in that they are primarily concerned with exploring present and past (minimal) conditions of im/possibility for both self-determining subjectivity (on an individual-monadic scale) and world-shaping praxis (on the level of collective praxis), both of which persist in the present as reified but in ruins, i.e., objective but alienated possibilities. As we have witnessed hitherto, such conditions of im/possibility are explored by Adorno by means of deploying critical concepts such as non-identity and by topically addressing enduring historically-sedimented antinomies that manifest themselves in both theory and praxis.

The above ruins which are registered in Adorno’s corpus ensure his work’s continued relevance despite the common tendencies to dismiss his work and/or him *ad hominem*. History, in Hegel’s emphatic—if problematic—sense of the self-conscious unfolding of freedom, has yet

⁶⁸ I.e., the proletarianization of bourgeois society following the Second Industrial Revolution.

⁶⁹ Benjamin quoted in McCole, *Antinomies of Tradition*, 77.

⁷⁰ Adorno & Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?”, 54

to liquidate Adorno's work, which registers a persistent and shared narrative emplotment of unfreedom. Nor in any case has history *qua* freedom liquidated the works Adorno himself sustains, like those of Marx, as Adorno argued in his 1968 lecture "Is Marx Obsolete?" (to which he answered in the negative). In addition to holding open the theory/praxis antinomy, which stands as one of the defining and most productive aporias of Adorno's corpus, Adorno's continued relevance also rests upon his—like Benjamin's—inheritance and reconfiguration of *Kritik* in the long aftermath of the collapse of German Idealism. Immanent critique inaugurated by Kant as, very broadly here, the exploration of conditions of possibility for experience and its transformation.

For Adorno, the discontinuous histories of art, philosophy, literature, etc. produced under conditions of capitalist modernity, are catalogues of experiences by means of which the past, present and perhaps a post-capitalist future are re/determinable. History is recursive and under conditions of modernity there is, *pace* Derrida and Deleuze, no such thing as pure repetition but only repetition in its possible devolution (what Marx calls farce) or its potential recuperation and advancement. Such an advancement is expressed, for example, in Lenin's identification of early 20th century capitalist imperialism as the "highest state of capitalism,"⁷¹ in other words, the *final* stage of capitalism announced by self-determining revolutionary subjectivity. This deepening is expressed *in praxis* with the Bolshevik seizure of the state and *in theory* with Trotsky's wager of "permanent revolution" and Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917), the latter a critical book-report on Marx and Engels' scattered writings on the state. And yet potential recuperation, even if successful, can only entail further distancings and further slidings of experience into new unsure stages of crisis of both consciousness and social praxis. This was a problematic Trotsky registered in *Lessons of October* (1924), which retraces the crises of critical consciousness at

⁷¹ See Lukács, *Lenin*, chapter 4 for a critical exegesis of Lenin's writings on imperialism.

events and periods of historical and political rupture surrounding the Russian Revolutions of 1917.

The twin theoretical pitfalls Adorno navigates that are expressive of his cul-de-sac are that of, on the one hand, a melancholic decaathesis (found, for instance, in an escapist retreat into the disinterested strongholds of theory and critique); and on the other hand, a manic hypercathesis finding expression in an epistemological authoritarianism that results from hijacking the ‘messages in a bottle’ (seen, for instance, in a praxis that subordinates theory to itself). Neither of these poles, of course, are completely avoidable, an acknowledgement that is expressed in Adorno’s antinomic thought-figure, “[t]he dialectical critic of culture must both participate in culture and not participate. Only then does he do justice to his object and to himself.”⁷² Adorno’s cathesis of natural-historical decline by way of self-comprehending and -memorializing criticism (what Pensky calls Adorno’s practice of “critical memory”) occasions the question of the relaxing of such cathesis, more precisely, of memorialization’s antithesis: forgetting, or more emphatically, active forgetting in Nietzsche’s sense.⁷³

It is this latter sense of forgetting which opens up rapt historical memorialization to its antithesis, praxis.⁷⁴ Adorno singled out such a categorical hairpin turn as Benjamin’s proper “bequest”: “to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.”⁷⁵ In “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” Nietzsche conceives of forgetting as an activity that can be in the service of life, and which can thus be supra- or post-historical insofar as historical forgetting (e.g., collective praxis) can overcome a form of remembering or cathesis of the past. To actively forget in Nietzsche’s sense

⁷² Adorno, *COL*, 161.

⁷³ Pensky, “Natural History,” 241.

⁷⁴ See Luxemburg, “On the Spartacus Programme.”

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 151–152.

holds out the possibility for not only overcoming a need to remember but also overcoming the past itself, the latter understood as a manifold of unresolved problems that weigh upon the present.

VIII. Turn to Historicism

The name of history may not be spoken since what would truly be history, the Other, has not yet begun.—Adorno⁷⁶

Indexing the retreat into critique and autonomous theory, the late-Marxian go-for-broke turn to critical historiography reaches a fever pitch in Benjamin's hermetic meditations in "On the Concept of History" (1940).⁷⁷ This turn Benjamin instigates is affirmed by Adorno's further recoiling response, "Reflections on Class Theory" (1942), as well as one of Horkheimer's more radical works, "The Authoritarian State" (1940), both written in response to Benjamin's above (and perhaps final) work and premature death.⁷⁸ To be sure, these three essays represent Critical Theory's moment of absolute recoil, the latter two of which cannot be understood exclusively on the basis of the historically proximate traumas of Benjamin's suicide and Hitler's enunciation of the final solution. Indeed, in "Reflections on Class Theory" we encounter Adorno writing in the language of a Marxism *in extremis* and under-erasure:

According to [Marxian] theory,⁷⁹ history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the emergence of the proletariat. Even when it was still revolutionary, the bourgeoisie called itself the third estate. By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory denounces not just the bourgeoisie, whose freedom, together with their possessions and education, perpetuates the tradition of the old injustice. It also turns against prehistory itself.

By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, [bourgeois]

⁷⁶ Adorno, *COL*, 224.

⁷⁷ Late-Marxism may be understood as a challenge to Foucault's polemical and ultimately dismissive characterization of Marxism after Marx in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."

⁷⁸ The latter two originally composed ca. 1940–1942 for the unpublished 1942 *Gedächtnisschrift* for Benjamin.

⁷⁹ As Rolf Tiedemann notes, "[t]hroughout this essay, Adorno uses the term 'theory' as a code word for 'Marxism' or 'dialectical materialism'" (Adorno, *COL*, 490).

political economy became the critique of history as a whole...All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory. This gives us a pointer as to how we can recognize what history is. From the most recent form of injustice, a steady light reflects back on history as a whole. Only in this way can theory enable us to use the full weight of history to gain an insight into the present without succumbing in resignation to the burden of the past.

The irreconcilable power of the negative that sets history in motion is the power of what exploiters do to the victims. As a shackle binding one generation to the next, it functions as an obstacle to both freedom and history. The systematic unity of history [found in “Marxism” “as a philosophy”], which is supposed to give meaning to individual suffering or else demote it from on high to the level of something fortuitous, is the philosophical appropriation of the labyrinth in which men have toiled to this day, the epitome of suffering.⁸⁰

In turning to historical critique, Adorno elucidates the origins and conditions of possibility for the irreversible break Marx’s work instigated. Chief among these origins were the “bourgeois upheavals” to which, however, “the bourgeois was unable to find a successor” when bourgeois society, under conditions of capitalist modernity, came into self-contradiction.⁸¹ In Marx’s hands, the proletariat was thus simultaneously a historically concrete (sociological) and speculative category. As Adorno explicates above, Marx’s breakthrough was also achieved through an immanent critique of bourgeois political economy which came into self-contradiction as well. Marx’s corpus and subsequently Marxism as a politics were predicated on the condemnation of history—including the history of capitalist society hitherto—as prehistory, insofar as it took part in the unfolding of an immanent necessity.⁸²

These three above works by Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer index their shared impulse to retreat into ‘critique’ (the exploration of conditions of im/possibility for change), and more specifically, historically-insulated critique, when robust forms of self-constituting subjectivity and collective praxis are at a standstill, or worse, regressing—on account of

⁸⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁸¹ Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State,” 106; Adorno, *COL*, 227.

⁸² See Ibid., 97, where Horkheimer echoes Adorno’s above reflections.

pernicious counter-revolutionary social forces and the psychic internalization of defeat. Indeed, as Horkheimer and then Adorno forcefully argue in these works:

Sociological and psychological concepts are too superficial to express what has happened to revolutionaries in the last few decades: their will toward freedom has been damaged, without which neither understanding nor solidarity nor a correct relation between leader and group is conceivable.⁸³

The immeasurable pressure of domination has so fragmented the masses that it has even dissipated the negative unity of being oppressed that forged them into a class in the nineteenth century. In exchange, they find they have been directly absorbed into the unity of the system that is oppressing them. Class rule is set to survive the anonymous, objective form of the class.⁸⁴

Through their synchronous turns to historical critique these thinkers reveal, however negatively, that an implicit historical self-understanding (*Selbst-Darstellung*) was the condition of possibility for emancipatory social praxis as it had come to be known historically, leading up to the aftermath of WWI and the failure of socialist world revolution issuing from the October Revolution and elsewhere. Registering the decline and eclipse of such self-presentation, these works overcompensate for this waning by enacting that which is dwindling. Horkheimer, in particular, oscillates between utter despair—“whoever cares for a human arrangement of the

⁸³ Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State,” 117.

⁸⁴ Adorno, *COL*, 97. The terse, aphoristic prose found here is encountered as early as Horkheimer’s *Dawn and Decline* (1926–31) and would later be emulated in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*. As Horkheimer writes in “The Authoritarian State,” “[t]he fact that even the enemies of the authoritarian state can no longer conceive of freedom destroys communication. A language in which one does not recognize his own desires or becomes impassioned is alien” (Ibid., 116). Such an impassioned language was found in fascism, as Benjamin argued: “Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves...The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 241). The late-Marxism of Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer would take up the task of formulating a “language in which one does not recognize his own desires”—hence the hermetic turn of late-Marxism—and would attempt to reformulate and preserve the memory Marxism and the struggle for socialism through a rethinking of the relation between, on the one hand, language and writing and, on the other hand, a Marxian critique of the history of Marxism itself (Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State,” 116). Indeed, in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin would argue that language is the precise space-time wherein dialectical images (of the past) can come to life. So-called late-Marxism thus concerns the very ‘truth content’ of Marxism itself; in short, its transmissibility in the age of its failure, decline, and resultant im/possibility. Surrounding the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer expresses his linguistic intentions to Adorno thus (via letter correspondence): “To speak to someone means basically to recognize him as a possible member of a future association of free human beings. To speak presupposes a common relation to the truth, and hence the innermost affirmation of the alien existence that is being addressed, and indeed of all existent beings according to their potential” (Horkheimer quoted in Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 268).

world can look to no court of appeal, to existing or future power”—and self-determined hope.⁸⁵

In the following passage he ends with what could be construed as a hopeless plea:

The revolution that ends domination is as far-reaching as the will of the liberated. Any resignation is already a regression into prehistory...The theoretical conception which, following its first trailblazers, will show the new society its way—the system of worker’s councils—grows out of praxis. The roots of the council system go back to 1871, 1905, and other events. *Revolutionary transformation has a tradition that must continue.*⁸⁶

What was implicitly operative in praxis has to be recovered immanently, and nonsynchronistically, by way of a dialectic of retrieval whereby the critique of contemporary forms of antinomic appearance are animated by the presentation of their historical sedimentation. In light of such natural-historical decay that can be registered on levels both sociological and psychological, it would appear that the memory of both Marxism and the struggle for socialism can only be accessed through a critical experience of tradition—a brush with history that both theory and art are capable of offering. As Horkheimer puts the matter to Adorno in their 1956 dialogue, “we cannot rely on the assumption that people will still have any memories of socialism.”⁸⁷ Adorno’s work, in particular, stands as a cipher for understanding what it might mean to say that the struggle for socialism has been relinquished. Such an understanding is made possible through his general thesis of the regression of consciousness, which explicates how consciousness can adapt, conform and even fall beneath a regressive social totality.⁸⁸ Engaged retrospectively from the present, Adorno’s corpus compels us to retrace these faltering steps of regression.

What we are calling late-Marxism is a decathected Marxism and hence no longer an emphatic Marxism operating on the levels of theory and praxis (as is found in Lenin and

⁸⁵ Horkheimer, “Authoritarian State,” 104.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Adorno & Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?” 43.

⁸⁸ See Adorno, *CM*, 292.

Luxemburg); instead, late-Marxism constitutes a dialectical image of what Marxism was. (This, however, is not to say Adorno was not a Marxist in a strong sense.) The above retreat into critique effectuates the becoming-writing and -aesthetic of late-Marxism: on the level of the text itself, and in its turn to problems surrounding aesthetics, more precisely, the relation between politics and aesthetics.⁸⁹ The two-fold becoming-aesthetic of late-Marxism thus indexes, more generally, the retreat of world-shaping praxis (prefigured in Lenin and Luxemburg's final reflections that similarly turn away from concrete politics and toward a politics of experience); and more distantly, the pernicious counter-revolutions whose preponderance led to the internalization of defeat (seen most conspicuously in the pervasive introjection of Stalinism), the latter a problematic dialectically registered in Wilhelm Reich's discourse on "the fear of freedom," and echoed in Frantz Fanon's discourse on the "pathology of freedom."⁹⁰

For late-Marxism these historico-political crises occasion enduring historico-philosophical problematics that serve to hold open the wounds of their imminent enclosures; for instance, Lukács on reification; Korsch on philosophy and Marxism; Benjamin on the philosophy of history; and Adorno on the non-identity of theory and praxis. Adorno will simultaneously address all of these concerns in a single train of thought from his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*: "The separation of theory and praxis is itself an expression of reified consciousness. And it is the task of philosophy to dismantle the rigidity, the dogmatic and irreconcilable character of this separation."⁹¹ The textual-literary effects that these problematics effectuate include most notably the becoming-sedimented and -hermetic of the text; in other words, the introduction of tarrying into late-Marxism.

⁸⁹ See fn. 84.

⁹⁰ Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 31; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 176.

⁹¹ Adorno, *LND*, 53.

IX. Conclusion

Late-Marxism's broad turn to matters of aesthetics—culminating in Adorno's asystematic critique of the history of (late-)modern art in *Aesthetic Theory*—became the necessary if conditional theatre in which to carry out the program of a politics of experience by means of mobilizing the messages in bottles that find their grounding in critical historical experience. To be sure, this is a program seeking ultimately to foster self-constituting subjects and collective self-determining praxis democratically embodying and struggling in the direction of a post-capitalist social arrangement. The politics of experience operative in the works of these figures thus stands as not only a placeholder of sorts for emancipatory politics; as pre-political, it also serves as a tendential umbilical cord to emancipatory politics, while simultaneously exposing the latter's im/possibility. Hence to speak of such a pre-politics is simply to strive to make exoteric and democratically available a critical experience of history (which we have begun to explicate) that Benjamin and Adorno collectively assumed and in some sense took for granted—an experience which is otherwise intimate and esoteric (as seen in their letter correspondence). To be sure, their shared experience of the present “traverses life with the speed of lightning,” reaching nimbly (if helplessly) back into the past to comprehend the now-time, but never out of injury for the present in its singularity and availability to spontaneity and futural plasticity.⁹² Their combined works can be read today as supercondensing the history and critical experience of capitalist modernity into a calculus of citable gestures, which intermingle in a differentiated chorus.

It is here that Susan Buck-Morss' remark—to paraphrase, that artists have more interestingly engaged Benjamin's work than philosophers and academics—becomes of crucial

⁹² Benjamin, *Reflections*, 210.

importance.⁹³ One would have to look no farther than a filmmaker such as Chris Marker or the late work of Jean-Luc Godard to corroborate Buck-Morss' judgment that, historically, artists have exhibited a more compelling disclosive capacity for a Benjaminian-Adornian politics of experience than that of 'discourse' (e.g., contemporary philosophy, theory, art criticism, etc.).⁹⁴ Immanent to the idea of such a Benjaminian-Adornian pre-politics are its concepts of form, presentation and disclosure which serve to produce in language a critical experience of history in both its freedom and (hypostatized) unfreedom. Herein lies, we should note, the proximity of Benjamin and Adorno's thought to the knowledge of (modern) literature, which is closer, we might venture, to experience than discourse and theory by way of its immanence to experience and the forms of life.

⁹³ Buck-Morss, *One Way Street*.

⁹⁴ Given Benjamin and Adorno's strong emphases on both the category of the aesthetic and the idea as constellation, we might identify a romantic moment in late-Marxism's broad preoccupation with aesthetics.

2. Reading Adorno's Interdisciplinary Dialectical Criticism

...certain illegible traces, like chalk dust on a blackboard after it has been erased, so we must learn to recognize it as the form—the only one—in which such fragments of the true learning as we are destined to receive will be vouchsafed to us, if at all.

—John Ashbery⁹⁵

I. Approaching Adorno

Receiving Adorno's messages in a bottle requires us to decahct 'what' Adorno sought to digest (history, broadly speaking) from his thought proper and ask speculatively how this process of (put crudely) digesting experience might be of pertinence given the needs of the present (as we will explore in chapter 4). In taking up Adorno's work, we find ourselves compelled to divest it of its congealed and thereby quasi-non-negotiable character which results from his dialectical dissensus vis-à-vis the object of critique, which is preponderantly historically-sedimented. The end of such decahct, the goal of relaxing Adorno's grip, will be to open up availability to what is otherwise tendentially muted when strictly approaching his criticism in its (pre)cahcted character. This overdetermined cathexis manifests itself perhaps most conspicuously in Adorno's quasi-authoritarian (if aporetic) formulations, such as "[i]t is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist"; or his controversial proscriptions concerning writing

⁹⁵ Ashbery, *Three Poems*, 79.

‘poetry’ after Auschwitz.⁹⁶ Yet Adorno often acknowledges this congealed dimension of work, such as when he remarks how “[t]he prohibitions [dictated by his philosophical criticism] are both gentle and strict.”⁹⁷ Loosening Adorno’s grip thus means engaging his work via the critical model of allegory so as to decouple historical experience and philosophical reflection.

To thematize the unpleasant—indeed perhaps for some, insufferable—tarrying operative in his work, which stems from a deeper, intransigent submission to history, is to highlight the rapt cathexis immanent to his writing that results from the work of criticism. Take, for example, the opening lines of Adorno’s 1965 radio talk “Sexual Taboos and Law Today” which are expressly indicative of the weighty character of his writing and thought:

The theorist who intervenes in practical controversies nowadays discovers on a regular basis and to his shame that whatever ideas he might contribute were expressed long ago—and usually better the first time around. This means that time-honored arguments must once again be trotted out.⁹⁸

To be sure, it would be typical and even stereotypical to read this passage as sententious and condescending,⁹⁹ when in fact it might also represent the humility (deference to past critical figures) and submissiveness (immanence to tradition and history) of Adorno’s thought. Isolating such tarrying further enables us to highlight—and thereby prevents us from fetishizing—‘what’ is being tarried-with (the historically-sedimented object, subjectively yet allegorically cathected), preventing us, moreover, from reifying the thought. To do so is to open up and return thought to the stream of becoming whence it emergences as a maelstrom (Benjamin) or whirlpool (Schelling). Yet upon decathecting Adorno’s work we find that his thought is itself already immanently allegorical (and therefore not symbolic, to invoke Benjamin’s distinction) in that it reflexively remarks upon its own historically and thus singularly determinate cathexis.

⁹⁶ Adorno, *AT*, 1; Adorno, *COL*, 162.

⁹⁷ Adorno, *AT*, 37.

⁹⁸ Adorno, *CM*, 71.

⁹⁹ What Hullot-Kenter refers to as the imputed “haughty Alexandrian formality of [Adorno’s] writing” (Hullot-Kenter, “What Barbarism Is”).

As Shierry Weber Nicholzen has pointed out,¹⁰⁰ the desire to simply ‘better understand’ Adorno tends to only mean over-academicizing his work (i.e., making the task of inheriting his corpus a matter of strict hermeneutics) and thereby prevents us from critically reckoning with what is at stake *in* his corpus. Guarding against the pitfalls of the entrenched academic practices surrounding Adorno (which reduce his work, for instance, to simply a critique of late-capitalist society, instrumental rationality, etc.), immanently approaching his work by posing *Adorno’s* question of messages in a bottle—and not having a preordained regulative hermeneutics ready-at-hand (e.g., Marxism)—forces us to imaginatively and speculatively engage his work. (With regard to these former academic practices, it should be noted that a strictly scholarly or text-based study of, say, the origins of negative dialectics might operate entirely immanently, that is, strictly on the level of discursivity—and thereby miss the extra-textual and -discursive messages in a bottle. To be sure, it is a danger inherent to archaeologically-driven work that what is extra-discursive might be repressed and hence not be adequately acknowledged as intimately constitutive of discourse proper.) However, when engaging Adorno’s work speculatively, we quickly encounter that his work is itself already speculative and thereby extra-empirical—yet only by way of immanent dialectical critique. To glimpse the speculative-spiritual moment of Adorno’s thinking, which is grounded in the empirical-experiential, we need only recall the opening lines of his important work of pedagogy, “Education after Auschwitz.”

Adorno begins this essay with the assertion that “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again,” a plea for which he does not believe he needs to adduce supporting evidence, as scientific discourse might put it.¹⁰¹ He writes: “Its priority before any other requirement is such that I believe I need not and should not justify it. To justify it would be

¹⁰⁰ Nicholzen, *Exact Imagination*, 1–2.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *COL*, 19.

monstrous in the face of the monstrosity that took place.”¹⁰² In the spirit of Adorno, we also need to be willing to sacrifice certain scientific and discursive requirements in order to conduct unconditional interdisciplinary research and writing, and to make larger claims that adequately respond to the enormity of events and phenomena with which cultural criticism is tasked with reckoning—yet that all the while remain immanent to the object of critique.

To engage Adorno’s disseminated messages immanently, and so not be “above” them (as Adorno cautioned against when approaching the work of Hegel), is comparable to asking what the present is “in the face of” Adorno.¹⁰³ Indeed, anything less risks not only mistaking the re/search of origin (*Ursprung*) as an end in itself, but also failing to acknowledge the ‘new’ that is both anterior and immanent to origin, which gives rise to the impulse and consequent research of origin in the first place. To mistake origin for the goal would mean, for example, failing to grasp the political and historical emplotments within which Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* or Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* were undertaken and operate, and the past, present and futural modalities the works open out onto.

For all of Adorno’s emphasis on maintaining not only the primacy of the object but also sustaining (and so not collapsing) the contradictions that fissure the object—in short, his critical object-dependence—it is easy to forget that his criticism also sought to make itself obsolescent. Counterbalancing his natural-historical criticism, this latter intention highlights Adorno’s allegiance to a Hegelian-Marxism that strives to sublimate philosophy into a broader economy. The gesture of grasping what is unsublatable in the object and, through the work of criticism, pointing to its possible (self-)overcoming is the dialectical dimension of Adorno’s thought, and expresses in miniature the potential of philosophy to abolish itself through historical self-

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Adorno, *Hegel*, 1.

liquidation. That Adorno can still be of historical interest to us and have a certain purchase on the present indicates that his work is not yet exhausted or obsolete, and moreover, that we continue to share with him, as well as Marx, the ‘this-sidedness’ of theory, which always finds itself outstretched—yearning to find its terminus and liquidation in and through praxis. Indeed, the continued purchase of Adorno’s work may be generally understood to be a function of its immanent relation to both history and to what has transpired since Adorno’s death, i.e., his work’s unforeseeable post-history. Beyond the obvious difficulties of receiving his work in the Anglo-American context, Nicholzen has keenly given voice to a shared sense of “the presence of some fundamental problem in grasping [Adorno’s] work that we have yet to overcome.”¹⁰⁴ “One senses,” she continues, “that we have still not plumbed the real implications of the work. It is almost as though the sense of familiarity masks an inaccessible core of the work that has so far proved impervious to appropriation.”¹⁰⁵ Following Nicholzen, this hermeneutical problem can be overcome, she argues, by “imaginatively appropriating his work.”¹⁰⁶ For our purposes here, this means approaching Adorno’s work compositionally, which will be achieved by creating “a mosaic,” as Nicholzen writes, “in which diverse elements from his life and work are juxtaposed.”¹⁰⁷

II. Interlude: Theory & Praxis, An Origin Story

In the interest of further exploring the dissensual relation between theory and praxis that obtains in Adorno’s corpus, it will be productive to broach his early formative relation to the

¹⁰⁴ Nicholzen, *Exact Imagination*, 1–2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Missac, *Walter Benjamin’s Passages*, x.

eminent Viennese composer Alban Berg (1885–1935) of the Second Viennese School. As evidenced by his various biographies, Adorno’s tutelage under Berg constitutes one of the many primal scenes of his oeuvre.¹⁰⁸ Adorno first met Berg when the latter came to Frankfurt in the spring of 1924 “for a premiere performance of fragments from his opera *Wozzeck*, conducted by Hermann Scherchen.”¹⁰⁹ Adorno was in the audience, and “[o]vercome by the music,” he recounts that he “begged Scherchen, with whom I had contact, to introduce me to Berg. In a few minutes it was agreed that I should come to Vienna as his student.”¹¹⁰

In terms of Adorno’s own overarching aesthetic theory, which draws heavily from the various disciplines of psychology and psychoanalysis, it goes without saying that in order for there to be robust artistic production, creativity and praxis, there must also be certain auspicious psychic and social conditions in place. Faced with the decision of whether to pursue the career of a composer during his time with Berg, Adorno’s forsaking of this path entailed his own personal-occupational displacement from praxis, a self-distancing that constitutes an internal tension in his own work and which only complicates his inheritance of the fraught Marxian relation between theory and praxis. Adorno’s early relation to Berg consequently sets the tone for his ensuing corpus not as simply a biographical, Kierkegaardian either/or (composer/scholar) but more crucially, as a problematic immanent to his thought and the peculiar physiognomy of his work.

Adorno’s drive to conceptualize and comprehend, which he harnessed through the medium of writing in his emphatically modernist, self-revolutionizing life-work, posed serious problems for his ability to commit wholly to artistic praxis, that is, to become a composer. The following humorous anecdote offered by Susan Buck-Morss (who has gone perhaps farthest in apprehending Adorno’s work compositionally) evidences this near neurotic drive of Adorno’s:

¹⁰⁸ See also his personal encounters with Lúkacs and Korsch in Adorno’s biographies.

¹⁰⁹ Adorno quoted in Buck-Morss, *OND*, 11.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Whenever there was an opportunity, Adorno accompanied Berg and his wife to concerts and, of course, to the opera. On one occasion, they heard Mahler's *Eighth Symphony* conducted by Anton von Webern. They became so excited about the music that they talked too loudly and 'were almost thrown out for rowdiness.'¹¹¹

Adorno's compulsive drive to conceptualize—here, the impulse to discuss and comprehend musical praxis—was only later met with enthusiasm by Berg whereas with Schoenberg, infamously, it never made sense. At first, as Buck-Morss explains, "Berg did not much appreciate Adorno's 'philosophical ballast,' which he referred to as 'fad.'"¹¹²

Having "serious aspirations to become a composer," Buck-Morss so writes of Adorno, we can imagine he could indeed have become a professional composer and/or musician.¹¹³ Yet Buck-Morss notes how he "was not [musically] prolific" and "had little success in getting his music performed"; and as Stefan Müller-Doohm has detailed, this was largely due to the immense amount of time he devoted to writing music criticism and philosophy.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, Buck-Morss explains, Adorno "returned to Frankfurt after little more than a year [of studying under Berg] in order to resume his study of philosophy with the hope of obtaining a university teaching position. The reasons for his leaving Vienna are unclear."¹¹⁵ But as Buck-Morss reliably speculates, "Adorno was perhaps too reflective, too self-conscious, and lacked the spontaneity necessary for uninhibited composing. He may have realized that, given his penchant for philosophy, he was better suited to musical criticism than composition."¹¹⁶ Adorno's concern with composition, however, would nevertheless persist and survive in the critical work he produced throughout his life—his writings relating to history allegorically in a manner comparable to that of music. As such, we are compelled to engage Adorno not simply in terms of

¹¹¹ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 91.

¹¹² Buck-Morss, *OND*, 16.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*; see Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 161.

¹¹⁵ Buck-Morss, *OND*, 16.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

strict argument, but we must also attempt to play his ideas and thought—as Adorno wrote apropos Hegel—“with the speculative ear as though they were musical notes.”¹¹⁷

III. Experience and Criticism

The enduring purchase of Adorno’s work lies in his straightforward project of philosophically digesting critical experience, by means of which experience and philosophical reflection are nevertheless maintained as non-identical.¹¹⁸ In his “Dialectical Epilegomena” to *Negative Dialectics*, comprising his late works “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” and “On Subject and Object,” Adorno would remark that these essays brought “together, intentionally, philosophical speculation and drastic experience.”¹¹⁹ Such a constitutive non-identity of philosophical criticism and aesthetic experience became a necessity in modernity, a need Hegel classically addressed in his *Aesthetics*.¹²⁰ In his early essay “The Social Situation of Music” (1932), Adorno assumed this post-Hegelian problematic in analogizing the task of “present-day music” (and modern art, more broadly) to that of critical “social theory,” arguing that they share the same “aporias” and, moreover, are both “under the same obligation” to fulfill their respective “dialectical cognitive function[s],” that is, to occasion critical acknowledgement.¹²¹ Buck-Morss lends clarity to the post-Hegelian problematic that Adorno inherits when she succinctly defines the interlinking tasks of modern art and criticism: “[Artists’] work is to sustain the critical

¹¹⁷ Adorno, *Hegel*, 123.

¹¹⁸ The genesis and movement from experience to critique is carefully traced and explicated, from the level of everyday experience to critical-speculative reflective judgment, in John Dewey’s *Art As Experience*, thereby offering a complement to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*.

¹¹⁹ Adorno, *CM*, 126.

¹²⁰ See Benjamin, “Theory of Criticism” (1920) on this constitutive non-identity.

¹²¹ Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 393–4.

moment of aesthetic experience; our job as critics is to recognize this.”¹²² The circuit Adorno thus establishes between art and critique, between experience and philosophical reflection, often leads him—as he was fond of doing, for instance, apropos a Brecht or a Beckett—to place an artist’s own self-understanding (of their art) against their art as such. As Lydia Goehr will put this matter in the context of the philosophy of music, “it is not uncommon to hear a tension existing between what musicians claim they want to do with music and what they actually do.”¹²³ Accordingly, this parallax serves to inform and guide our own reading of Adorno.

Perhaps one cannot fully grasp the stakes of philosophical reflection and criticism unless one has explored the rich context—in short, experience—whence a form of thought has emerged. Such conditioning biographical and historical factors, which call to be held in constellation with the substantive content of philosophical activity, negatively delineate, for our purposes here, the equiprimordial-constitutive blindnesses and insights of Adorno himself as well as his work and corpus proper. Consequently, an account of the origins of negative dialectics must look equally to exogenous historical experience as well as the immanent stream of discursivity and tradition.

For W.E.B. Du Bois¹²⁴ as for Adorno, the origins of a negative dialectics, that is, a Hegelian dialectics *sans* reconciliation, arise from the distinctly modern experience of unfreedom in the failed attempt of struggling to overcome one’s own individual, collective and world-historical entanglement under conditions of global capitalism. In Adorno’s case, as well as Du Bois’, such a transmutation of dialectics is born of both an immanent critique of Hegel as well

¹²² Buck-Morss, “Response to Visual Culture Questionnaire,” 29.

¹²³ Goehr, *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, 261.

¹²⁴ In addition to standing as a historical document of the struggle of African-Americans for social emancipation and redemption, Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) also represents an immanent critique of Hegelian dialectics. “Double consciousness”—Du Bois’ term that indexes the awareness of African-Americans of being simultaneously Americans and not Americans—became a fundamental idea of African-American literature and criticism, as seen in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground”—two classic works by black Americans that explore Du Bois’ theme through writing social invisibility and the struggle for self-constituting identity. The idea would also be taken up in post-colonial thought, as seen in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*.

one's own proper historical experience. As Adorno would explicate in "Reflections on Class Theory,"

Dynamism is merely one side of dialectic: it is the side preferred by the belief in practicality, masterful action, the indefatigable 'can-do' attitude, because constant change is the best way to conceal the old untruth. The other, less popular aspect of dialectic is its static side. The self-movement of the concept, the conception of history as a syllogism, as it is to be found in Hegel's philosophy, is no developmental doctrine. It was only turned into one by the collusive misunderstanding of the humanities. The law that, according to the Hegelian dialectic, governs the restlessly destructive unfolding of the ever-new is also the old lying close at hand. The new does not add itself to the old but remains the old in distress, in its hours of need, as it becomes topical as an immanent contradiction through its act of reflection, its indispensable confrontation with the universal in the old. Thus throughout all its antithetical mediations, history remains one vast analytic proposition.¹²⁵

In Adorno's work, as exemplified in this passage, critique strives to establish a continuous circuit between the post-Kantian concepts of freedom and the concepts of nature (unfreedom), and more broadly, between discursivity and historical experience proper. Through such capacious mediation, Adorno's model of critique overcomes a central problem internal to Kant's philosophy—what Kant himself called "the great chasm"—as well as its Neo-Kantian recrudescence, the latter which followed the waning presence of Hegelian philosophy in Western Europe in the late 19th century and became "the dominant pre-World War One philosophy."¹²⁶ Adorno would follow Benjamin's early 1918 metacritique of Kant and the pervasive Neo-Kantianism of his day, where Benjamin offered one of his first articulations of the idea of a 'dialectics without synthesis' (or constellation), which sought to tenuously mediate between the post-Kantian spheres of reason (freedom) and nature/experience (unfreedom). Through such a short-circuiting of mediative integration (synthesis), Benjamin broadened the philosophical space

¹²⁵ Adorno, *COL*, 94.

¹²⁶ Kant quoted in Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant"; Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 242. The shared intellectual and historical setting for both Benjamin and Adorno's thought, as well as that of the Second International (1889–1914), was the recrudescence of Kantian philosophy in the form of Neo-Kantianism, whose emergence can be dated back to the 1860s. Neo-Kantianism was used to revise the philosophical foundations of Marxism and "nearly became an official dogma for many ideologists of the Second International" (*The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, "neo-Kantianism"). See Michael Wayne's *Red Kant*, on the relation between neo-Kantianism and Marxism/The Second International.

(traditionally conceived as the aesthetic—from Kant on) between these two traditionally distinct and antithetical spheres—a philosophical gesture Adorno would embrace and further develop. For Benjamin, and Adorno following him, the aesthetic sphere may be thought of as a mosaic or chorus of ideas.

The contemporary appropriation of Adorno by Jacques Rancière has done much to turn attention away from, or at least color our perception of, Adorno on the basis of Rancière’s argument that Adorno’s work—specifically his aesthetics—is detached and aloof from experience. In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2009), Rancière characterizes Adorno’s aesthetics as “maintaining the gap between the dissensual form of the work [of art] and the forms of ordinary experience.”¹²⁷ In short, Adorno’s aesthetics are here perceived as being predicated on a “refusal” of the “mundane world” through his critical affirmation of the non-identical dimension of modern art.¹²⁸ Rancière will use the following line of Adorno’s to sum up his aesthetics: “The social function of Art...is to not have one.”¹²⁹ While Rancière here captures a fundamental dimension of Adorno’s aesthetics, his engagement with Adorno nevertheless reduces his work to a monolithic aesthetic theory, and thereby abstracts his thought from the historical experience whence it was formed and gains intelligibility.

To broadly argue that Adorno’s work stands above or against ordinary experience risks neglecting the central role the concept of experience plays in Adorno’s overall living-thought. As we have studied, Adorno maintained experience to be both non-identical to philosophical criticism but also intimately constitutive of the latter. Moreover, Adorno’s broad and sustained turn to aesthetics and the criticism of modern art was itself undertaken in response to more general-historical circumstances which presented themselves to Adorno’s own proper

¹²⁷ Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 41.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

experience—an experience we have sought to capture hitherto. Rancière further writes that for Adorno, “[t]he promise [of a reconciled society] is negatively preserved [in the work of art], not only through the separation between artistic form and other forms of life, but also through the inner contradiction of this form itself.”¹³⁰ Thus Rancière concludes that for Adorno, “aesthetic difference,” i.e., autonomous art’s non-identity to social reality, becomes the “guardian of the promise.”¹³¹ While Adorno doubtless prizes autonomous artworks that are non-identical to social reality whence semblances of hope flash up like “fireworks,” he did not require the artwork, or art more generally, to singlehandedly or didactically pave the way for social redemption, as Rancière intimates here.¹³² Rather, Adorno understood the task of bringing about a reconciled society as proper to collective praxis as informed by critical social theory, and vice versa; modern art—the plenipotentiary of a freedom yet realized—cannot bring about thoroughgoing social freedom alone.

IV. Reading Adorno (with Benjamin)

Adorno comes to us as not only predigested in his being remote, that is, irrelevant, to our contemporary moment (such a lack of presence is detectable in his form of writing, specifically in his mode of address); but we also receive him as brought to a finish, as it were: as myth has it, the German New Left and their “flower power” quite literally killed him.¹³³ The predigested and predetermined character of our reception of Adorno thus compels us—as we have undertaken heretofore—to work our way back into his thought by engaging it immanently. Adorno’s final works—in particular, his criticisms of the German New Left (the SDS, Marcuse, etc.) and his

¹³⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹³¹ Ibid., 41.

¹³² Adorno, *AT*, 81.

¹³³ Adorno quoted in Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 24.

unfinished monograph *Aesthetic Theory*—represent further retreats into both the strongholds of theory (in the face of false/bad praxis) and the history of art, respectively. Such retreats bring about a sense of closure for Adorno (and for first generation Critical Theory more broadly), but not resignation, as he would stress in his final published essay “Resignation.” Indeed, Adorno’s avowed identification with theory was hedged and strategic: “The desperate state of affairs, that the praxis on which everything depends is thwarted,” he argues, “paradoxically affords thinking the breathing-space which it would practically be criminal not to use.”¹³⁴ Such an identification with theory (over and against praxis), which subtends the entirety of Adorno’s corpus—despite the fact that much of his work thematizes artistic praxis—is not comparable, again, to the Heideggerian or post-Heideggerian turns to thinking, which were undertaken for different motives that we do not have space to explore here.

From his early work to his late work, Adorno will often remark upon the this-sidedness and insufficiency of criticism and theory:

[...] criticism cannot take comfort in its own idea.

Dialectic reaches the insight that the closed process also includes the non-included. It thus reaches a boundary to knowledge itself. Dialectical theory itself would only be surpassed by transforming praxis.

The interpretation of given reality and its abolition are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for [reality’s] real change always follows promptly. The change-causing gesture of the riddle process—not its mere resolution as such—provides the image of resolutions to which materialist praxis alone has access... mere thought by itself cannot accomplish this: therefore the annihilation of the question compels praxis.¹³⁵

As these passages evidence, the avowed this-sidedness of theory becomes the pivot from which Adorno’s work opens onto that which exceeds it. The twin status of ‘theory’ as a

¹³⁴ Adorno, *ND*, 245.

¹³⁵ Adorno, “Actuality of Philosophy,” 129; Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 39; amended trans.; Adorno, *COL*, 160.

delimited field and ‘praxis’ as a limit-concept of alterity in Adorno’s corpus comes into high relief in his late work (e.g., “Resignation,” “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” etc. (1969)), much of which was informed by his complex critical engagement with the German New Left. Even though the German New Left later dismissed him, Adorno’s works and pedagogy upon his return to post-WWII West Germany were both profoundly instrumental in bringing the former to the world-historical stage. Thus while business-as-usual for Adorno is immanent dialectical criticism, in the moments where his work remarks upon itself (as theory or criticism, for instance), his corpus opens onto more general-historical trajectories that transpire behind the back of the manifest content of his writings: for our interests here, the trajectory he terms “historical praxis.”¹³⁶ In light of this dual nature of Adorno’s writing (latent/manifest), it seems vital to attempt to further unravel and explore his ambivalences, in other words, to continue mining the enigmatic and cryptic character of both Adorno as a figure and his difficult corpus.

Recent research that has brought the works of Benjamin and Adorno together has revealed the double enunciation (or what Jean-Luc Nancy would call “compearance”) of Benjamin with(in) Adorno.¹³⁷ Indeed more broadly, engaging both thinkers simultaneously can serve as a gateway to clarifying the proper contents and physiognomies of each of their challenging life-works. Adorno, for one, anticipated how his work was and could increasingly become potentially obscure and esoteric, and so strove to counteract this tendency. While Benjamin’s corpus is arguably more gnomic and rarified than the former’s (and thus more apt to be freely interpreted and abused), Adorno’s work—while also cryptic in its own right—is able nevertheless to remark more explicitly upon its own potential obscurity and difficulty on account of a palpable presence of Adorno *as* critic and Adorno *as* author in much of his work.

¹³⁶ Adorno, *ND*, 144.

¹³⁷ Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 29. See Arnott, *Correspondence(s) of Benjamin and Adorno*.

The difference in authorial presence between the two writers is not coincidental but points to the discorrespondence of their methods, their respective historical experiences and their differing understandings of critique. With regard to the last, Benjamin is primarily interested in immanent critique whereas Adorno tends to engage simultaneously in both transcendent critique (“aims at totality”/“call[s] culture as a whole into question from outside”) and immanent critique (“presupposes the questionable whole” and “confront[s] [culture] with the norms it itself has crystallized”).¹³⁸

Seldom in Benjamin’s work—his letter correspondences aside—does he openly or confessionally “put his cards on the table” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*), that is, to explicitly unfold his philosophical methodology, or unequivocally claim, for instance, to “submit himself...to the authority of the materialist dialectic” (Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History”).¹³⁹ Benjamin *as* author tends to be phenomenologically hidden from his corpus; and this, we can glean, was of methodological interest to Benjamin, whose styles of citation, montage and presentation seek to give birth to the critical reader. In his eulogistic “Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” Adorno spoke to the general opacity and invisibility of Benjamin, in terms of both his personal character and temperament and also in terms of his status as ‘author’ of the work and research he produced during his life. This is not the least reason why the vast letter correspondence between Benjamin and his various interlocutors seems essential when not only looking for the author ‘behind’ the mercurial and fragmentary corpus Benjamin bequeathed but also when attempting to achieve an exhaustive and unconditional reading of Benjamin that tends toward systematic comprehension.¹⁴⁰ It is in light of these hermeneutical difficulties that both the practice and study of letter writing becomes, as Stefan Müller-Doohm puts it, “an aid to

¹³⁸ Adorno, *COL*, 158.

¹³⁹ Adorno, *ND*, xix; Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 169.

¹⁴⁰ See Arnott, *Correspondence(s) of Benjamin and Adorno*.

philosophical self-clarification”—for both ourselves and the writers we are striving to understand.¹⁴¹

The difference in vocal presence of both thinkers does not betray the above textual typologies. For instance, Benjamin’s radio talks present yet another ‘new’ Benjamin no one has heard before, whereas the transcripts of Adorno’s radio talks—as well as his recorded discussions with Horkheimer (which Gretel Adorno painstakingly transcribed along with many other Adorno-dictated manuscripts, as the men carried on as usual¹⁴²)—only make what is unsaid and latent in Adorno’s texts become more legible. In speech, Adorno is more forthright and less authorially evasive: “We have to express ourselves in such a way that our readers can see quite clearly how things have to be changed, but one must allow the reader to see enough to enable him to glimpse the idea that change is possible.”¹⁴³ Upon the publication of the English translation of Adorno’s *Critical Models*, containing many of his radio talks, the book was praised as “a more accessible Adorno to the public.”¹⁴⁴ By contrast, *speaking Benjamin* in the recently published *Radio Benjamin* (2014) is still mercurial as ever.

Adorno is forced to shore up the protean character of Benjamin’s thinking in order to—however ambivalently—preserve him and integrate his work into his own comparatively more programmatic thinking. While Adorno’s appropriation and reconfiguration of Benjamin’s method of immanent criticism (developed in the latter’s 1924 study of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* and the *Trauerspiel*) is an act of self-comprehension apropos Benjamin, this endeavor doubtless sacrifices the unboundedness of Benjamin’s thought. (This is revealed, for instance, in the way in which praxis-bound anarchist thought is less amenable to Adorno’s avowedly Marxist

¹⁴¹ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 214.

¹⁴² See Staci Lynn Von Boeckmann, *The Life and Work of Gretel Karplus/Adorno* (2004).

¹⁴³ Adorno & Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?”, 60.

¹⁴⁴ Adorno, *CM*, [back-cover].

thinking than it is to Benjamin's thought, the latter who never firmly settled on any hermeneutic keys.) Indeed, by extracting a method out of his thought, Adorno's transmutation of Benjamin may be lamented as an ossifying of Benjamin's protean thought into the comparatively more systematic thrust of Critical Theory.¹⁴⁵ Yet on the other hand, Benjamin's thought may be seen as only becoming strategic when framed by Adorno's transcendental elevation of the former's practice into a method. Nevertheless, it is only by finding Benjamin in Adorno that the latter can be read immanently, as we are attempting here. Thus we may see Adorno's shoring up of Benjamin's experimental, shape-shifting and unconditional thinking as the repressed condition of possibility for the explicit and implicit programs of Critical Theory and negative dialectics (to leave aside other originary figures such as Simmel, Kracauer, Bloch, et al., who are deemed by Adorno as insufficiently dialectical).

And yet Adorno's oeuvre, in its own right, is as equally unconditional and audacious as Benjamin's and, further, resonates more with the contemporary social situation of academia. Benjamin has been dubbed the last European man of letters, although he never held an academic post; Adorno, on the other hand, was more thoroughly entrenched within academia. Benjamin lived nomadically and never had the institutional, much less financial, security afforded to Adorno, although the latter's life was of course not without precarity.¹⁴⁶ While Adorno's corpus therefore needs to be assessed as being colored by its institutionality (literally, The Institute for Social Research) it must also be approached with an eye to its undeniable claims to extra-institutionality. Indeed, Adorno is able to transcend his putatively 'academic' status and emplotment by means of a form of interdisciplinary research and writing that gestically engages

¹⁴⁵ As Adorno explicates in *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, "it is my belief that an a-systematic or anti-systematic form of thought can compete with the system nowadays only if it feels this need itself and...if it is also capable of absorbing into itself something of the energy that was formerly stored up in the great philosophical systems" (Adorno, *LND*, 36). In its Preface, Adorno calls *Negative Dialectics* an "anti-system" (Adorno, *ND*, xx).

¹⁴⁶ See Esther Leslie, "Walter Benjamin: The Refugee and Migrant"; Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*; and Jenemann, *Adorno in America*.

a mosaic of empirical-scientific and critical-speculative discourses and forms of criticism, which combine to make up a veritable prism.

V. Dialectic of Retrieval

One reason why we are drawn to Adorno's thought is due to its unconditional interdisciplinarity whose critical power entices us to take it up for the critique of contemporary social phenomena.¹⁴⁷ In taking up his work, we find ourselves standing amidst a stream of discontinuous traditions, narratives and critical models, all of whose afterlives, as a function of historical change, compel us to receive them critically and reconfigure them immanently via historical metacritique. In brief, Adorno's work is compelling because it makes possible the cohabitation of a manifold of critical models whose nexus one *a priori* inhabits when engaging his thought.¹⁴⁸ What is at stake in receiving Adorno's work is thus not only the digestion of historical experience as such but also the transmissibility and interpenetration of modes of critique for this very activity of digestion.

The interdisciplinarity of Adorno's thought does not result in or stem from a colonizing gesture. Rather, each lens of Adorno's prism gains potential authority—its plausibility for being meaningful and potentially 'true'—by means of an eloquence that is born of its own self-reflexivity and submission (i.e., object-dependence) to 'history,' the latter grasped as both the

¹⁴⁷ Extrapolating on Adorno's work, J.M. Bernstein argues that "the same forces of fragmentation and reification which have produced the great divide between high art and the culture industry produced the division of labor among the various disciplines": "[t]he division of labor between disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, history and psychology is not contained in or dictated by their material, but has been forced on them from the outside" (Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 2–3). Adorno's work represents a life-long struggle to reveal the fragmentation of the various academic disciplines which have fallen into distinct, non-communicating realms; as Horkheimer reminds us, "the life of society is the result of all the work done in the various sectors of production" (Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," 197). If these academic disciplines do not communicate, their disjointedness expresses an objective disunity of society, one that needs to be overcome not only in thought.

¹⁴⁸ "The perpetual entry in *medias res*" one experiences when engaging with Adorno's work, Hullot-Kentor argues, "is not epical but philosophical: it is the thinking feel of being in the midst of the object, sometimes at the height of its antagonistic conflicts" (Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 15). In this sense, there is no proper *arche* of Adorno's thought.

transmission of emphatic and critical experiences (in the service of self-determining social freedom), and ‘history’ also as the unfolding of a historically determinate but alien immanent necessity: collective unfreedom under capitalist modernity. It is in this sense that Adorno’s concept of immanent dialectical criticism is modeled on Marx’s dialectical critique of ‘capital,’ which Marx discerned as simultaneously opening up and closing off possibilities: post-capitalist society and social regression, respectively. It should be appropriately stressed that Marx’s interests were not anti-capitalist per se. Rather Marx sought to transcend capitalism, as Lenin put it, on its own basis, from within—to “build socialism,” Lenin writes, “not with abstract human material, or with human material specially prepared by us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism.”¹⁴⁹

Adorno’s prismatic and metacritical engagement with a manifold of discursive traditions and models of critique explores the conditions of im/possibility for the discontinuous *continuity* of the various modern discursive traditions he inherits, as well as their speculative intermingling into a differentiated chorus. The underlying gesture/thought-figure common to the various conditions of im/possibility explored by Adorno—for instance, the im/possibility of emphatic artistic praxis and aesthetic experience (*Aesthetic Theory*), or the im/possibility of philosophy and metaphysical (nonsensuous) experience (*Negative Dialectics*)—is that of self-comprehension, which almost always means for Adorno, historical or sedimentary self-comprehension. Yet if this gesture seeks to engage and sustain, there is also a temporal spacing or distancing immanent to this thought-figure whose guiding impulse is that of recovery and retrieval. (Note should be made here of the family resemblance between Adorno’s thought and Freudian psychoanalysis, which can be broadly understood as a form of psycho-linguistic self-

¹⁴⁹ Lenin, *LWC*, 34.

comprehension.¹⁵⁰) Self-comprehension—or what we might variously term a certain dialectic of retrieval—entails the recovery of the origin of a critical experience and the uncovering of how this origin persists, insofar as its immanent truth content is not only pertinent and eloquent but also has a claim on the present that demands its liquidation through belated fulfillment, in other words, its redemption.

By invoking the origin of the critical experience from which a critical model issues, Adorno is able to free a critical model and its concepts from their binding force of cathexis-compulsion and self-preservation; the subsequent employment of de-cathected/-reified critical models and their concepts will have direct consequences for questions concerning the presentation (*Darstellung*) and arrangement of interdisciplinary criticism. Insofar as “concepts become available for an association as they are associated in the object itself,” constellation—instead of linear reasoning—becomes an alternative form of critical presentation and writing by means of which ideas, concepts and phenomena can be associated on the basis of affinity,¹⁵¹ as Benjamin would first emphatically explore in the *Trauerspiel*.¹⁵² In a letter from 1941, Adorno would express to Horkheimer how their shared philosophical reflections were “gestures taken from concepts,” but for which “the whole labour of conceptualization” was nevertheless demanded.¹⁵³

The gestic and citational character of what we are calling the politics of experience operative in the works of Benjamin and Adorno—within which historical experience is sedimented—rests upon an unrestricted practice of collecting critical experiences, which the construction of constellations then goes beyond by means of an allegorical apprehension of these

¹⁵⁰ See Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968).

¹⁵¹ See Adorno, *Hegel*, 41.

¹⁵² Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 35. “Note should be made of the psychoanalytic source of this idea of an association that, freed from its defensive purpose, allows ideas to come into a potentially liberating order” (Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 14).

¹⁵³ Müller-Dooh, *Adorno*, 278.

experiences.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, collecting operates by means of a freedom to choose that falls outside the perennial, historically determinate ebb and flow of the circulation of commodities and their attendant subjective consumption. The *active* collecting of critical experiences, thereby implying their self-comprehension, in turn makes possible the digestion and transmissibility of such experiences elsewhere. Occasioned here is thus the question of how history—taken as a mosaic of ‘past’ experiences—is transmissible in and through language and writing: the proper space-times where, following Benjamin, dialectical images can be conjured and where questions of presentation, form and method obtain.

What we might call Adorno’s modernism, which is integral to his pre-politics, operates on a certain critical experience of history that is registered immanently through the various histories of modern literature, art, politics, philosophy, psychology, etc. What is at stake in these trajectories are precedents for capturing specific-singular and general-recursive aesthetic and extra-aesthetic crises under capitalist modernity. To be sure, the general and perennial character of many of these crises accounts for why we encounter Adorno endlessly returning to certain texts, figures and thought-figures throughout his corpus. Robert Hullot-Kentor, for one, has rightfully queried “whether Adorno’s prismatic use of concepts successfully escaped...the sum total of its origins.”¹⁵⁵

In the emergent history of modernist literature, for instance, the works of Baudelaire, Flaubert and Rimbaud become nexes of singular and protracted social-political crises and the corresponding subjective forms that register and express these crises on the level of experience; more precisely, on the level of aesthetic-literary praxis.¹⁵⁶ The Hegelian program for modern

¹⁵⁴ Hullot-Kentor describes Adorno’s writing as “paratactical”: “Adorno uses the most condensed gestures to invoke rather than propound relevant philosophical arguments” (Adorno, *AT*, xvi).

¹⁵⁵ Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 15.

¹⁵⁶ Here we should recall Foucault’s identification of modern literature, in contradistinction to aesthetics, as a

literature Lukács would advance in *Theory of the Novel* (1915) is echoed by Benjamin in the opening to his essay “The Image of Proust” and would fittingly serve as a maxim for Adorno’s own modernism: “It has rightly been said that all great works of literature establish a genre or dissolve one—that they are, in other words, special cases.”¹⁵⁷ Riven with rupture, the history of modernism thus becomes an unavowable tradition that can nevertheless be read as a continuous “history of determinate negations.”¹⁵⁸ Extrapolating on the critical work of Pierre Jean Jouve, Adorno would trace in “Valéry’s Deviations” how the literary works of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry, Surrealism, Proust, et al., all emerged—to varying degrees—out of the left-wing and right-wing aesthetic and political tendencies latent in Baudelaire, to whom they would stand as immanent reconfigurations.¹⁵⁹

Reencountering Adorno’s modernism *in extremis*, which developed within the period Hobsbawm terms “the short twentieth century” (1914–1991) but which crests before the paradigms of post-modernism and -structuralism and the global transformations of neoliberalism took hold (being cut short by Adorno’s death in 1969), offers us the occasion to revisit the question and problem of critique and explore its conditions of im/possibility, given what we may now identify as a certain “stagnation” or exhaustion of Critical Theory that Habermas and Sloterdijk were among the first to register.¹⁶⁰ This exhaustion has now, in the 21st century, been codified by contemporary thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, who has done much to challenge and think through Adorno’s cul-de-sac. Following Sloterdijk, it would seem that the Adornian project of Critical Theory—which for our purposes here can be broadly defined as the expression

counter-science constituting “a perpetual principle of dissatisfaction” against the human sciences (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 373).

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 1927–1930*, 237.

¹⁵⁸ Adorno, *AT*, 48.

¹⁵⁹ Adorno, *Notes to Literature I*, 137–174.

¹⁶⁰ Sloterdijk, *CCR*, xxxv. See Habermas, “Modernity: An Incomplete Project” and Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*.

of contemporary antinomies and the “becom[ing-] conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them”—has all but run out of steam.¹⁶¹ And yet Critical Theory has not liquidated itself; for to do so would mean making-obsolescent the ‘past’ need that gave rise to the emergence and apparent necessity of Critical Theory, which was none other than the failed and since abandoned overcoming of capitalist society and the struggle for what Marx called proletarian socialism, an overcoming—the possibility of a post-capitalist, emancipated form of social life—which the historically specific, dialectical dynamic of capital simultaneously engenders and constrains. To be sure, now well into the 21st century, it is self-evident that nothing about critique—to invoke the Adornian refrain—can be taken for granted as self-evident. Engaging Adorno, whose corpus conveniently marks off a historical epoch, makes possible a certain disattachment from many of the post-‘60s/New Left discontents and concerns that now preoccupy contemporary 21st century discourses and practices. For this reason, however, such a disattachment could be perceived as untimely or worse, irresponsible; as an unnecessary engagement with a ‘bygone’ figure. Yet insofar as the Left appears persistently plagued by its own disseminated problematics, returning to Adorno proves to be a timely endeavor.

VI. “Nothing New Under The Sun”

What remained theoretically inadequate in Hegel and Marx became part of historical praxis; that is why it is to be theoretically reflected upon anew, instead of thought bowing irrationally to the primacy of praxis; this was itself an eminently theoretical concept.
—Adorno¹⁶²

It goes without saying at our historical juncture that there is no self-evident line leading beyond capitalist society; nor is there, as we will explore in the fourth chapter, a clear or obvious

¹⁶¹ Adorno, *AT*, 118. What Sloterdijk identifies as an enlightened false consciousness can be seen as a new way of expressing what in Adorno figures as the regression of consciousness, i.e., consciousness’ becoming-identical to reality and consequent loss of autonomy.

¹⁶² Adorno, *ND*, 144.

remedy for anthropogenic global warming. There is, however, a road leading back into bourgeois society which makes possible an intensification of a project of freedom that has yet to be liquidated: a task registered, however variously, by radical bourgeois figures such as Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, et al. As we have noted, the capacity for and possibility of othering the world is alienated and in ruins. Hence the productivity of tracing the antinomies that emerge out of the breakdown of the emphatic, but in no way unproblematic (and hence in need of metacritical and immanent reconfiguration), task of freedom that is varyingly hallucinated in the radical bourgeois philosophy and political economy of Rousseau, Adam Smith, et al; the Enlightenment philosophy of Kant; the post-Enlightenment philosophy of Hegel; and the so-called “Second Enlightenment” of Marx and Engels—all of which find their afterlives, as Adorno argues, in “historical praxis.”¹⁶³

Adorno, “the last defender of the bourgeois tradition against the horrors of the 20th century”—and also simultaneously its premier critic and undertaker—stands as a signpost to this radical bourgeois lineage.¹⁶⁴ At the same time, his work also stands as a cipher for understanding the difficulty of receiving and making good on the tasks handed down by this tradition. Running counter to our own attempt to receive the messages Adorno bequeathed and the figures whose thought he sustains, we are confronted with the Benjaminian-Adornian discourse on the decay and resultant im/possibility of emphatic (metaphysical/nonsensuous) experience; a registered fragmentation of experience under late-capitalist modernity that may in fact prevent us from inheriting these veritable messages. In short, this is the thesis of the historical disintegration and synchronic sliding of experience, the latter finding expression in apperceptive distractedness, reified disinterestedness, etc.

¹⁶³ White, *To the Finland Station*, v; Adorno, *ND*, 144.

¹⁶⁴ Arnott, *Correspondence(s) of Benjamin and Adorno*, xxvi.

The possibility of “the new” (“the dialectically produced”), the possibility that something beyond the eternal return of the same under late-capitalist society can appear, is an indirect concern of Freudian psychoanalysis and an explicit problematic for Adornian negative dialectics, which philosophically engages and immanently reconfigures Freudian psychoanalysis under changed historical conditions.¹⁶⁵ Like psychoanalytic practice and theory, Adorno’s work also shares a “fundamental practical orientation toward freedom,” for which the new is its discursive index.¹⁶⁶ Yet while the desideratum is no doubt the new, everywhere Adorno’s texts are weighed down with the old, the ever-same and ‘nature’ in the critical Hegelian sense of the “mere reproduction of what has already been.”¹⁶⁷

The liminality of the limit-concept of “the new” in Adorno’s corpus, moreover, the fact that any and all positive images of the future and a reconciled society are tabooed except for the negative images refracted through immanent critique, reflects and is mimetic of the im/possibility of the emergence of the new.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, as we will soon explore, Adorno’s corpus may itself even be characterized as natural-historical; as submissive to history as an apparently “natural force in which one is constantly being carried along.”¹⁶⁹ In Adorno’s historical metacritiques and in his own programmatic works proper, the “weight of history” effectuates “the transmutation of metaphysics into history”: “It secularizes metaphysics,” he writes, “into the secular category pure and simple, that of decay.”¹⁷⁰ As, for instance, in his so-called metacritique of Husserl, Adorno argues that in the former’s hands, “the decaying concepts of epistemology

¹⁶⁵ Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 267. It should be noted that Adorno’s *Habilitationsschrift* was on Kant and Freud; the figure whom Adorno uses to mediate between the two is Marx. Via Marxian immanent critique, psychoanalytic concepts become subjective categories of the commodity form.

¹⁶⁶ Rosen-Carole, “The Possibility of the New,” 62. “Freud speaks of the promise of psychoanalysis to yield a ‘freer or superior view of the world’” (Ibid., 63).

¹⁶⁷ Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 253.

¹⁶⁸ See Bloch and Adorno’s transcribed discussion on utopia, “Something’s Missing” (1964).

¹⁶⁹ Arnott, *Correspondence(s) of Benjamin and Adorno*, 11–12.

¹⁷⁰ Adorno, *ND*, 360.

point beyond themselves”; such concepts are “a bit of unconscious transcription of history. For they must be helped to procure self-consciousness against that which they explicitly mean.”¹⁷¹ The imputed weighty and intransigent character of Adorno’s work may thus be seen as pointing to and rendering legible the object of dialectical critique and its sedimented history of failed self-overcomings. However, to portray Adorno’s thought as natural-historical is not to say that his thinking is devoid of plasticity or openness.

The intransigence of Adorno’s thought has rarely been seen positively or as meriting much historico-philosophical interest. Instead, it is typically lamented or even derided in favor of new models of critique that, even within the hermetic walls of academia, bear the phantasmatic traces of the commodity character in their desublimated embraces of the new and the different, which of course in any emphatic or robust sense social reality categorically denies. Sloterdijk has characterized such intransigence as an “a priori pain” and “crypto-Buddhist spirit” that suffuses Adorno’s work.¹⁷² Sloterdijk’s own call to loosen up the mood of philosophy—to engage in a “new critique of temperaments,” instead of picking up the phone where Adorno left off—bars us from considering the potential use and productivity of Adorno’s so-called *a priori* pain.¹⁷³ Indeed, what Sloterdijk ends up abjuring in Adorno by pathologizing his thought is arguably what is productive and of historical interest in Adorno. If it was “astonishing” to Adorno “how few traces of human suffering one notices in the history of philosophy,” then the inverse proposition could be directed at his own work.¹⁷⁴ Such a philosophical submission to history, for which Hegel is Adorno’s proper forbearer,¹⁷⁵ raises the question of to what, if anything,

¹⁷¹ Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 39.

¹⁷² Sloterdijk, *CCR*, xxxiv, xxxvii.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

¹⁷⁴ Adorno quoted in Burke, *Adorno and the Need in Thinking*, 133.

¹⁷⁵ One would have to look no farther than Hegel’s maxim in *Philosophy of Right* that philosophy is its own age comprehended in thought. “[T]he lack of *clarté* in Hegel’s philosophy would be the result of the historical dimension intruding into it” (Adorno, *Hegel*, 124).

philosophy should not be receptive.

The avowed intrusion of history into the scene of the writing of philosophy—meaning now history sets the terms *for* philosophy (exogenously) and *of* philosophy (immanently)—is embraced as early as Adorno’s 1931 inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” where he argues that “only out of the historical entanglement of questions and answers does the question of philosophy’s actuality emerge precisely.”¹⁷⁶ This encroachment of history upon philosophical discourse is brought to asystematic articulation in *Negative Dialectics*, which meditates on what it means to philosophize “after Auschwitz” and in the wake of the world-historical and political failures of Marxism and the Left, among other junctures.¹⁷⁷

In the Preface to *Negative Dialectics* and in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, Adorno professes that “history” “dictate[s]” the “concern[s] of philosophy.”¹⁷⁸ Breaking the spell of what Freud polemically calls the “omnipotence of thought,” history can thus be said to constitute late-modern philosophy’s proper *Ur-text*.¹⁷⁹ The primacy of history for Adorno’s thought is demonstrated perhaps most powerfully in the “new categorical imperative” Hitler established: to “arrange” “unfree mankind’s” “thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”¹⁸⁰ Adorno would assume and carry out this imperative most exhaustively—on levels both psychological and sociological—in his post-WWII writings and lectures on education and pedagogy. The entanglement of history in Adorno’s work thus gives birth to his corpus’ persistent deadlocks and accumulated problematics. Hence the productivity of engaging his corpus as a whole rather than as a series of disarticulated studies, essays and

¹⁷⁶ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” 124.

¹⁷⁷ Adorno, *ND*, 361

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*; Adorno, *LND*, 185.

¹⁷⁹ Freud quoted in Adorno, *AT*, 117.

¹⁸⁰ Adorno, *ND*, 365.

books: this is an attention to the ‘whole’ that Adorno’s writings on music, for instance, inculcate in the experience of listening to music.

Given what we have identified as the encroachment of history upon his thought and the resultant sedimentation of historical experience (which anyone’s life unavoidably bears under capitalist society), what space is there, if any, for spontaneity and play in the work of Adorno? Certainly for Adorno, “[s]pontaneity appears to be trivial *at the outset* in the face of the factual supremacy of the objective conditions.”¹⁸¹ Perhaps if there is spontaneity and experimentation in Adorno’s thought it is achieved through what we have heretofore identified as his unconditional engagement with a manifold of empirical and critical-speculative discourses. A certain margin of play is also arrived at through the aesthetic and paratactical dimensions of his prose, which Hullot-Kentor has captured most concisely and forcefully. Such prose, we might say, sublimates the creative drive through a form of critical, multidisciplinary writing that reflexively expresses its own social unfreedom whence negative images of an emancipated world issue; not unlike that of Schoenberg’s music.¹⁸²

To be committed to engaging Adorno’s work is to sense that the past outweighs and molds the present and future tenses, and yet to also have an attendant, countervailing desire to inhabit the nexus of this weighty past with the desire for emphatic newness. In Adorno’s work, dialectical critique serves as the immanent channel between these two seemingly isomorphic poles that are in disagreement: on the one hand, a weighty past, and on the other, emphatic newness. Perhaps what we are so resistant to in Adorno’s work, that is, what is experienced as disagreeable in his thinking and on the level of his text, is the weightiness of history as an emplotment of unfreedom that we continue to share and identify with. It is this ‘insufferable’

¹⁸¹ Adorno, *CM*, 266; my emphasis.

¹⁸² See “Perennial Fashion—Jazz” on the creative drive (the “expressive”/“aesthetic impulse”) and its sublimation (Adorno, *Prisms*, 129–130).

tarrying with the past that culminates in Sloterdijk's declaration of the apparent dead-end of Adornian Critical Theory which operates in a supposed "crypto-Buddhist spirit."¹⁸³

A politics or poetics of novelty would seemingly overcome this persistent cathexis of the past by opting for a spatial rather than a temporal model of criticism. By thinking spatially, as it were, the present is made available as not being weighed down by the past; a poetics of novelty, of how something new can emerge, can now be theorized without reference to the burden of historical weightedness. With this emphasis on spatiality, however, we lose an attunement to sedimentation; and thus we continue to sense that time overdetermines space—and are quickly drawn back to a poetics of tarrying.¹⁸⁴ Perhaps what is perceived as 'wrong' in Adorno's work—i.e., what is democratically called out by the reader of Adorno and protested against—is the tarrying, the remarking upon historical sedimentation which of course Adorno is in disagreement with as well via criticism. We may broadly characterize or think of the intransigence of Adorno's thought in terms of a form of submission to the preponderance of nature—in the Hegelian sense of the ever-same, and the Kantian realm of unfreedom/necessity—as opposed to that of becoming and self-overcoming.

This intransigence of historical experience, subsumed immanently into philosophical writing, has made possible our metacritical reading of Adorno hitherto, which seeks to speak speculatively of Adorno's corpus, that is, *tout court*. To be sure, the historical experience proper to Adorno's oeuvre does not consist of the fragmentary experiences that Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, in giving further phenomenal form to Marx's *Capital*, would capture as normative under conditions of late-capitalist modernity. Instead, historical experience here

¹⁸³ Sloterdijk, *CCR*, xxxiv.

¹⁸⁴ In the essay "The Curious Realist," Adorno criticizes the "primacy of the optical" in Kracauer's work (Adorno, *Notes to Literature II*, 98). In "Cultural Criticism and Society," Adorno argues that "[t]opological thinking, which knows the place of every phenomenon and the essence of none, is secretly related to the paranoid system of delusions, which is cut off from experience of the object" (Adorno, *COL*, 161).

accumulates via a process of sedimentation, a concept Adorno uses to express a fraught non-dialectic of being and becoming, of continuity and change: “everything new is weaker than the accumulated ever-same, and it is ready to regress back into it.”¹⁸⁵

It has become common to read what Richard Wolin, along with many others,¹⁸⁶ has identified as Adorno’s “remarkable continuity,” which spans nearly four decades, as stemming from a certain obstinacy or inflexibility of his thinking: what Sloterdijk, for one, has lamented as Adorno’s “defensive thinking.”¹⁸⁷ As Sloterdijk argues, “[p]olitically, and in its nerve endings, this aesthetic, this ‘sensitive’ theory [of Adorno’s], is based on a reproachful attitude, composed of suffering, contempt, and rage against everything that has power.”¹⁸⁸ The sensitivity and receptivity of Adorno’s thought, coupled with its consistency, makes Adorno’s corpus something of a living-thought that can be addressed in its totality; as Barthes will similarly remark vis-à-vis Beethoven, “[his oeuvre’s] readability feeds on a sort of totality of the artist,” that is, a totality or consistency already immanent to Beethoven’s oeuvre proper.¹⁸⁹ To grasp the former ‘whole’ means traversing the disparate works of Adorno’s corpus in order to contemplate its entirety, an aesthetic and critical experience that Adorno himself understood as having become increasingly impossible, for instance, in the experience of the ‘whole’ of a work of art. Of course the danger here is that of hijacking ‘Adorno’ as a totality, as a potentially reified object, and thereby making him amenable to various programmatic interests, such as academic leftist imperatives.

The continuity of Adorno’s thought has typically been cast negatively, influenced not the least by his infamous critical engagement with the ‘60s German New Left which saw his intransigence as an obstacle—a perception captured here by Sloterdijk:

¹⁸⁵ Adorno, *AT*, 238.

¹⁸⁶ Addressing the span of his work from the early ‘30s–late ‘60s, Buck-Morss also writes of how Adorno’s thought “remained remarkably consistent over time” (Adorno, “Actuality of Philosophy,” 118).

¹⁸⁷ Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 166; Sloterdijk, *CCR*, xxxv.

¹⁸⁸ Sloterdijk, *CCR*, xxxiv. As Adorno himself wrote, “[t]hinking sublimates anger [/rage]” (Adorno, *CM*, 293).

¹⁸⁹ Barthes, *Image—Music—Text*, 150.

To remain sensitive was, as it were, a Utopian stance—to keep the senses sharpened for a happiness that will not come, a stance that nevertheless, by being prepared for happiness, protects us from the worst kind of brutalizations...In this sensitive critique, there is a paralyzing resentment...Adorno's theory revolted against the collaborative traits embedded in the 'practical attitude.'¹⁹⁰

To be sure, the perceived obstinacy of Adorno's thought tends to be read as reflecting Adorno's temperament (what Sloterdijk calls Adorno's "emotional a priori"; a supposed regulative "concept of the Sensitive") instead of his object.¹⁹¹ From the side of the object, such intransigence can be construed as productive in that it makes legible not only emphatic historical experience but also history in its discontinuous *continuity*. What we have captured above as the cathetically overdetermined character of Adorno's work—which would seem to pose problems for the plasticity and responsiveness of his thinking to the singularity of the present—also makes possible its dense, rich, and often powerful character, insofar as critical-historical experience is thereby congealed in his writings. The textual presence of such historical experience, however, is not accidental but rather stems from the privileged status accorded to experience in his thinking; more precisely, the function of a philosophical concept of experience operative in his work, for which, as we will soon explore, Adorno is indebted to Benjamin.

What appears as the obstinacy of Adorno's thought is also bound up with the anxiety of his thinking in the face of social regression. For instance, Adorno took pains to memorialize, disseminate, and critically sustain Benjamin's work, a life-long activity witnessed most poignantly in his eulogistic and archival essays on Benjamin ("Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*"; "Benjamin the Letter Writer," etc.). For Adorno, the historical trajectory that had issued from Benjamin's death in 1940 endangered the very preservation and survival of his critical thought. Adorno's labors to sustain Benjamin's work point—however indirectly—to his

¹⁹⁰ Sloterdijk, *CCR*, xxxiv–xxxv.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

broader understanding of the social tendency of regression, a concept Adorno critically borrowed from psychoanalytic discourse and practice.

VII. Conclusion

Given Adorno's preoccupation with this tendency and the societal lapses into barbarism he witnessed during his life, we might push back here on Jacob Taubes' excoriating reading of the "Finale" of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, which leads him to attack Adorno for being an "aesthete," without recognizing the historical valences of the work's closing aphorism—the beginning and end of which read:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption...But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.¹⁹²

What Taubes takes to be Adorno's "aestheticization of the problem" of redemption here we might conversely see as Adorno's willful and self-conscious critical objectification of the obstacle, which is manifest through the conspicuous distance he assumes vis-à-vis "redemption."¹⁹³ While Taubes places emphasis on the irreality of redemption for Adorno—arguing that Adorno only cares to entertain its virtual possibility but not its actuality—we might counter this reading by emphasizing that for Adorno here, "the demand...placed on thought" to strive for social redemption, more precisely, for social transformation, is in fact the *only* thing that "matters"; the '*as-if*' is subordinate to the "besides."¹⁹⁴ In other words, it does not matter whether we contemplate the reality or unreality of redemption; only the task and struggle (mutually shared by thought and praxis) to change and thereby redeem the world can be our

¹⁹² Taubes, *Political Theology of Paul*, 74–75; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

concern. Hence Taubes' Benjaminian critique of Adorno, which approaches him from the standpoint of critical-hermeneutical theology, misses what is critically and historically at stake in Adorno's gnomic aphorism. Indeed, Adorno's "Finale" (and much of his work more generally) remarks upon how critical thought itself—the condition of possibility for social transformation, through its non-identity with social being—is in danger of being eclipsed by a regressive social totality which has subsumed forcible, dialectical opposition to capitalist society and thereby perniciously molds society on levels both sociological and psychological by and large unchecked. Thus, as Adorno's work seems to intimate, perhaps Benjamin's philosophy of immanence is no longer tenable on account of the post-history of Benjamin's work, which the latter could not have anticipated.

3. On the Convergence of Natural History and a Philosophical Concept of Experience

To the eternity of the historical moment there corresponds an attitude which sees the way of the world as naturally fallen and invariant; the moment, the absolutely transient, is the likeness of the eternity of passing away, of damnation.—Adorno¹⁹⁵

Through the lens of Adorno's own engagements with the idea of natural history (*Naturgeschichte*),¹⁹⁶ his thought, I will argue, can itself be understood as natural-historical, tending toward sedimentation rather than self-overcoming, which in turn reflects the intransigence of the object of critique more than his thought itself. In his 1932 lecture "The Idea of Natural History," containing, as Hullot-Kentor has noted, "the central elements of Adorno's mature works," Adorno would assimilate Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* for the program of his own immanent dialectical criticism.¹⁹⁷ Grasping the ambiguities and conceptual slippages immanent to the idea of natural history, Adorno understands the idea's constitutive concepts of 'nature' and 'history' as not only mutually determining but as also providing the key for demystifying each other's 'necessary forms of appearance.'¹⁹⁸ Adorno would thus employ the concepts of nature

¹⁹⁵ Adorno, *COL*, 224.

¹⁹⁶ While Adorno's "The Idea of Natural History" embraces Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* and its central ideas, it fails to address the multivalence of Benjamin's idea of natural history as well as how the Prologue to the *Trauerspiel* deals with the natural history of the artwork (spelled *natürliche Geschichte*) whereas Benjamin's study of the baroque proper develops an idea of natural history that is variously spelled *Natur-Geschichte* and *Naturgeschichte*. The latter may be broadly thought of as the submission of history to nature (decay), whereas the former contains possibilities of organic life that go beyond strictly decay. In chapters 1–3, we are primarily concerned with *Naturgeschichte*, but in chapter 4 we will take up Benjamin's idea of the *natürliche Geschichte* of the (art)work and apply it elsewhere. While Benjamin's work contains a negative-theological dimension, Hanssen notes how Adorno "brushe[s] aside a certain equivocation that adhered to Benjamin's figure of allegory"; this is due to the fact that Adorno primarily embraces natural history and allegory as *critical* ideas (Hanssen, *BOH*, 82).

¹⁹⁷ Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 241.

¹⁹⁸ See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 166–179, on 'necessary forms of appearance.'

and history in much the same way as the early Lukács in order to break open the ideological fusion of nature and history that congeals in social phenomena and results in a reified second nature. The task Adorno set forth, Hullo-Kentor clarifies, was to “comprehend an object as natural where it appears most historical and as historical where it appears most natural.”¹⁹⁹ This particular usage of the idea of natural history—which has a long history of mirror-stage like uses²⁰⁰—as a *critical* concept is also encountered in the *Arcades Project*, where Benjamin establishes “the axiom” “to avoid mythic thinking”: “No historical category without natural substance; no natural substance without its historical filter.”²⁰¹

For Adorno, the idea of natural history may be best understood as a certain “dialectical way of seeing” that attempts to comprehend history (ostensibly the domain of transformation and becoming) “in its eternal and total passing away,” and thereby grasp the natural in the historical.²⁰² (And here it seems auspicious to draw the family resemblance between Adorno and Benjamin’s shared “thanatological model of interpretation” and Lenin’s ideas of the withering away of the state and the overcoming of bourgeois right. As Benjamin writes in a moment that inevitably evokes Lenin, “nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away. To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.”²⁰³) “For radical natural-historical thought,” Adorno writes, “everything existing” (under capitalist modernity) “transforms itself into ruins and fragments.”²⁰⁴ To be sure, natural history would prove to be an idea that permeated Adorno’s thought; for instance, he would identify the task of the essay—critical to its core—as striving to “seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; [the essay] tries to render the transient

¹⁹⁹ Hullo-Kentor, *TBR*, 239.

²⁰⁰ See Rajan, “Spirit’S Psychoanalysis.”

²⁰¹ Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 59.

²⁰² Pinsky, “Three Kinds of Ruin,” 66; Benjamin, *Reflections*, 313.

²⁰³ Hanssen, *BOH*, 33; Benjamin, *Reflections*, 313; see Lenin, *State and Revolution*.

²⁰⁴ Hullo-Kentor, *TBR*, 265.

eternal.”²⁰⁵

Looking to “dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history” that animates large swaths of post-Kantian intellectual history, Adorno formulates, following Benjamin, what might be called a *weak* relation between nature and history that can be contrasted against the tangled and mediative relation between spirit (*Geist*) and nature in Hegel, and the rift encountered between freedom and nature in Kant’s idealism.²⁰⁶ In his early 1918 essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” Benjamin had announced his desire to “abolish” the “distinction between the realms of nature and freedom” in Kant’s architectonic philosophy.²⁰⁷ Contesting this dichotomy, however, did not mean synthesizing or collapsing these two realms; rather Benjamin argued that “[a]nother relation between thesis and antithesis is possible besides synthesis.”²⁰⁸ Within the context of this essay, he would ultimately advocate (however vaguely) for “a certain nonsynthesis of two concepts in another.”²⁰⁹ Samuel Weber explains how, for this early Benjamin, thesis and antithesis (here, the Kantian spheres of freedom and nature) are to be brought together “in a relation that would not be subsumptive or reductive of their constitutive differences.”²¹⁰ While Benjamin perhaps unwittingly repeated the Hegelian point of departure in advocating for a speculative rethinking of Kant (that seeks to dialectically mediate (neo-)Kantian antinomies), his early metacritique of Kant and Neo-Kantianism also represents what Osborne and Matthews have called “an attempt to construct an alternative post-Kantian tradition to that of Hegelian dialectics.”²¹¹ Such a veritable alternative is forged through Benjamin’s early formulations of constellation (a “nonsynthesis of two concepts in another”) and

²⁰⁵ Adorno, *Notes to Literature I*, 11.

²⁰⁶ Hulot-Kentor, *TBR*, 252.

²⁰⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1913–1926*, 106.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*, 167.

²¹¹ Osborne & Matthew, “Walter Benjamin.”

his embrace of aesthetic experience as a capacious and quasi-mediative nexus between the otherwise antinomic or reified (post-)Kantian spheres of freedom (moral-political reason) and nature/unfreedom (experience).²¹²

As Beatrice Hanssen explicates, by suggesting history and nature were “commensurable” in “the moment of transience that befell both” Adorno saw Benjamin as challenging the “customary antithesis of nature and history” found in the German Idealist fissure between nature and freedom/history.²¹³ Adorno would also embrace Benjamin’s idea of natural history as a challenge to Hegel’s idealist philosophy of history and as a corrective to the idealist trappings of phenomenology, the latter of which Adorno argued exhibited a constitutive “blindness to history.”²¹⁴ The idea of natural history pointed to an “originary unity” and dialectical interpenetration between nature and history (rather than a rift), whose common origin was that of an originary transience.²¹⁵ By emphasizing the transient and the process of decay that marked history, Hanssen explains how Adorno perceived Benjamin as “initiat[ing] the turn to another form of history, one no longer idealist in nature.”²¹⁶

Bringing Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* into dialogue, Adorno argues both texts share the same endeavor of transvaluing nature and the natural, and thereby not only call into question any idea of a “primary substance or *arche*” but also challenge the ‘vulgar’ philosophical concept of nature as simple “originary immediacy.”²¹⁷ While Lukács demonstrated

²¹² Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1913–1926*, 106.

²¹³ Hanssen, *BOH*, 15; Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 252.

²¹⁴ Hanssen, *BOH*, 13. Despite Heidegger’s theory of historicity advanced in *Being and Time*, which had attempted to break with phenomenology’s failure to engage with history, Adorno argues Heidegger’s philosophy succumbed to the pitfalls of transcendental philosophy and the philosophy of consciousness by casting historicity as an “existential structure”—thus, Hanssen writes, “turning it into a fundamental determination...of *Dasein*” (Hanssen, *BOH*, 14). The idealistic vestiges Adorno identifies in Heidegger’s thought prevented the latter, he contends, from accounting for transience and the historically contingent and singular.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

the transformation of history into nature, resulting in a second nature (a concept borrowed from Hegel), Benjamin inversely conceived nature as “transitory nature,” i.e., nature as history.²¹⁸ Nature is hence no longer understood by Benjamin as “originary immediacy” but as originary transience, which in turn constitutes original history or archi-history.²¹⁹ What surfaces in this *Ur*-history is not nature as such but an originary decay. In revealing the fissure between signification (the sphere of history) and nature, Benjamin’s critical use of allegory in the *Trauerspiel* thereby exposes how “nature bears the imprint of history.”²²⁰ Like nature, history in Benjamin’s hands also loses its organicity and self-sameness; in becoming entwined with nature it becomes “nature-history.”²²¹

I. *Pharamakon* of Natural History

Adorno’s appropriation of Benjamin’s multivalent idea of natural history²²² entails the philosophical assimilation of the concepts of transience, decay and disintegration; concepts which had, according to Adorno, been historically “downgrade[d]” (ontotheologically) by the Western philosophical tradition and considered “negligible.”²²³ Adorno’s concern for such themata would reappear programmatically in his late work *Negative Dialectics* where he argued in the Introduction that “the matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest.”²²⁴ Here he would also cite “nonconceptuality, individuality and particularity” as additional concepts that needed to be

²¹⁸ Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 262.

²¹⁹ Hanssen, *BOH*, 16. As Buck-Morss notes, “to affirm transitoriness as the essential factor in both nature and history was ontology only in a negative, antiontological sense” (Buck-Morss, *OND*, 57).

²²⁰ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 179–180.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

²²² See fn. 196.

²²³ Adorno, *ND*, 17.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8. “Philosophy’s theme would consist of the qualities it downgrades as contingent, as a *quantité négligeable*” (*Ibid.*, 17). As Hanssen notes, “philosophy henceforth was to be informed by a logic of disintegration and decay” (Hanssen, *BOH*, 16).

integrated into philosophical thinking and discourse by means of a capacious, indeed “spiritual” (*geistige*), concept of philosophical experience.²²⁵ In so doing, Adorno tacitly acknowledges his assimilation of Benjamin’s unconditional project of widening the philosophical concept of experience, which served as the grounds for Benjamin’s later explorations of the idea of natural history.

In his 1918 metacritique of Kant and the contemporaneous Neo-Kantianism of his milieu, Benjamin argued that while Kant had been able to address the “question of knowledge that is lasting,” Kant’s epistemology had been unable to adequately address “the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral.”²²⁶ Benjamin accounted for this blindness by exposing how Kant had constructed his philosophy upon the “naked, primitive, self evident” Enlightenment concept of experience, whose paradigm was that of Newtonian physics.²²⁷ In this essay, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” Benjamin consequently announced his intention to expand the limited spatio-temporal forms and causal-mechanistic categories of Kant’s philosophy through the integration of religious, artistic, historical, mythical, insane, linguistic, psychological, and other forms of experience. By incorporating more speculative phenomenological forms of experience into the arena of philosophical knowledge—for which he would nevertheless preserve the Kantian “demand for justification”—Benjamin exposed philosophy to experiences, themata and concerns that it had typically excluded or had not embraced self-consciously, much less emphatically.²²⁸ Such a capacious philosophical receptivity to experience as developed by Benjamin is programmatically invoked in the Introduction to Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*,

²²⁵ Adorno, *ND*, 8; Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 2.

²²⁶ Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1913–1926*, 100.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

which “expounds the concept of philosophical experience.”²²⁹ As Roger Foster has revealed in *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, “[t]he introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, which perhaps more than any other of Adorno’s writings contains the methodological key to his work, had originally carried the title of ‘a theory of spiritual [*geistige*] experience.’”²³⁰ This capacious concept of experience not only opens up the space for natural history but also serves as the condition of possibility for Adorno’s multi- and inter-disciplinary dialectical criticism, which he undertook in many divergent but interrelated contexts and fields throughout his life.²³¹

The downgraded concepts Benjamin strove to integrate into philosophical thinking, such as ephemerality, have a distinctly pharmakological effect on Adorno’s corpus. To be sure, ideas such as allegory and natural history are not imbued with the same negative-theological character in Adorno’s thought as they are in the early and even the late Benjamin (however allegorical they may be in the latter’s work). As Richard Wolin has observed, the “ideology-critical moments of categories such as allegory and natural history,” which find their most proximate origins in Benjamin’s thought, are divested of their “redemptive significance” in Adorno’s corpus.²³² Such critical moments, Wolin argues, can only be brought to closure via “social praxis” for Adorno.²³³ Wolin hence appropriately contrasts Adorno’s “purely negative idea of the function of theory” with that of the (“far removed”) “conception of redemptive criticism” Benjamin undertook in his early work.²³⁴ Lacking the negative-theological dimension of both Benjamin’s early and late iterations of critique, Adorno is thus forced to look beyond theory proper in order to account for not only why critical moments cannot be brought to completion via social praxis, but moreover, why praxis itself is not transformative; or worse, why it has become regressive.

²²⁹ Adorno, *ND*, xx.

²³⁰ Foster, *Adorno: Recovery of Experience*, 2.

²³¹ Adorno, *ND*, xx.

²³² Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 169.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

While the ideas Adorno inherited from Benjamin and salvaged from the one-way street of history open up the space for the healing of accumulated historical suffering and memory *through* philosophy, they also, at the same time, further expose philosophy to an ever-steepening balance-sheet of suffering which tends—as Adorno witnessed, for instance, in the cultural response to the Holocaust—to only be met with collective amnesia and subjective repression.²³⁵ Hence it is as if in Adorno’s work Benjamin’s thought becomes fully secularized and loses its halo, as Benjamin wrote apropos Baudelaire. In the wake of the horrors of the twentieth century and upon his return to post-WWII West Germany after his exile in America, Rolf Tiedemann describes how Adorno “continued in his thinking to reflect upon actual history and the processes eroding it.”²³⁶ Hullot-Kentor similarly writes that “[t]he whole of Adorno’s philosophy...right through [to] *Negative Dialectics*, stood before him in this brief talk [“The Idea of Natural History”] as a capacity to present the reality of history with an unprecedented starkness of philosophical consciousness.”²³⁷ Perhaps nowhere is Adorno’s submission to a regressive (if minimally progressive) historical process more vividly captured than in his transcribed and posthumously published lectures, where his faltering voice continually repeats the same central thought-figures and becomes caught in a ceaseless, tarrying dialectic of retrieval. In a footnote later appended to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno would confess that “[t]he idea of a logic of disintegration is the oldest of [my] philosophical conceptions, going back to [my] student years.”²³⁸

²³⁵ Adorno, *ND*, 56.

²³⁶ Adorno, *COL*, xiii.

²³⁷ Hullot-Kentor, *TBR*, 251.

²³⁸ Adorno quoted in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 233.

II. Conclusion

...the possibility of action in lingering and the promise of freedom in action.—Fred Moten²³⁹

Adorno's corpus, which is arguably more emphatically and classically Marxist than Benjamin's, is also decidedly more natural-historical than the latter's insofar as it more noticeably bears, on the level of the text, the marks of decay of its object. In other words, and as we have studied hitherto, natural-historical experience is more conspicuously objectivated and made-manifest in Adorno's writings. Heretofore we have encountered such decay in the charted decline and atrophy of forcible, dialectical forms of opposition to capitalist society (via collective praxis) and their resultant incapacity, which transpired during Adorno's lifetime and are registered in his overall corpus. Through the "allegorical vision" which opens up the space-time for natural history, Benjamin describes in the *Trauerspiel* how "all that is human...not only the nature of human existence in general but the biographical historicity of an individual is enunciated in this figure ["a death's head"] of the most extreme subjugation to nature."²⁴⁰ It is perhaps in this sense that Adorno's living-thought may be thought to be subject to 'nature': to transience and decay as a form of original history, and to that which is static or worse, regressing. After all it is that which does not change, which Adorno called "[t]he other, less popular aspect of dialectic," that properly concerns his negative dialectic.²⁴¹

Thus far we have explored what it might mean to read Adorno's living-corpus as natural-historical in its entire composition, 1931–1969. Further, by framing our engagement with Adorno through a post-1917 prism, we have also sought to render legible a historical trajectory that is non-identical to critical reflection, and to study how this exogenous process became entangled with and is expressed in and through his thinking. Yet aside from maintaining their

²³⁹ Moten, *In The Break*, 70.

²⁴⁰ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 166; Hullot-Kentor amended trans.

²⁴¹ Adorno, *COL*, 94.

non-identity, what is the proper distance—we might ask—to establish towards Adorno’s writing, on the one hand, and its concomitant concrete historical experience on the other? Of course in approaching Adorno it seems imperative not to crudely reduce thought to history, or vice versa; indeed herein lies the modicum of freedom for critical thinking: in the space between history and experience. And yet through the eyes of Adorno’s own philosophy, as we now know well, critique frequently appears entirely helpless vis-à-vis an alienated historical dynamic that continues apace unchecked, insofar as it can only lend critical digestion to its object. It is in this sense that Moishe Postone’s contemporary thematization of helplessness may be understood as a faint echo of the post-Adornian disintegration of theory since the post-1917 aftermath—theory now being exceedingly severed and alienated from praxis.²⁴² As we will study in the coming chapter, this experience of helplessness resonates with the contemporary experience of ongoing and future anthropogenic global warming which, along with a manifold of other interlocking social problematics, stands incapable of being adequately redressed via social praxis.

²⁴² Postone, “History and Helplessness,” 93.

4. A Critical Reading of *Freedom in the Anthropocene: 20th Century Helplessness in the Face of Climate Change* (2015)

One must insist that transference is the formal source of the creative processes that inspire the exodus of humans into the open. We do not so much transfer incorrigible affects onto unknown persons as early spatial experiences to new places, and primary movements onto remote locations.
—Sloterdijk²⁴³

I. An Embrace of Transference

1. Everywhere, even *here*, environmental politics (praxis that seeks to redress the perceived environmental crisis²⁴⁴) is being held to a new criterion that syncopates with the desideratum of the traditional, and now historical, Left: minimally, radical social transformation. By ‘the Left’ we do not mean to denote a singular, monolithic entity or actually-existing object but rather a manifold of unresolved antinomies, or dialectics at a standstill, stemming from the past which animate the present. The Left also notably persists, following Leszek Kolakowski, as an idea, in the sense of an aggregate or constellation of extremes.²⁴⁵

2. Re: the query of whether there is “any prospect for an ideological unification of environmentalism and the [desiderata of the] traditional left?” we might argue that, on a historico-philosophical register, it is already transpiring—perhaps spontaneously and unconsciously—in response to ongoing and intensifying anthropogenic global warming.²⁴⁶ The

²⁴³ Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, 12–13.

²⁴⁴ “Using ecology as the explanatory linchpin, [Rachel Carson, in *Silent Spring* (1962)] simplified a variety of problematic human/nature relationships into one ‘environmental crisis’” (Hannigan, *Environmental Sociology*, 82).

²⁴⁵ See Kolakowski, “The Concept of the Left” (1968) and Benjamin, *Trauerspiel* for the idea as constellation.

²⁴⁶ Paehlke, “Environmentalism and the Left in North America,” 145.

notion of the allegorical imbrication of these two historico-political trajectories and the speculative conjunction of their respective messianisms is intimated in the provocative closing lines of Andrew Feenberg's essay "Beyond the Politics of Survival" (1979):

The environmental crisis, in short, brings not peace but a sword. And precisely for that reason it is not a unifying messianic force through which the human race could join in an ennobling struggle beyond the petty conflicts of history. Rather, it is a new terrain on which the old, old issues will be fought out, perhaps this time to a conclusion.²⁴⁷

3. While the traditional Left understood surpassing the horizon of socialism, that is, attaining socialism, as necessitating the determinate negation or self-overcoming of capitalist society, what it would mean to 'surpass' or 'overcome' global warming seems much less clear or straightforward. This lack of clarity will lead us, below, to ask after and query the desiderata of environmental politics and allegorically constellate the latter with the history of the Left.

4. In both contemporary scientific and social-scientific discourse surrounding climate change, the emphases (and frequent co-joining) of a) *transformation/change* (whether passive or active) and b) the *social* dimension of global warming (whether exogenous or anthropogenic) have reached a fever pitch:

a) i) "the problems of political transformation" concern precisely "getting from the unecological present to an ecological future."

ii) "The impact of climate change on natural ecosystems and on human society and economies is potentially severe, ranging from sea level rise and melting ice at higher latitudes (Arctic and Antarctic) and altitudes (mountain glaciers), to changing weather patterns characterized by increasingly severe storms, floods and droughts, and the attendant impacts of these changes."

iii) "Those societies that respond to environmental and other stresses by transformation rather than collapse have the capability to question their core values if they become dysfunctional and to drive fundamental shifts in those values, leading to more adaptive and resilient societies."²⁴⁸

b) i) Adequately reckoning with global warming increasingly appears to mean, as Melathopoulos and Stoner argue in *Freedom in the Anthropocene*, "taking hold of broad

²⁴⁷ Feenberg, "Beyond the Politics of Survival," 70.

²⁴⁸ Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, 77; Harris, *Europe and Global Climate Change*, 6; Steffen, et al., "Looking Back to the Future," 37.

social processes that are seemingly more complex and incomprehensible than [for instance,] the dynamic chemical processes and patterns of aerosol movements in the stratosphere.”

ii) “The emergence of climate change as a central political issue around the world, along with growing concern for the environment more generally, has raised the challenge to achieve sustainability as a high order social goal.”

iii) “Today, the possibilities for environmental change have become linked to the redefinition of the environmental movement and its capacity to transform society itself.”

iv) To be sure, the social dimension of global warming concerns, at its most elementary, “the very conditions, both biological and geological, on which the survival of human life as developed in the Holocene period depends.”²⁴⁹

II. The Status of Scientific Research

5. While environmental scientists and sociologists²⁵⁰ alike exhibit the capacity to describe the crisis in its objectivity and its ‘total’ dimension (for instance, the long-term effects of climate change, and humanity’s ability to transform the objective character of the world²⁵¹), a growing concern for environmental scientists and sociologists is how “rising consciousness of environmental degradation” (such as increased popular awareness or greater techno-scientific understanding) does not necessarily lead to, or translate into, ecologically meliorative changes in humanity’s objective transformation of the world.²⁵² For a veritable chorus of scientists and sociologists, this contradiction highlights and points to the “runaway” and alien character of anthropogenic global warming which, by and large, continues apace unchecked.²⁵³ As Joern Fischer, et al. contend (2007), “[d]espite increasing efforts at all levels of society to create a sustainable future, global-scale indicators show that humanity is *moving away* from sustainability rather than towards it”; further, they write that scientists recurrently find that “their actions in the

²⁴⁹ Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 13; Steffen, et al., “Looking Back to the Future,” 507; Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 390; Chakrabarty, “Climate of History,” 213.

²⁵⁰ “In intellectual life, the environmental movement spurred the emergence of what we now call environmental sociology” (Humphrey, et al., *Environment, Energy, and Society*, 176).

²⁵¹ “Objective human-ecological transformation is a property of human labor” (Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 22).

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

world end up being frustrated and turn into ‘politically mediated compromises that fall far short.’”²⁵⁴

Herein we should note that much of the research environmental science produces tends to lack the capacity for dialectical critique, that is, the ability to point in the direction of its object’s transformation on the basis of its non-identical immanence to its object. Seeking to bolster the critical reflexivity of scientific research apropos global warming, Bruno Latour has aptly noted that “[w]hile the older problem of science studies was to understand the active role of scientists in the construction of facts, a new problem arises: how to understand the active role of human agency not only in the construction of facts, but also in the very existence of the phenomena those facts are trying to document.”²⁵⁵

III. Whence Environmental Politics? (i)

6. In the face of intensifying, unforeseeable (scientific and predictive indeterminacy²⁵⁶) and (largely) unavowable climate change, the perceived failure²⁵⁷ of environmental politics and movements—let alone ‘mainstream’ politics, and the imbrication of forms of eco-politics therein—to adequately bring about the social transformation that now appears increasingly necessary to mitigate, much less avert, the manifold effects of anthropogenic global warming, has called into question the ‘origin’ as well as the ‘prehistory’ of eco-politics. The conspicuous *arche* of eco-politics, which emerged between the 1960s–80s in North America and Europe²⁵⁸ as a distinct, *sui generis* and recognizable form of politics, has become an ever-present origin that is recurrently retrieved in the critical literature surrounding eco-politics.

²⁵⁴ Fischer, “Mind the sustainability gap,” 623; my emphasis; Fischer, et al. quoted in Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 21.

²⁵⁵ Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” 2.

²⁵⁶ Despite such indeterminacy, see Scranton, “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene.”

²⁵⁷ See note no. 12.

²⁵⁸ Within the context of this chapter we will not have the space to analyze the specific case of *Die Grunen*.

Retrieving this origin, A.D. Tarlock, for one, has argued that environmental politics attained its “first peak of political power between 1968 and 1972 when it moved beyond the progressive conservation vision to a more holistic theory of social and economic order,” thereby marrying the “multi-level activism” of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the ‘60s with environmental protection and conservation movements.²⁵⁹ Yet despite these political heights, which arose in the wake of the “post-WWII spike in environmental degradation [that] gave rise to new environmental needs and desires,” Melathopoulos and Stoner contend in *Freedom in the Anthropocene* that “the environmental discontent expressed by contemporary environmentalism [of the ‘60’s–70’s] failed to engender changes in social structure conducive to moving beyond the societally induced environmental degradation which characterizes this period.”²⁶⁰ To be sure, if environmental discontents (like any other form of discontent) are not reflexively non-identical to the society it opposes and protests a ‘wrong’ against, these discontents are blunted and readily integrated into society. In turn, such discontents become means of perpetuating the status quo of an alienated social dynamic. Thus, the co-authors of *Freedom in the Anthropocene* insist: “[e]nvironmentalism remains identical with society while appearing opposed to it.”²⁶¹ Indeed, since the 1970s, environmental discontents—and eco-politics in the global north more broadly—have become increasingly integrated into society via broad processes of institutionalization, nationalism, environmental policy (“a system designed to manage and control rather than reduce or restructure the sources of pollution and other environmental ills”), etc.²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Tarlock, “City Versus Countryside,” 467.

²⁶⁰ Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 62.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶² Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 401.

IV. Discontents with Eco-politics

7. *From Outside*: Critiques of the perceived ‘inefficacy’ of eco-politics can be found across large swaths of scientific and sociological discourse from the past two decades. Consider, a) Røpke (2005): “the ‘implementation deficit’ that followed the creation of national government environmental agencies in the early 1970s in many OECD countries”; b) Blühdorn (2007) and Steffen, et al. (2008): “the failure to guide economic development along the sustainable development framework outlined by the Brundtland Report in 1987”; c) Blühdorn (2013) and Karlsson (2013): “the sense of helplessness that attends the most recent turn to protest-oriented climate justice.”²⁶³ From the standpoint of the retroactive present, the mass of these perceived shortcomings and failures (among others) points to the *runaway* post-WWII dynamic of the ‘Great Acceleration,’ which delimits a period of intensified impact on the environment that leads straight to the present. To be sure, this mediative society-environment dynamic continues seemingly unabated, so long as forcible and dialectical opposition to capitalist society is dormant.

From Inside: In an interview with Andony Melathopoulos, the American environmental lawyer and advocate James Gustave Speth captures the contradiction between the evident growth of environmental-isms and the overarching failure to satisfactorily redress the ecological crisis via social transformation: “We now have a flourishing environmental movement, a proliferating number of organisations, more and more money going into this, decades now of environmental legislation and programs, at all levels of government, and the environment keeps going downhill.”²⁶⁴ Further, as Melathopoulos provides running commentary, “[t]he contradiction, according to Speth, results from the U.S. environmental movement focusing too narrowly on

²⁶³ Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 21

²⁶⁴ Melathopoulos, “Capitalism and the environment,” 3.

‘working within the system.’ They lobby, litigate and educate the public to the neglect of an ‘equally powerful effort to change the system itself.’”²⁶⁵

V. Narrativizing the Trajectory of Eco-politics

8. In many critical histories of environmental politics and movements, such as Robert Gottlieb’s canonical *Forcing the Spring* (1993), little attention is paid to the extra-national and geopolitical prehistory of eco-politics. The political imaginary of the “environmental humanities in the United States” in particular, as Bob Nixon has noted, is especially “skewed toward nation-bound scholarship that is at best tangentially international and, even then, seldom engages the environmental fallout of U.S. foreign policy head on.”²⁶⁶ Beyond this imaginary, the general-historical prehistory of eco-politics we are asking after here, which flashes up in the face of intensifying climate change, would doubtless seem, *prima facie*, discontinuous and extraneous to the historical trajectory of environmental politics. Such a prehistory, for our purposes here, would encompass the historico-political dynamics of progress/regression stemming from the mid-19th century, which witnessed both the first ‘real subsumption’ of social life under capitalist society as well as the agonistic emergence of a proletarian politics. These historical dynamics, which further played out in the twentieth century on the world-historical stage and lead to the present, constitute, for our purposes here, the *a priori* conflictual world out of and into which eco-politics emerges. (From a Marxian purview, we should recall that “[t]he task of freedom in the nineteenth century—that of consciously recognizing and actively transforming social structure—was inextricably linked to the question of the political activity of the proletariat.”²⁶⁷) Thus Benjamin’s image of origin as a “maelstrom [*Strudel*]” “in the flow of becoming” is

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Dixon, *Environmentalism of the Poor*, 34.

²⁶⁷ Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 30.

instructive for grasping this complex emergence (*Entstehen*) of environmental politics (*Entstehen*: (literally) “arising, in the sense of taking a stand, assuming a stance”).²⁶⁸

9. It has become common for critical histories of environmentalism to commence by briefly remarking upon or confessing their object’s entropic posthistory; for example, Christopher Rootes (1999): “It is an oversimplification to say that the environmental movement has undergone a change from being a mass participatory movement to a series of institutionalised interest groups.”²⁶⁹ Because the period of the ‘60s–80s stands as the conspicuous *arche* of recognizable environmental politics in the global north, it seems appropriate that attempts to broach the speculative revivification or reconstitution of such politics recurringly query whether its “adaptations ultimately weaken the capacities of EMOs [environmental movements] to effect the mass mobilisations from which the EMO’s power initially derived and upon which it may ultimately depend.”²⁷⁰ Through the persistent retrieval of its origin, the critical literature surrounding the trajectory and outcome of environmentalism points to the necessity for this praxis to grasp its own historical emplotment.

In the essays composing Rootes’ edited collection, *Environmental Movements*, the only trace of non- or extra-reformist iterations of eco-politics resides in the pseudo-tension Rootes establishes between “[c]onventional and unconventional forms of action.”²⁷¹ The latter is given little-to-no voice, let alone ontological status, within this specific critical compendium on environmental politics—but still nevertheless exists at its margins. Gottlieb, for one, has addressed the problem of “defining contemporary environmentalism primarily in reference to its

²⁶⁸ Benjamin quoted in Weber, *Benjamin’s-abilities*, 133–4.

²⁶⁹ Rootes, *Environmental Movements*, 2–3.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

mainstream, institutional forms.”²⁷² “Such historians,” Gottlieb continues, “cannot account for the spontaneity and diversity of an environmentalism rooted in communities and constituencies seeking to address issues of where and how people live, work [etc.]”—the latter which lie outside of these former mainstream iterations.²⁷³ In the early case of the United Kingdom’s 1956 Clean Air Act (which predated the landmark U.S. 1970 Clean Air Act by more than ten years), the extra-parliamentary pressure-group the National Smoke Abatement Society was a key force in legislating the Act, which helped precipitate the U.K.’s creation of a national environmental policy.

VI. Whence Eco-politics? (ii)

10. The ‘origin’ of environmental politics, which now appears as emerging within and out of more general-historical configurations and fields of contestation that seem to delimit—or at least pose problems for—its imputed possibilities for society-shaping, arises from the posthistory²⁷⁴ of this *sui generis* form of politics, in other words, its outcome. Such a retroactive relation between outcome and origin is given expression here by Rootes:

Of all the ‘new’ social movements which emerged from the student movements of the late 1960s, it is environmental movements which have had most enduring influence on politics and which have undergone the most wide-ranging institutionalisation in terms both of the professionalisation of their activities and of the regularisation of their access to policy-makers.²⁷⁵

As Rootes indicates here, the efficacy and survival of this specific post-‘60s iteration of politics has been inseparable from its transmutation and accommodation via social forms of institutionalization. In *The Greening of a Nation* (1998), Hal Rothman will echo this diagnosis in

²⁷² Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 36

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ With regard to posthistory (*Nachgeschichte*), “[o]rigin is not...discovered by the examination of actual findings, but is related to [the phenomenon’s] history and their subsequent development” (Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 46).

²⁷⁵ Rootes, *Environmental Movements*, 1.

remarking how the environmental movement is paradoxically a “victim of its own successes.”²⁷⁶ As Rootes writes elsewhere, one result of such institutionalization has been that the environmental movement no longer “capture[s] the imagination or command[s] the support of any large part of the public.”²⁷⁷ Broad declines in public protests since the ‘70s have been seen by some (Diani and Donati (1999)) as a key indicator of the public demobilization caused by such adaptations.

11. It should be stressed that the general history in which eco-politics is tenuously being placed and situated here is open to determination and contestation: ideally no privilege or primacy should be accorded to any single discursive hermeneutic, historical trajectory, or voice over another. Although it may be impossible to ever *not* occupy a standpoint, Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* nevertheless ventures to counterpose dialectics (or alternatively, dialectical critique) to standpoint; thus Adorno’s maxim, “dialectics not a standpoint.”²⁷⁸ Against ‘standpoint,’ the demos and its voicings of a ‘wrong’ not only haunt political community (contra the sensible order of the police) but also haunt academic/discursive writing as a liminal non-identity immanent to (policed) discursivity and discursive taboos, the former of which exceed these enframings.

VII. The Anthropocene?

12. The recently-surfaced and -popularized concept of the Anthropocene has sought to categorically inaugurate a new geological age wherein humanity is understood as the greatest determinant of the global environment of the planet (e.g., its geology and ecosystems) following the Industrial Revolution. Yet as Melathopoulos and Stoner have argued, the Anthropocene as an

²⁷⁶ Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation*, 210.

²⁷⁷ Rootes, *Environmental Protest in Western Europe*, 2.

²⁷⁸ Adorno, *ND*, 4–6.

account of

what generates [socio-biophysical] change ends up linear [and such reified linearity ends up] without the potential for being otherwise. This failure to specify the type of transformation and its conditions of possibility ends up in the externalization of the factors of transformation. Consequently, scholars have yet to specify the dynamic that is generative of the current environment-society crisis.²⁷⁹

It is thus crucial to note the hallucinatory and thereby reified character of retroactively projected origins such as the Anthropocene, which negatively capture how, rather than self-consciously transforming the socio-biophysical world, humanity is subject to and dominated by the history they have set in motion. To be sure, as Melathopoulos and Stoner contend, “it is precisely history that appears to ensnare human society in a runaway developmental pattern that will not lead to the opening of human capacities and the flourishing of ecosystems, but rather to the inevitable diminishing of both.”²⁸⁰ In addition to its hypostatized linearity, the historico-geological concept also fails to directly address the political dimension of the ecological crisis and the agonistic politics contained within the historical period it spans.

Despite its mystified character, it is important nevertheless to grasp ‘the Anthropocene’—which currently has scientific, academic, artworld and popular traction—as expressing a deepening and broadening of ecological subjectivity. Crutzen (2002) and Steffen, et al. (2011) note that while “Anthropocene-like periodization” emerged as early as 1873, “it has only recently become the subject of debate at international geological meetings and in the popular media.”²⁸¹ Yet, as Melathopoulos and Stoner argue, “[c]ut off from its historical and dialectical genesis, the concept of the Anthropocene advanced by Crutzen, et al. is unable to effectively grasp how a society that emerges from the Industrial Revolution can be both conscious of the

²⁷⁹ Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 21.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

degradation of planetary systems and seemingly powerless to do anything about it.”²⁸² And yet, the co-authors nevertheless maintain that “[a]ctual (critical) recognition of today’s worldwide ecological crises would mean recognizing this thought itself as a form of reified consciousness, so that the inherently irreducible, emancipatory potential contained within might be unleashed.” Indeed, to acknowledge a thought as reified opens up the space for exploring how theory proper might move beyond itself into a speculative relationship with praxis, so that the potency of critical thought may come to fruition.²⁸³

13. As Chakrabarty observes, “the current [objective] crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility.”²⁸⁴ (See, for instance, Alan Weisman’s best-selling book *The World Without Us* (2007), which Chakrabarty singles out as exemplary of this tendency to abstract from both the past and present and to fantasize the impending future.) Against this tendency, Chakrabarty, a historian by training, asserts that “[t]he discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience.”²⁸⁵ In *Freedom in the Anthropocene*, Melathopoulos and Stoner similarly assert the necessity of immanence to both the past (history) and the present, i.e., our contemporary juncture. Despite the fact that, “[t]oday, society threatens to transform planetary systems in a manner that surpasses the reach of geological processes of much larger timescales,” the co-authors argue (paraphrasing Rosa Luxemburg) that the “prime political task at this stage in the Great Acceleration is being able to learn again, by learning the lessons of relating theory and

²⁸² Ibid., 42.

²⁸³ Ibid., 69.

²⁸⁴ Chakrabarty, “Climate of History,” 197

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

practice in history.”²⁸⁶

VIII. “Death of Environmentalism”?

14. Ingolfur Blühdorn’s concept of “post-ecologist politics” which attempts to articulate the contemporary post-‘90s narrative emplotment of environmental politics also expresses a desire to rethink and reconstitute eco-politics “since the late 1980s” via immanent critique.²⁸⁷ In so doing, Blühdorn’s work directly remarks upon the posthistory of eco-politics, which for him is marked by the exhaustion of an “ecologist critique of modernity and the ecologist belief in a comprehensively different society,” both of which have stymied eco-politics’ capacity for society-shaping praxis.²⁸⁸

Shellenberger and Nordhaus’ *Death of Environmentalism* (2004) similarly points to such an exhaustion with their sweeping call to “reexamine everything we think we know about global warming and environmental politics.”²⁸⁹ Interrogating the outcome of such politics, the co-authors ominously query: “has the U.S. environmental community’s work over the past 30 years laid the groundwork for the economic, cultural and political shifts that we know will be necessary to deal with the crisis?”²⁹⁰ However, in the specific case of the authors of *Death of Environmentalism* their emphasis is still on solutions, albeit revamped ones (see their *Break Through* (2007)), that look to the state and “increasingly sophisticated technical solutions to climate change” (see, for example, the controversial Solar-Radiation Management (SRM) technologies) to bring about an “ecological revolution.”²⁹¹ In these appeals to the state and techno-scientific reason, we should note the attitude of passivity and the temporality of

²⁸⁶ Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 105

²⁸⁷ Blühdorn, “The Governance of Unsustainability,” 19.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ Shellenberger & Nordhaus, *Death of Environmentalism*, 4.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ Haq & Paul, *Environmentalism Since 1945*, 97; Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 3.

expectancy that accompanies such recognitive gestures. These gestures index, more generally, the “inability of society to freely regulate itself” and transform itself in the direction and at the service of social freedom.²⁹²

15. As many critical histories of environmentalism capture, such as the classic *Forcing the Spring*, the early period of environmental politics and movements in the ‘60s–70s in North America and Europe focused on a wide array of problems (many inherited from the anterior anti-nuclear movement, among others), for instance, ranging from managing “the quality of air, water and soil” to “protecting flora and fauna.”²⁹³ However, in contemporary discourse surrounding environmentalism in our early 21st century moment, there is detectable a new sense of focus, temporal urgency and discursive intensification, given that global warming is now generally understood to pose “the greatest challenge” for eco-politics.²⁹⁴ This new ascribed primacy of climate change, however, has not canceled out the manifold of other ecological problems engendered by the society-environment problematic but has only intensified them, e.g., loss of biodiversity, resource scarcity, pollution, etc.

16. Given recurrent reports and declarations of the death of environmentalism, it is tempting to read a ‘death drive’ out of the body of literature comprising critical histories of eco-politics written, say, within the last 30 years beginning with Gottlieb’s seminal *Forcing the Spring*. These works seek to bring to cessation (via critique) and hence inaugurate an ‘end’ of their object; e.g., Shellenberger and Nordhaus: “modern environmentalism...must die so that something new can live.”²⁹⁵ These summary ends, we should note, operate on a more fundamental disagreement vis-à-vis the theory and praxis of hitherto eco-politics, and thereby

²⁹² Ibid., 14.

²⁹³ Haq & Paul, *Environmentalism Since 1945*, 92.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Shellenberger & Nordhaus, *Death of Environmentalism*, 10.

create a critical fissure in the normative regimes of sense and sense-making surrounding what is called environmental politics.

Beyond such dissensus, critical histories of eco-politics often conclude with the upshot of inaugurating some new beginning. Yet this Arendtian-like *arche* tends to take on a confused and opaque form; often not being clearly articulated or only tentatively put forth, such as in the final chapter of Haq and Paul's *Environmentalism Since 1945: "The Future of Environmentalism."*²⁹⁶ More common, however, is for these works to opt for hope, expectancy, futural projection and the like,²⁹⁷ rather than dialectically engaging and critiquing actually-existing environmental politics and the antinomies it expresses in theory and praxis. Nevertheless, in terms of their positive, manifest-content, these critical histories express what might be called an anarcho-realist maxim: they demand for a more real, more authentic, more socially-engaged, more democratic, (etc.) form of environmentalism to emerge in order to overcome its perceived inefficacy and/or history of failures.

IX. Antinomies of Environmental Politics

17. The afterlife of the environmental politics and movements that emerged alongside and out of the '60s-70s New Left in the global north²⁹⁸ has resulted in the antinomy (among others²⁹⁹) between, on the one hand, forms of eco-anarchism that are protest-driven and undertake other such forms of resistance; and, on the other hand, reformist iterations of so-called market environmentalism that engage with the state and within mainstream politics to mitigate

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 99–100.

²⁹⁷ See Haq & Paul, *Environmentalism Since 1945*, 92–98.

²⁹⁸ In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Bob Dixon argues that while the problems and challenges faced by environmentalism in the global south are qualitatively different from those countenanced by environmentalism in the global north they should not be regarded as in any way disconnected or unrelated.

²⁹⁹ For instance, consider the either/or faced by climate and atmospheric scientists and environmentalists alike between reducing climate change from below (i.e., at the level of civil society) versus reducing global warming via techno-scientific bureaucratic solutions from above.

the ongoing environmental crisis.³⁰⁰ This antinomy can be conjured, for instance, via the disjunction—and the great dissonance that obtains therein—between the 2015 Paris Climate Conference and the 2016 protests currently being carried out by indigenous First Nations tribes surrounding the North Dakota pipeline. To be sure, both of these struggles and actions seem equally necessary, vital, and important, but take place, as it were, in different, non-communicating realms of praxis and theory. As John Hannigan has noted, “environmental debates reflect the existence not just of an absence of certainty...but rather the existence of *contradictory certainties*.”³⁰¹

Taken individually or as an unlikely aggregate, these antithetical poles of eco-politics³⁰² appear unable to bring about the thoroughgoing social transformation that both assert is necessary in order to cope with, much less avert, ongoing and future climate change. Indeed, the so-called “ecological revolution” called for by reformist market-environmentalism is in many ways comparable to the thoroughgoing society-shaping demanded by contemporary eco-anarchist discourse, albeit the latter is typically thought to be achieved via forms of direct action. Addressing this antinomy between “alternative groups” of eco-politics and “mainstream environmentalism,” Gottlieb will query in *Forcing the Spring* whether “mainstream and alternative groups [can] find a common language, a shared history, a common conceptual and organizational home?”³⁰³

18. These irreconcilable extremes can *here* be placed within a broader history of the Left,

³⁰⁰ “The radical/mainstream division has characterized the contemporary environmental movement since its inception” (Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 61). In her monograph on Adorno, *The Melancholy Science*, p. 98, Gillian Rose interrogates the genesis of antinomies, that is, how an antinomy surfaces in thought and can be regarded as cogent, valid, and objective.

³⁰¹ Hannigan, *Environmental Sociology*, 49

³⁰² They also tend to be ideologically hostile toward one another; for instance, as Gottlieb has noted, many eco-anarchists “don’t like to call themselves environmentalists” (Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 401).

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 319.

and more specifically, in relation to the problematics that also beset the New Left³⁰⁴ (and here we echo one recent trend in academic leftist discourse³⁰⁵). Such antinomies can be addressed, however circuitously, through an immanent and historical metacritique of Theodor Adorno's corpus, which both anticipates and directly engages theoretical and practical obstacles that not only predated the historical emergence of the New Left but were also countenanced by this protean iteration of the Left in real, historical time. Yet for this ostensibly more general history of the Left (encompassing, for our purposes here, eco-politics) to attain to its concept, it would need to open itself up to voices and traditions that, historically, have been authoritarily muted or repressed by the institutional forms of the Left. These are voices that still exist at the margins of the dominant 'left' discourses and institutions as, quite literally, noise emitted from subaltern mouths.

X. What Is Eco-anarchism?

19. Eco-anarchism was first classically conceptualized by Murray Bookchin in the early '60's following his break with Trotskyism and Marxism more generally, an arc that resembles

³⁰⁴ "By the 1970s, the New Left had generated new social movements, which maintained that the dominant forms of socialist theory and practice had been inadequate because they had marginalized or ignored the issues that were now being raised, and they argued that socialism could be enriched by broadening its range. However, the defenders of orthodoxy feared that the whole socialist project would be undermined by excessive concentration on these issues, leading to fragmentation. No doubt both were right, and certainly it now became increasingly difficult to define the doctrine. The old certainties had disintegrated: socialism [i.e., the traditional and Old Left] had become decentred" (Newman, *Socialism*, 88). "[N]ever a coherent movement, but...rather a shorthand for a whole range of ideas and tendencies," we also understand the New Left here as a differentiated aggregate expressing both fragmentation (a "parorama of single-issue movements") and enrichment (Ibid., 85; Berman, *Power and the Idealists*, 65). The New Left effectively inaugurated a new grammar of the Left whose enframings still persist and inform contemporary twenty-first century discourses. However, with the emergence of new distinct voices (that make up the differentiated chorus of the New Left), this phase of the Left also experienced the decay and becoming-obsolescent of past forms of leftist politics, particularly those centered around the working class and the unemployed as such. See Irwin Unger's instructive study of the American New Left, *The Movement* (1972) and its relation to the civil rights movement and other international events and movements.

³⁰⁵ As the co-authors of *FITA* write, "[t]hroughout this book, we have attempted to demonstrate how the more specific lack of agency associated with contemporary environmental politics is connected to the more general theory/praxis problem relative to the decline of Left politics in the twentieth century" (Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 109).

that of Cornelius Castoriadis' own break from Trotskyism/Marxism and subsequent embrace of council-communism. In the essay "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought" (1964), Bookchin introduced the concept of ecology into radical politics. Rooted in his critiques of hierarchical societies that are predicated on the domination of (wo)man by man, eco-anarchism operates on the basis of a horizontal democratic confederalism or libertarian municipalism. Both of the latter are comparable to the council-communism in vogue during the '60s-70s New Left, a period of the Left that witnessed the further cleaving of (neo-)anarchism from Marxism: a turn motivated by discontents of anti-authoritarianism and anti-Stalinism.

20. We should note here that contemporary eco-anarchism and neo-anarchism more generally, both of which are forms of praxis that construct a rhetoric out of resistance, have acquired a new aura and signification in the wake of the 1999 anti-globalization Seattle protests. This event inaugurated what some have defined as our post-political activist-driven culture, which has given birth to what Liza Featherstone, et al. have termed "activist-ism," a term that explicitly echoes Adorno's late concept of "actionism."³⁰⁶ What is captured by these critical concepts is a form of subjectivity and social practice that, in expressing an extreme, runs the risk of failing to apprehend its own unthoughts and categorical theoretico-practical others. Such a critique of neo-anarchism is levelled by Moishe Postone, who has written of post-'60s New Left "resistance" as "fail[ing] to grasp its own conditions of possibility":

[After the late-'60s] [t]he idea of a fundamental transformation became bracketed and, instead, was replaced by the more ambiguous notion of resistance. The notion of resistance, however, says little about the nature of that which is being resisted or of the politics of the resistance involved...[Resistance] is rarely based on a reflexive analysis of possibilities for fundamental change that are both generated and suppressed by the dynamic heteronomous order. [Resistance] is an undialectical category that does not grasp its own conditions of possibility; that is, it fails to grasp the dynamic historical context of which it is a part.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Featherstone, et al., "Action Will Be Taken."

³⁰⁷ Postone, "History and Helplessness," 108.

Postone's gross but provocative critique of resistance here raises the question of what dialectical resistance might look like, i.e., resistance that does in fact grasp its own conditions of possibility.

Yet anarchism and more generally, nonconceptuality, spontaneity, and praxis born of immediacy and contingency, tend to be blind spots (and thus phantasms) for 'major' discourses and epistemes, constituting not only the latter's subaltern others but also perhaps their (repressed) conditions of possibility, much like the big toe or the gaping exposure of the human eye for Bataille. Consider, for instance, the historically fraught relationship between Marxism and anarchism, in which anarchism tends to constitute the former's banished and repressed other. Classically, this tension crystallized in the infamous quarrel between Marx and Bakunin surrounding the First International of 1864 and was borne out in the broad dismissal of the figure of Blanqui in Marxian thought,³⁰⁸ whom Benjamin sought to recover in his *Arcades Project*.

XI. Disagreement: Eco-Anarchism and Environmental Reformism

21. The tension between anarchist and reformist/mainstream environmental politics, much like the disjunctions between academic/extra-academic, Marxism/anarchism, theory/praxis, etc.—many of which appear to have arisen or have roots in the '60s-70s, but whose prehistories no doubt run much deeper³⁰⁹—can be regarded, to paraphrase Adorno, as two

³⁰⁸ See Luxemburg, "Blanquism and Social Democracy."

³⁰⁹ Adolph Reed Jr. has argued that the '30's were "the Left's last great crisis, but there was a similar moment of lesser crisis in the mid-1960s when the issue of how to come to terms with economic inequality came close to surfacing. In both cases, the 1930s and the 1960s, the response shifted the discussion of inequality or social justice from the realm of political economy to the realm of culture" (Reed Jr., "Nothing Left"). Bookchin, during his turn away from Marxism, similarly identified the '60s as a repetition of the problems of the '30s, yet this time as farce: "All the old crap of the thirties is coming back again...It's all back again, and in a more vulgarized form than ever...In the thirties, at least it was understandable" (Bookchin, *Post-scarcity Anarchism*, 195). Bookchin further argues here that "Marxism has ceased to be applicable to our time": a "new era is in birth which Marxism does not adequately encompass"; he concludes that "the problem is not to 'abandon' Marxism or to 'annul' it, but to transcend it dialectically" (Ibid., 199).

torn halves of an “integral freedom” which, however, do not add up to a whole.³¹⁰ In other words, both sides are moments or ingredients of a dialectic that would place both terms into a mutually-constitutive dynamic. Put in the phraseology of Walter Benjamin’s “dialectics of intoxication”: it would take “the energies of intoxication”—“a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance”—and the “constructive, dictatorial side of revolution” (“methodical and disciplinary preparation”) for the integral whole of theory and praxis to be put back together, such that, as Benjamin writes, “reality [has] transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.”³¹¹ For our purposes, perhaps as Benjamin suggests it is only through such a dialectics that combines the rational-processual (typified here by reformist market-environmentalism) with messianic immanence (seen in forms of eco-anarchism and resistance) that the dynamic exchange between theory and praxis could be reconstituted as a ‘whole.’ Following Adorno and to a certain extent the pragmatism of Dewey, critical social theory must risk tendentially mediating the enduring and unresolved antinomies of social praxis (without, however, resolving such antinomies) in order to open up speculative possibilities for praxis’ own self-overcoming—a capacity for reflection praxis can hardly afford.

XII. Idea as Constellation of Extremes

22. In the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin puts forth an understanding of the idea as a constellation of extremes. This thought-figure which suspends philosophical integrative mediation is methodologically taken up by Adorno who defines the “idea of truth” in *Negative Dialectics* as the “touch[ing]” of “two extremes.”³¹² While truth, or perhaps more crucially for Adorno, social truth, lies “in and through the extremes, in the extremes themselves,” “[t]he two [extremes]

³¹⁰ Adorno & Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 130.

³¹¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 2*, 210, 218.

³¹² Adorno, *ND*, 375.

cannot,” however, “be glued together in a synthesis.”³¹³ As Adorno relates in an off-hand manner in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, “I was someone who tended to extremes, who detected something false in syncretism and who instinctively objected to happy mediums, following Arnold Schoenberg, who had written that the middle road is the only one that does not lead to Rome.”³¹⁴ As we explored in chapters 1–3, the veritable resources for reconciling praxis and a possible reconciled life lie precisely in these extremes or antinomies for Adorno: “What has not been severed lives solely in the extremes.”³¹⁵ Thus, “[t]he only thoughts to have a chance are those that go to extremes, capable of cerebral acrobatics.”³¹⁶

XIII. Method: Natural History

the negativity of natural history—which always discovers what phenomena used to be, what they have become and, at the same time, what they might have been retains the possible life of phenomena as opposed to their actual existence.—Adorno³¹⁷

23. Through relating its prehistory to its posthistory, the natural history of environmental politics—more precisely, the natural history of the *problem-idea* of environmental politics—can be “virtually explored” and “assembled,” one which exposes a logic of decay and devolution.³¹⁸ Indeed the “allegorical vision” that opens up natural history, in which Benjamin immerses and absorbs himself in the *Trauerspiel*; the “vision” whose sidelong, melancholic gaze strips historical phenomena of cultural and ontotheological accretions, bestows upon them in the

³¹³ Adorno, *Hegel*, 9; Adorno, *ND*, 286.

³¹⁴ Adorno, *LND*, 29.

³¹⁵ Adorno, *ND*, 286.

³¹⁶ Adorno, *LND*, 151.

³¹⁷ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 137–138.

³¹⁸ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 34–35. In the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin describes the “science of the Origin [*Ursprung*]” as a form a philosophical history that brings “ideas...to life only when extremes are assembled around them” (*Ibid.*, 47, 35).

latter's stead a "natural life" (*natürliches Leben*) with their own singular natural history.³¹⁹ This vision also opens up, for our purposes here, the space-time for Benjamin's "thanatological model of interpretation," whereby critique intensifies and assists in the natural-historical mortification of works, which illuminates the 'truth content' of a work through the burning up of its material content and results in the work's collapse.³²⁰ Yet as Deleuze reminds us, "Problems-Ideas are positive multiplicities, full and differentiated positivities described by the process of complete and reciprocal determination which relates problems to their conditions."³²¹ Thus "[t]he positivity of problems"—whence springs affirmation, decision, etc.—"is constituted by the fact of being 'posited.'"³²²

Indeed, by bringing into constellation the remote extremes of its development (pre- and post-history)—as critical histories of eco-politics normatively do, that is, critiques that (however unconsciously) explore the conditions of im/possibility for the theoretico-practical transformation of such politics—'environmental politics' can be grasped and critiqued immanently in the direction of its potential self-comprehension. A natural history of environmental politics would thus occasion the problem-question of the appropriate self-transformation (being *for-itself*) of such politics and thereby subsequently broach its in/capacity for social transformation (being *in-itself*). Natural history thus, while "virtual" in its philosophico-historical form of presentation, nevertheless opens up the space for working

³¹⁹ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 47. It follows for Benjamin that every singular "natural life" is what he calls an "original phenomenon" (Ibid., 47, 45). One of the fundamental ontological gestures of Benjamin's corpus (the philosophical operation Heidegger calls 'gathering') is expressed in his intention to bestow "life...[on]to everything that has a history, and not to that which is only a stage setting for history"; hence, *natural* history (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 71). Put inversely: "The philosopher's task...is to understand all natural life on the basis of the more comprehensive life of history"; hence, natural *history* (Ibid.). As Tilottama Rajan points out in "Spirit'S Psychoanalysis," the historically sedimented vicissitudes and slippages congealed in the idea of natural history (in other words, its mirror stage-like transferences) constitute its philosophical productivity for late-Marxists as a means, for instance, of defamiliarization.

³²⁰ Hanssen, *BOH*, 33.

³²¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 267.

³²² Ibid.

through reified forms of (self-)appearance which, as necessary and psychically-real phantasms, bar the necessary (self-)recuperation that is the condition of possibility for self-determination and self-legislation on the models of the psyche and that of collective praxis.³²³ Yet *a* natural history—which Benjamin argues requires “protection in order to unfold clearly and [unperturbed] by human life”—amounts to little more than a critical historiographic poetics that crystallizes into a constellation the pre- and post-history of a phenomenon.³²⁴ Indeed, as Benjamin reveals, when such a history is constructed and finally attains “rest,” such “philosophical history” (which he defines as “the science of the origin”) becomes “natural-historical” in a ‘vulgar,’ “inauthentic” sense: becoming is translated into being and thereby attains the presence of still-life.³²⁵ Philosophical history, the form of research and presentation this thesis undertakes, hence cannot take comfort in its own idea, and must remark upon its own ipseity in the face of its categorical antithesis, praxis. At the same time, however, such an anti-historiographic poetics must also strive to reestablish the historically-liquidated “umbilical cord” between theory and praxis; in our case here: explore (minimal) conditions of im/possibility for their tentative rapprochement.³²⁶

XIV. What Does Climate Change?

24. Calls from environmentalists for “systemic changes,” the “transformation of society,” an “ecological revolution,” and so on, in order to avert or cope with ongoing and future climate change and its attendant ecological extirpations, have increasingly displaced its former privative language of protection (e.g., biodiversity), reduction (e.g., emissions), mitigation (e.g.,

³²³ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 47. See Postone, *Time, Labor, Social Domination*, 166–7. Reification understood here as the auto-poetic rewriting of social reality. See Gasché, *Georges Bataille*, 111–167, 277–287, for discussions of the phantasm as a repressed condition of possibility for philosophical thinking and discourse proper.

³²⁴ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 47.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 59.

degradation), etc.³²⁷ These intensifying demands, however, appear at odds with the trajectory of the eco-politics and -movements issuing from the '60s and '70s in the global north, which have witnessed “wide-ranging institutionalization” and have resulted in the above reformism/resistance antinomy, among others.³²⁸ Further, the transference and projection of leftist demands onto eco-politics—seen for instance in the critical reception of the high-profile environmentalist and writer Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* (2014)³²⁹—have raised the stakes for environmental politics in general and, moreover, have retroactively rendered past and present forms of such politics apparently inadequate. Indeed, the critical reception and broad popularity of Klein’s book have served as indicators of both the increased awareness of the preponderance of anthropogenic global warming as well as the increasingly high demands made upon eco-politics. Epithets such as ‘market environmentalism’ and ‘green capitalism’ call into question, by their very names, a specific and potentially limited political approach to reckoning with the environmental crisis that looks to the state and reformist measures to address this enduring problem. As Klein has succinctly put it, “there are no non-radical options left before us.”³³⁰ Thus eco-politics faces “the same theoretical problem that socialism [i.e., the traditional Left] confronted much earlier as to whether it is a revolutionary or reformist ideology.”³³¹ We should note here, however, that the topical antinomy we have thematized heretofore does not obtain between reform or revolution but rather between reformism or resistance, despite the fact that eco-anarchism and market environmentalism both acknowledge the necessity of some radical

³²⁷ Haq & Paul, *Environmentalism Since 1945*, 96–97.

³²⁸ This antinomy appears in Robert Garner’s *Environmental Politics*, specifically in chapter 1 where he presents typologies of the normative antinomic forms of environmental subjectivity and politics.

³²⁹ Consider the introduction to an article on *This Changes Everything* from *Jacobin*: “What does it mean to change the world? The Left has long proclaimed the need to ‘change everything’—to foment revolution rather than advance reform” (Battistoni, “How to Change Everything”). The slippage, let alone conflation, between the Left and eco-politics here has characterized much of the critical reception of Klein’s *This Changes Everything*. Indeed, is the Left or environmental politics (or both) supposed to bring about this change?

³³⁰ Winship, “Naomi Klein.”

³³¹ Newman, *Socialism*, 110. See Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 314–5 on this antinomy.

othering of society.

25. With *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein has emerged as a central figure in contemporary discourse surrounding environmental politics: one who is not reducible to our two above typologies of environmentalism and who has, moreover, sought to move beyond this either/or altogether. On the registers of her thought and temperament, we should note how Klein exhibits a certain compatibility between these two theoretico-practical orientations. Indeed, in terms of her reception, Klein has been celebrated by both neo-anarchists (see her *No Logo* (1999)) and also more mainstream, left-identifying liberals. *This Changes Everything* documents Klein's own break with market environmentalism as an approach to addressing global warming and finds her rethinking how to best approach the problem. Seeing capitalist society as the fundamental stumbling block to tackling climate change (the subtitle of her book: "Capitalism vs. The Climate"), Klein has argued that nothing less than a "profound and radical economic transformation" will be able to avert the onset crisis.³³² Yet Klein is wary of both local, "activist" approaches to bringing about such a transformation (that are "performed by a small tribe within a culture") as well as reformist approaches that look to the "political class" (i.e., the managerial political elite), whom she criticizes as "wholly incapable of seizing those tools and implementing those plans [to redress the crisis], since doing so involves unlearning the core tenets of the stifling free-market ideology that governed every stage of their rise to power."³³³

Klein's historico-political horizon, however, is ultimately that of the '60s-70s New Left and its irreducible concept of a 'movement' onto which her optimism and hopes for the future are inextricably cathected. In the final chapter of *This Changes Everything* she turns to the history of social movements and notes how in the civil rights movement, for instance, "the usual

³³² Ibid., 391.

³³³ Ibid., 397.

categories dividing ‘activists’ and ‘regular people’” “became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life. Activists were, quite simply, everyone.”³³⁴ While Klein sees such inclusivity as desirable, she insists that she is not calling for a “new movement that will magically succeed where others failed.”³³⁵ Instead, she seeks to understand how, like certain past social movements, “climate change can be the force—the grand push—that will bring together all of [the] still living movements.”³³⁶

26. As has been argued by Richard Rubin (2009), the concept of a movement stands as something of a regulative idea for “the dominant conception of politics on the [post-New Left] Left.”³³⁷ Indeed, this normative understanding of a movement, which is wedded to the politics of the New Left, grasps its “goal,” Rubin writes, as putting “pressure on the government to do something or to not do something,” which—while not a bad or wrong-headed pursuit in and of itself—tends to bracket “the possibility that the global environment in which movements operate could itself ever be radically changed.”³³⁸ To be sure, Rubin continues, “[w]e will have movements against bad things, such as war, poverty, [etc.], but we are going to keep fighting essentially the same struggles under different conditions, sometimes better and sometimes worse.”³³⁹ What should be underlined here is that the horizon of a movement—Rubin goes on—is a “profoundly pessimistic conception for the Left to have, and it is not the one it always had. At one time the Left had a much more triumphal conception of its own capacity to build a radically new world.”³⁴⁰ In other words, “a conception of politics centered on movements [or even, for that matter, a ‘movement of movements’ *pace* Klein] is one that has already taken a

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid., 459.

³³⁶ Ibid., 396.

³³⁷ Rubin, “What is a movement?”, 2.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

huge amount of defeat and pessimism for granted.”³⁴¹ Rubin here articulates one unthought of post-New Left politics, within which our contemporary post-political moment is contained.

XV. Conclusion: Environmental Politics and the History of the Left, a Preliminary Re-encounter

27. Many of the theoretical and practical impasses environmental politics faces appear to predate its own historical emergence when placed into a more general economy of history, one which reaches farther back than the ever-lingering narrative employment of the ‘60s-70s New Left. More precisely, these problems can be understood as reiterations of ‘past’ problems in theory and praxis which various forms of the Left once countenanced in real, historical time but perhaps never properly worked through; problems that may consequently still persist, undigested, in the present. Yet while the theoretical and practical challenges faced by eco-politics may have precedents in the history of the Left, or may be bound up with past leftist problems yet to be liquidated, the former are nevertheless unprecedented and must be addressed in their novelty and singularity given our historical juncture. In light of the above discontents with eco-politics, the appeal of grafting eco-politics and -movements onto a more general (but perhaps more dogmatic and authoritarian) history of the Left is that the perceived inefficacies and failures of eco-politics are accounted for and explained away by means of the reassertion of a historical master-narrative of the Left; and typically a homogenizing narrative that casts the Left with an inborn openness to degenerate.

28. Such a tack is taken in a recent work of great ambition and massive scope, which we have cited extensively heretofore, *Freedom in the Anthropocene: 20th Century Helplessness in the Face of Climate Change*. In this work the trajectory and problematics of environmental

³⁴¹ Ibid.

politics are indeed grafted onto a broader and encompassing history of the Left. Co-authors Melathopoulos and Stoner argue that working through the failed world-revolutionary politics of the Left in the early twentieth century (to be precise, from 1914–1923, ending with the “decisive defeat of communist uprisings in Germany, Italy, and Hungary”³⁴²) can help us come to grips with why contemporary eco-politics seems unable to effectuate satisfactory social transformation in the present. More broadly, these failures of the Left are also understood by the authors as setting the geopolitical stage for the unchecked post-WWII dynamic of the Great Acceleration.³⁴³

The chief merit of *Freedom in the Anthropocene* lies in its heeding Chakrabarty’s call to explain

this catastrophe [the Anthropocene]...[via] a conversation between disciplines and between recorded and deep histories of human beings in the same way that the agricultural revolution of ten thousand years ago could not be explained except through a convergence of three disciplines: geology, archaeology, and history.³⁴⁴

In other words, heeding the call for radical interdisciplinarity in the face of the hyper-object of global warming. Yet even further, *Freedom in the Anthropocene* queries the politics of the Anthropocene by integrating the political and tendential purview of Marxism with geological “deep histories” of the trajectory that the Anthropocene retroactively indexes.³⁴⁵ Despite our present ability to construct deep histories, Chakrabarty reminds us that “[i]n no discussion of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as and through processes closely linked to their acquisition of freedom.”³⁴⁶ To be sure, without the insertion of the immanent streams of agonistic politics and the modern pursuit of freedom, the Anthropocene stands as a

³⁴² Melathopoulos & Stoner, *FITA*, 40.

³⁴³ “[T]he understated feature of the Great Acceleration is the extent to which the runaway development pattern seems foreclosed in spite of numerous attempts to change its course” (Ibid., 21).

³⁴⁴ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 219.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 208.

mere historical category. Describing past history that we do not identify with, geological space-time and the trajectory of human history—wherein the modern pursuit of freedom arises—stand unmediated. Ultimately, *Freedom in the Anthropocene* succeeds in constellating two histories: the history of emancipatory politics as culminating in Marxism as a politics, and the deep geologico-ecological history of the Anthropocene. However, *Freedom in the Anthropocene* has by and large neglected examining the antinomies animating environmental politics as non-identical from those bequeathed by the history of the Left, a task we have undertaken here.

29. The twin pitfalls with regard to constellating the history of the Left and environmental politics are, on the one hand, to reduce one history to the other (i.e., one trajectory becomes a master-narrative); and, on the other hand, to treat them as distinct trajectories that exist in parallel universes (that have no bearing on one another). Heuristically, eco-politics is here presented as non-identical to the history of the Left so as to retain both of their respective trajectories and messianisms; yet, as I have advanced heretofore, it may be productive to regard this former historical trajectory as being entangled with the latter trajectory, if we are to adequately reckon with the former's discontents. The reification of these two historical trajectories as categorically distinct thus opens up the possibility to virtually rearrange them into a new constellation via the critical model of allegory. Moreover, the purpose of speculatively mediating the two is to reveal how an apparently one-sided standpoint may have purchase beyond its own ipseity.

30. Not only does *Freedom in the Anthropocene* posit a certain authoritative and self-identical understanding of the history of the Left, but the co-authors' tendencies to regard this specific trajectory as if it were the hidden truth of history³⁴⁷ risks succumbing to age-old hermeneutical trappings of leftist dogmatism. Like the religious spirit that sees God in

³⁴⁷ In other words, an unconscious writing of history that is self-identical and unequivocal.

everything, such a left-centric view of history—that addresses each emergent phenomenon as being overdetermined by the past³⁴⁸—risks becoming a non-negotiable stance that closes off availability to both the present and future (and perhaps a different past) by fixating the ‘failed’ past, despite its avowedly good-cum-revolutionary intentions. (Trotsky and Trotskyism’s cathexis of 1917 would be a prime example of such an intransigent left-hermeneutics.) Such a model of interpretation resembles Freudian psychoanalysis insofar as every moment of crisis spells reemergence: each new crisis represents the ongoing failure to solve a past (psychic, social, etc.) conflict that was never adequately attended to and/or resolved. (This particular understanding of sedimented crisis is articulated in Adorno’s formulation, “the new...remains the old in distress, in its hour of need.”³⁴⁹) Worse, it can border on becoming a jargon of authenticity that belittles forgetfulness and authoritarianly declares an originary *arche* to which all thinking and praxis must claim fidelity.

The above leftist hermeneutical trappings lie less in the Zizekian-Badiouian variety of Stalinophilic decisionism and more in an overidentification with Adorno’s cul-de-sac. In embracing Adorno’s ambivalences and antinomies, *Freedom in the Anthropocene* ultimately hypostatizes the historico-philosophical significance of Adorno and remains within the trap of compulsive historical retrieval, castigating all political forms born of immediacy and resistance as ‘New Leftism’ or undialectical anarchism. In other words, while *Freedom in the Anthropocene* effectively broaches the matter of Adorno’s historico-philosophical significance and explores the enduring antinomies that his corpus registers, the work is unable, notwithstanding, to overcome Adorno’s cul-de-sac, which is doubtless another matter altogether.

³⁴⁸ Here ‘the past’ here could be broadly defined as the historical accumulation of the struggle between labor and capital; or perhaps in a more overdetermined and characteristic way: the Left’s internalization of defeat via Stalinism, manifested in the authoritarian psyche.

³⁴⁹ Adorno, *COL*, 95.

To be sure, overcoming Adorno's cul-de-sac would first necessitate an acknowledgment of the ways in which our historical juncture is discontinuous with Adorno's and, secondly, an acknowledgement that a minimum amount of experimentation, that is, present and futural (psychic) availability, is required in order to simultaneously move beyond this dead-end and all the while preserve the insights of Adorno. As we have sought to explicate in this chapter, such experimentation could come through thematizing the contemporary antinomies of environmental politics; or, perhaps in a different register, by addressing the antinomic ambivalences that are expressed in and through contemporary ecological subjectivity.

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