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Reply to Iaan Reynolds: “The Dialectic of Progress and the Cultivation of Resistance in Critical Social Theory”

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Among the many concepts that have fallen under suspicion in critical theory, the concept of progress may be the most contested. In “The Dialectic of Progress and the Cultivation of Resistance in Critical Social Theory,” Iaan Reynolds focuses on the status of progress, specifically in relation to the task of grounding the normative foundations of critical theory (Reynolds 2021).<sup>1</sup>

### **On the “First-Generation” of the Frankfurt School**

In this all-together excellent intervention, Reynolds raises important objections to the rejection of the “first-generation” of the Frankfurt School and develops highly productive insights regarding the program of critical theory, which he interprets as a method of reflection, education, and resistance to capitalist society. Taking Amy Allen’s much discussed book, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2016), as a reference point, Reynolds defends the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno from their critics. Positioning their dialectical conception of progress as the key to the development of critical consciousness and novel forms of resistance, Reynolds develops the related notions of progress, reflection, and education as immanent possibilities of capitalist society. In addition to problematizing the need for a normative foundation in critical theory, he establishes—to my mind correctly—the unity of critical theory and the Marxist critique of political economy. After opposing the “normative turn” in figures like Jürgen Habermas, and, to a lesser extent, Allen, Reynolds articulates the possibility of an immanent critique of capitalist society.

The early practitioners of critical theory, Reynolds argues, reject the project of grounding its core normative commitments, favoring a dialectical method that is immanent to the antagonistic relations of society. He portrays the notion of “critical consciousness” as an emerging possibility of society and supports the retrieval of a dialectical concept of progress—one that is both “backward” and “forward-looking” in orientation. I agree with his claim that Horkheimer and Adorno did not simply abandon the “backward-looking” moment of progress, despite all the skepticism they shared regarding Hegelian conceptions of universal history.<sup>2</sup>

Reynolds is more interested in delineating the possibility of a mode of critical consciousness than he is in engaging the details of Allen’s efforts to decolonize critical theory, and, to this end, I will respond to his analysis regarding the relation between critique and the capitalist social object. Although Adorno rejects the project of rationally grounding the normative foundations of critical theory, his negative dialectics should be grasped as a process of immanent critique that expresses—and requires—moral, normative, and experiential concepts that belong to the capitalist social object. The concept of progress Adorno articulates, moreover, requires a normative impulse that is not graspable in terms of linear, socio-historical development, but orients critique around a possible future that could be free

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, Iaan. 2021. “The Dialectic of Progress and the Cultivation of Resistance in Critical Theory.” *Social Epistemology* 1-12. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2021.2000663.

<sup>2</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno. 2006. *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965* translated by Rodney Livingstone, 79-88. Cambridge: Polity Press.

from domination. Below I will reconstruct the main outline of Reynolds's argument as it pertains to the concepts of political economy, rationality, and the cultivation of critical consciousness, and will provide suggestions that could be used to develop and expand the critical intention of this project. As a general recommendation that will be developed below, I suggest that Reynolds consider the potentials for a critique of capitalist labor as fundamental to the idea of progress, as well as an important—if overlooked—aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory.

### **The Normative Turn in Critical Theory**

Reynolds begins by assessing the limits of the normative turn in critical theory, addressing Habermas's rejection of Horkheimer and Adorno's apparently totalizing abandonment of enlightenment reason. Reynolds summarizes this position: "the first generation of critical theory makes claims about the wrongness of contemporary life, but simultaneously revokes its ability to justify these claims through its conception of the totalizing force of enlightenment rationality," (Reynolds 2021, 2). Against the putative nihilism and relativism of this abandonment of enlightenment reason, Habermas's approach aims to recover the normative content of modernity through a rational account of society's differentiated "value spheres" (2).

If one is to judge the reception of these competing methods, Habermas's theory of communicative action, or, more recently, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, have superseded the first-generation. However, as Reynolds suggests, this change in perspective has lost sight of the emancipatory potentials of Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory, particularly its critique of political economy. In a careful reconstruction of their critique of positivist, or, traditional theory, he focuses on the concept of society as a "negative totality" and delineates the meaning of dialectics as a method that can articulate the mediation of rationality by the objective relations of society.

Opposing the positivist criteria for transparency, clarity, and stable categories for the analysis of structural dynamics, critical theory grasps society as a contradictory, double-sided, and mediated object. This dialectical approach returns to Marx's critique of political economy, which understands capitalist society as a fetishized, inverted social world that reproduces itself "behind the backs" of producers (Marx 1976, 135). Far from being the agents of their own world, individuals in capitalism act under the compulsion of the law of value.<sup>3</sup> Reynolds interprets the implications of this inversion, foregrounding its centrality: "Critical theory strives to bring this antagonism—between human beings making up society, and the relations determining its organization—into consciousness through reflection," (Reynolds, 2021, 4). He correctly disputes the charge that Horkheimer and Adorno abandoned Marx's critique of political economy (in the name of embracing a culturalist critique of instrumental reason), suggesting that their social theory "focuses on the antagonisms and contradictions

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<sup>3</sup> "The form this Hegelian theme takes in Marx is transformed almost out of all recognition, but retains extraordinary power. It is the highly obscure and difficult theory of the so-called law of value. This is the summation of all the social acts taking place through exchange. It is through this process that society maintains itself and, according to Marx, continues to reproduce itself and expand despite all the catastrophes that may eventuate" (Adorno 2006, 49-50).

underlying the social whole, resulting in a critique of capitalist political economy and its distinct forms of conceptuality” (Reynolds 2021, 4).

### **The Exchange Society**

How does political economy constitute these forms of conceptuality? Reynolds pursues Adorno’s theory of “exchange society,” detailing the complex inner connection between the practice of commodity exchange and cognition. Social mediation, according to Adorno, occurs through commodity exchange, a principle of synthesis or integration that binds all individuals and activities to the goal of capitalist profit. Adorno’s understanding of the mediation of exchange and thought is grounded in the concept of identity. The “identity-principle” operates on several levels. Socially, the act of commodity exchange “renders dissimilar objects identical” by reducing them to the unity of abstract labor time.<sup>4</sup> Commodity exchange posits identity in space and time; by equating different, heterogeneous, and non-identical use-values to exchange-value, the material, spatio-temporal properties of the commodities are presumed to remain unchanged by the act of exchange.<sup>5</sup> The abstract identity achieved in exchange constitutes an objective conceptuality that, as Adorno puts it, “holds sway in reality itself” (Adorno 1977, 80).<sup>6</sup>

Exchange establishes an equivalence of monetary value between concrete things by abstracting from their use-value. The liberal bourgeois categories of equality, fairness, and freedom are generated through the mediations of exchange, a socially synthetic principle that underlies enlightenment modernity’s universalist ideals. The putative equivalence and fairness of value, however, veils the reality of an antagonistic class relation between capital and wage-labor that is objectively unequal and exploitative. As Adorno argues—following Marx—the exchange of equivalent values requires the appropriation of surplus-value in production: “the main characteristic of the exchange of equivalents has been that unequal things would be exchanged in its name, that the surplus value of labor would be appropriated” (Reynolds 2021, 4). The spread of exchange conceals the non-identity of surplus value that is produced through the wage-relation. The concepts of political economy (for example, the commodity, labor, value), conceal their underlying genesis in practice. The appearance and essence of capitalism are contradictory in their unity and the task of critical theory is deciphering the social essence that vanishes in its forms of appearance as commodity-values.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the concept of real abstraction was introduced into Marxist theory by the economist Alfred Sohn-Rethel, whose work influenced Adorno. For an account of the differences between Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, see Frank Engster. 2016. “Subjectivity and Its Crisis: Commodity Mediation and the Economic Constitution of Objectivity and Subjectivity.” *History of the Human Sciences* 1-19.

<sup>6</sup> Adorno, 1977. “Sociology and Empirical Research.” *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, 80. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

The identity-principle also shapes cognition, a form of mediation that Adorno interprets in *Negative Dialectics*, (Adorno 1970).<sup>7</sup> Through a presentation of the epistemic concepts and categories of constitutive subjectivity, he unearths the genesis of forms of thought in the relations of capitalist society. His critique of “identity thinking” reveals the mediation of thought by matter, unmasking the social content concealed in the forms of instrumental thinking. But the critique of identity thinking does not posit an independent cognitive standpoint existing apart from society. “No theory escapes the market anymore,” (16). However, negative dialectics pushes against thought’s impulse to unify, to master reality through general concepts by understanding this impulse as a socially determined compulsion. Identity thinking follows the program of the inverted world of capital, of a totality that inverts means and ends, reducing individuals to “character masks,” or, “personifications” of economic categories (Adorno 1969-1970, 148).

Moments of non-identity not belonging to the logic of capital’s conceptuality are denied in their appearance as things. Identity and exchange mediate each other, reproducing society as a seemingly autonomous whole that lives an independent life over its subjects. If exchange establishes the concepts of equality and fairness through the absent appropriation of surplus value in production, identity thinking establishes the validity of formal reasoning through the determination of universal concepts. In the cognitive activity of conceptual predication, the unity of experience is achieved through the disavowal of the non-identity of concept and object. Identity requires the thinking subject to forget, or repress, the nonconceptual moments of reality that cannot be subsumed under concepts. Capitalist society is riven with such false identifications—the concept of profit is only established through the denial of surplus-value in labor; the concept of value only appears in the form of money; the concept of the free individual only appears through the denial of society’s objective value-relations.<sup>8</sup>

In the fetishized world of the commodity, capitalist profit appears to have the occult quality of self-generation, as though money could produce more money independently of human practice. Adorno pursues this connection between identity and exchange through a critique of subjectivity and representationalism, arguing that the identity principle is “akin” to exchange, and, like exchange, identity is implicitly founded on non-identity. Identity is constituted by reducing diverse, heterogenous, and incommensurable acts of labor to abstract labor, to simple, equalized magnitudes of average labor-time: “The exchange-principle, the reduction of human labor to an abstract general concept of average-labor time, is Ur-related to the identification principle. It has its social model in exchange, and it would not be without the latter, through which non-identical particular essences and achievements become commensurable, identical” (Adorno 1970, 149). The cognitive validity of identity is a socially constituted identity; just as the exchange-principle spreads throughout the negative totality through the private appropriation of social labor, cognition establishes the untruth of identity as the standard of instrumental reason.

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<sup>7</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by Dennis Redmond. Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ND2Trans.txt>, 16. Note that the Redmond translation is not paginated, all paginations refer to the German original.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis that explores the question of society as an objective conceptuality, see Werner Bonefeld, 2012. “Negative Dialectics in Miserable Time: Notes on Adorno and Social Praxis.” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 12 (1): 122-134.

The critique of identity thinking—as Reynolds indicates—is not a critique of rationality simpliciter, rather, such a critique interprets and exposes the sham unity of reason and domination as ideology. One detail I object to in Reynolds’s approach, however, is his understanding of dialectics as a specific “method” that can be applied to society.<sup>9</sup> Adorno’s presentation of dialectics not only refuses the functionalizing of dialectics as a method of critique, but also rejects the orthodox Marxist conception of dialectical nature.<sup>10</sup> Dialectics refers to the essential wrongness of social reality, to the negative totality that is riven by the contradictions of the commodity-form, by exchange-value and use-value. The social essence, he writes, “is downright mischief-making [Unwesen], the arrangement of the world which degrades human beings into the means of their *sese conservare*, curtailing and threatening their life, by reproducing it and deceiving them that things are so, in order to satisfy their needs” (Adorno 1970, 169).

Negative dialectics is the interpretation of this inverted state of things, moving through the objective concepts of society and revealing their genesis in relations of sensuous practice. The negative totality is a socially constituted abstraction; concrete relations of practice appear in conceptualized form, as value-relations crystallized in money. As the identity-principle circulates throughout the whole of society, compelling subjects to adopt a form of cognition that is as formal and calculating as the organizational principles of production, they must internalize identity as the principle of their self-preservation.

Reynolds rightly names positivism as one of Adorno’s primary objects of critique, because positivist sociology—according to its standard—can only identify society with observable facts without recognizing the prior social form of the totality that organizes all facts. Positivism’s rejection of all speculative thought belongs to the false unity of reason and domination, to the ongoing social processes that coordinate reality according to strictures prefabricated by the logic of exchange. Can any reality escape the grip of the totality? Adorno’s wager is that the concepts of the totality are immanently self-critical, that negativity lives in the abstract stability of identity, and negative dialectics can reflect on the historical contents of concepts by unsealing the reality that comes into contradiction with them.

### **Progress and Critical Reflection**

Reynolds correctly locates the concept of progress as the key to the process of critical reflection because the possibility of freedom from domination requires the memory of the practices and forms of existence that have dissolved in the solidification of the totality. To interpret this dialectic, Adorno engages the false dichotomy between “static” and “dynamic” categories in sociology, revealing the internal connection between both moments (Adorno

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<sup>9</sup> I acknowledge that Reynolds (1991) refines this perspective while detailing his work on the essay form, and is closer to Adorno’s ambivalent position in this regard, referring to his framework as “methodically unmethodical,” in “The Essay as Form” *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Sherry Weber Nicholsen, 20. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno criticizes the degradation of dialectics in the so-called “Diamat” tradition: “Only such an inversion of the Marxist motives as that of Diamat, which prolongs the realm of necessity with the assertion that it would be that of freedom, could degenerate into falsifying the polemical Marxist concept of natural lawfulness from a construction of natural history into a scientific doctrine of invariants,” *Negative Dialectics*, 348.

1961).<sup>11</sup> Modern society's progress is both static and dynamic, as social reproduction only preserves capitalism's external ends. Capitalist society posits a concept of progress one-sidedly, as ceaseless reproduction and expansion, while preserving its static essence, the class antagonism that is conserved through capitalist society's many transformations. Adorno refers to this inversion of progress and regression as history living "under the spell of blind nature," because social reproduction only exists for accumulation as the end-in-itself of capital (Adorno 2006, 124). This regressive expansion constitutes society as a "second nature," preventing human practices from becoming—in the truest sense—historical. Modern bourgeois society is characterized by a contradiction between the compulsory logic of society in its static and dynamic tension: "the dynamic aspects of society are, at the same time, its static aspects: Internal conflict provides the energy for change, but no change has taken place in this respect" (Adorno 1961, 44). Endlessly progressing in the mode of unchanging stasis, society acquires the appearance of being a cyclical, self-replicating, natural object.

Society's static dynamic also impacts subjectivity; the static moment belonging to the dynamism of endless production stamps subjects with an ahistorical consciousness. The detemporalization of time in bourgeois society can be attributed to the exchange-principle: "Exchange is the rational form of mythical eternal sameness. In the tit for tat of every exchange, each act revokes the other; it's a zero-sum game" (Adorno 2006, 170). However, the class antagonism that underlies the production of surplus-value belies the principle of equal exchange, and Adorno finds an emerging concept of progress in this very antagonism: "progress originates in the fact that the justice that amounts to a repetition of sameness is unmasked as injustice and perpetual inequality" (170). In other words, exchange society would disappear if the commodities exchanged were truly equivalent. A non-fetishized concept of progress then, according to Adorno, would be more expansive than its mere instrumental, productive, or technical application. The possibility of progress is immanent to the objective falsity of exchange—the reversal of domination entails "resistance to regression" in all of its present manifestations (172).

Reynolds is right to find in Adorno's concept of progress an orientation that is as much "backwards-looking" as it is "forwards-looking," because any possible freedom from domination would grasp the movement of society living "under the spell of nature" in terms of a conflict that was never resolved, namely, as a civilizational process that restricted practice and life to mere self-preservation. Moreover, he rightly situates the concept of progress within Marx's critique of political economy, which understands capital as an immanent dynamic that generates the possibilities of its overcoming. The very processes of rationalization, production, and techno-scientific development that belong to society's dynamic are equally tendencies that could improve living conditions, ameliorate poverty, and free human beings from needless labor.<sup>12</sup> However, it should also be recognized that Adorno

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<sup>11</sup> See Adorno, 1961. "'Static' and 'Dynamic' as Sociological Categories." Translated by H. Kaal, *Diogenes* 9 (28): 28-49. For an excellent analysis of this dialectic, see Marcel Stoetzler, 2015. "Needless Necessity: Sameness and Dynamic in Capitalist Society." *Fast Capitalism* 12 (1): 51-64.

<sup>12</sup> "The decrease in the quantity of work, which could theoretically be at a minimum even today, prepares the way for a new quality to come in society. There is no longer any need for one-dimensional progress; but there is [sic] the danger that our present productive relationships will resist the change demanded by our productive forces, and induce the entire system to continue stubbornly in its present course. Full employment becomes an ideal even though work need no longer be the measure of everything." Adorno, "'Static' and 'Dynamic,'" 47.

was deeply suspicious of the traditional Marxist framework which embraced the forces of production as a spontaneous principle of human freedom. He rejects the dogmatic thesis that speaks of a dialectic between the forces of production and the relations of production, understood traditionally as a determinate stage that would free labor from the “fetters” of capitalist relations.<sup>13</sup> He names this conception a “perverter of Marxian motives,” and deems any claim regarding the “natural growth of society as fetishistic,” that is, as ideology.<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, while not embracing this worldview necessarily, at times borders on suggesting that progress is immanent to the determinate contradictions of capitalist society’s economic and technological development.<sup>15</sup> However, as he also indicates, Horkheimer and Adorno’s dialectical reflection on society maintains that society’s progressive domination of nature generates a “possible use of reason unchained from society’s false needs and illusory forms” (Reynolds 2021, 6).

How does this possible use of reason emerge? Reynolds understands the need to articulate and cultivate forms of critical consciousness in the position of the social theorist as the key to resistance. Fundamental to this revised concept of reason, he argues, is the immediate experience of the senseless suffering existing in a totally rationalized society. One difference I have with this portrayal of suffering, however, is his suggestion that this experience rejects “theoretical elaboration” (3). Although Adorno refers to a moment of immediacy in all mediation, it is too strong to say that the experience of suffering is free from conceptualization. “All pain and negativity,” Adorno writes, “are many times over mediated” (Adorno 1970, 202).

Cultivating the consistent sense of non-identity does not rely on immediate, pre-reflective intuitions; the primary insight that informs negative dialectics is that non-identity is the implicit goal of identity, that the constitutive identity of abstract commodity exchange is a principle of mediation that aims to subsume the whole of reality but finds itself lacking. The only way out of exchange society is through its concepts and categories. “Contradiction indexes the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (5). Negative dialectics reveals that however much society has become

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<sup>13</sup> For additional remarks on this point see Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*: “we find something in Marx [...] called the ‘metaphysics of the forces of production.’ This means that he attributes a simply absolute potential to the productive energies of human beings and their extension in technology [...] this vast metaphysical pathos, this manner never properly explained, but one in which something like the metaphysical substantiality of these productive forces is presupposed, the latter would assert themselves victoriously in the conflict between the forces of production and the relations of production. Without this construct the entire Marxian approach would be incomprehensible. I have no wish to identify myself with this speculative side of Marx. I feel that this optimism about the forces of production has become problematic in the extreme.” Adorno, 2008. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, 96. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 348. Cited in Bonefeld, “Negative Dialectics in Miserable Times,” 132.

<sup>15</sup> I would simply qualify Reynolds’s claim that “while instrumental domination deepens exchange society’s control over every dimension of human life, these expansions of mastery also sow the seeds of their own overcoming,” by suggesting that this overcoming is in no way inevitable or even likely. Reynolds, “The Dialectic of Progress,” 6.

independent from individuals, it remains a form of human practice, and could be transformed through the abolition of labor as the sole form of value.<sup>16</sup>

## Redemption

As Reynolds shows, Adorno's efforts to salvage a form of emancipatory reason that would be free from instrumental domination recommends a process of development, self-reflection, and education (*Bildung*), in the social theorist. This understanding of education is both developmental and reflexive insofar as it is tied to a more radical concept of progress. Indeed, the notion of education as political practice is everywhere in Adorno, and it provided the framework for his interventions into the problem of postwar reconstruction. I recommend that Reynolds modify his claim that the process of education and self-reflection moves "beyond the justification or retrieval of normative principles," by engaging a normative impulse that pullulates in Adorno's work. Specifically, the utopian concept of "redemption" orients the task of critique, as well as self-reflection, in this process of development.<sup>17</sup>

As Adorno writes in the final aphorism of *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique" (Adorno, 2005, 247). The standpoint of redemption abjures linear or teleological conceptions of progress, as well as the empty homogeneity of abstract time. The standpoint of redemption refers to a possible future that would be free from domination, recoiling on the present to disrupt its grey identity: "Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light" (247). Such a future—however remote—turns on the emancipation of non-identity from the coercive mastery of identity, from the inverted world of capital that expands in order to remain the same. Adorno's utopian concept of redemption is not a foundational principle, but a reflexive standard of dialectical criticism, a position that holds the wrongness of present society against a possible future.

The concept of redemption, far from positing a representation or utopian image, works negatively through the concepts and categories of political economy, revealing their consistent failure to deliver the promise of enlightenment's potentials. As Reynolds summarizes: "In its ever-renewed struggle for self-transformation, philosophical critique aspires to a new relationship to itself and the social world, from within the negativity of the present" (Reynolds 2021, 9). Future struggles and forms of resistance may benefit from the concept of progress, if such a concept can be unchained from the compulsion of exchange society, from the reduction of life to mere means, to preservation.

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<sup>16</sup> "The possible reduction of labor to a minimum ought to radically influence the concept of praxis," Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* translated by Dennis Redmond, 242.

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds indicates that "Adorno and Horkheimer hope for a form of reason that could redeem humanity," 5. This depiction of the idea of redemption goes too far—redemption belongs to the underlying aims of negative dialectics, which seeks to unseal the non-identical through the reconciliation of mimesis and cognition.