

IDENTITY, EXCHANGE, AND VIOLENCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF MARXISM FOR RECONCILING ADORNO'S METAPHYSICS AND POLITICS

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This paper follows the question of violence as a guide to exploring the link between the metaphysical, social, and political in Adorno's thought. More specifically, I argue that violence, in the form of the exclusion, domination, and fungibility of life, marks the shared space of the metaphysical, material, and ethical for Adorno. Hence, this project contests the longstanding Habermas-inspired notion that there is something unclear in the way in which Adorno's metaphysical and methodological critiques connect to his social and political concerns—most specifically, his desire to address real suffering. In addition, this paper contributes to the growing interest in Adorno's Marxism, showing that it is through his commitments to Marx that Adorno sees the real, material importance of his critique of metaphysics and ontology, as well as the possibility for resisting the forces of social domination.

Cet article suit la question de la violence comme une guide pour explorer le lien entre la métaphysique, le social et le politique dans la pensée d'Adorno. Plus particulièrement, je soutiens que la violence, sous la forme de l'exclusion, la domination et la fongibilité de la vie, marque l'espace partagé de la métaphysique, du matériel et de l'éthique chez Adorno. Dès lors, ce projet remet en cause la notion de longue date inspirée par Habermas selon laquelle il y aurait quelque manque de clarté dans la manière dont les critiques métaphysiques et méthodologiques d'Adorno se relient avec ses soucis sociaux et politiques—plus spécifiquement son désir de s'occuper de la souffrance réelle. Par ailleurs, cette étude contribue à l'intérêt en plein essor au marxisme d'Adorno, montrant que c'est dans ses engagements avec Marx qu'Adorno voit l'importance réelle et matérielle de sa critique de la métaphysique et de l'ontologie, ainsi que la possibilité de résister aux forces de la domination sociale.

Despite oft-cited claims to the contrary by both supporters and detractors of Adornian critical theory, one can trace a direct link between Adorno's metaphysics and his politics via the concept of violence.¹ One finds across Adorno's corpus a concern for the way in which the dialectical processes of conceptualization, specifically in the relationship between subject and object, do violence to the objectivity of objects.² More precisely, Adorno insists that there is a structural and methodological violence of exclusion at the heart of conceptualization, in which the detemporalizing logic of the concept leads to the exclusion of the unique spatio-temporal specificity of objects from their concept.³ Adorno goes on to show that this structural violence of exclusion has its social corollary in the capitalist logic of exchange and system of wage labour: the violence of dialectics mirrored in the ideological domination and fungibility of subjects under capitalist modes of production. Hence, against Habermas's influential claim that there is something confused in how Adorno relates his metaphysics to his politics, this paper follows the concept of violence as the link between Adorno's metaphysical, social, and political concerns. I argue that violence, in the form of the exclusion, domination, and fungibility of life, marks the shared space of the metaphysical, material, ethical, and political in Adorno's thought. The clear identification of this shared space thus contests the notion that there is something "inappropriately 'metaphysical' or

¹ Following the work of Jürgen Habermas, a general concern emerges in critical theory that Adorno's thinking lacks material specificity, that his emphasis on aesthetics occludes, confuses, or at worst mystifies the ethical and political force of critical theory. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (tr.) F. G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 117–18, and Axel Honneth, "Communication and Reconciliation: Habermas's Critique of Adorno," *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*, vol. 39 (1979): 45–61. This basic concern is often repeated even by those who would defend the practical import of Adorno's work. See, for example, J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xi, and Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, (tr.) N. Solomon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), xi–ix. For an excellent review of the contradictory ways in which theorists have positioned Adorno's work particularly as either anti-materialist/anti-Marxist or as unduly religious, see Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2011), 7–10.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (tr.) E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 5. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ND.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, (ed.) R. Tiedemann, (tr.) E. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 70. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as M.

‘theological’ or ‘utopian’” in Adorno’s thought⁴ and enables a careful reading of Adorno’s Marxism that resists any merely aesthetic or theological understanding of his political aims.⁵ In fact, as my analysis shows, for Adorno the hope of resisting the violence of social domination lies not in some obscure messianism or abstract aesthetics but in concrete changes to the modes of production.

Before approaching the relationship between the metaphysical and the concrete in Adorno’s thought, it is important to understand the connection between violence and negative dialectics. For Adorno, “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder.” (ND, 5) Dialectics is at root the recognition of this essential non-identity, the fact that concepts can never completely grasp the objects of which they are concepts. The result of this structural non-identity in all processes of conceptualization and representation is that the relation of thought to objects takes the form of contradiction: “[c]ontradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity.” (*Ibid.*) For Adorno, dialectics is driven by contradiction, the inability to have identity or sameness without difference: “It [dialectics] indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.” (*Ibid.*) It is this basic and contradictory intertwining of identity and difference, the homogeneous and heterogeneous, that necessitates the link between dialectics, guilt, and ultimately violence.

Having established the contradictory character of dialectics, Adorno writes, “[d]ialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.”

⁴ Lambert Zuidervaart. “Metaphysics after Auschwitz: Suffering and Hope in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*,” in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*, (ed.) D. A. Burke, C. J. Campbell, K. Kiloh, M. K. Palamarek, and J. Short (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 133.

⁵ On the theme of Adorno’s Marxism, see, for example, Riccardo Bellofiore, “The ‘Neue Marx-Lektüre’: Putting the Critique of Political Economy Back into the Critique of Society,” *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 189 (Jan/Feb 2015); J. Holloway, F. Matamoros, and S. Tischler, eds., *Negativity & Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2009); Deborah Cook, “From the Actual to the Possible: Nonidentity Thinking,” *Constellations*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2005): 21–35, and “The Sundered Totality: Adorno’s Freudo-Marxism,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, vol. 25, no. 2, (1995): 191–215; and Yvonne Sherratt, “Adorno’s Concept of the Self: A Marriage of Freud and Hegelian Marxism,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 58, no. 227 (2003): 101–17.

(*Ibid.*) Dialectics follows out the immanent, contradictory relationship between objects and their concepts, exposing rather than positing the structural insufficiency of concepts to capture their objects without leaving a remainder. Dialectics is not, Adorno insists, a “standpoint,” but rather a mode of immanent critique. (*Ibid.*) The force of this mode of critique is the inherent insufficiency of thought—the failure of thought to represent objects in their totality. Adorno characterizes this necessary and motivating insufficiency as a “guilt” (*Schuld*), implying an “offence” or “fault” as well as a “debt,” “owing,” or “obligation.” The relationship of thought to objects inevitably involves a moment of misrepresentation and wrongdoing, as thought’s failure to capture its object structurally excludes certain aspects of the object from its concept. It is this failure, this exclusion of certain aspects of objects, that marks the essential, structural violence at work in the relationship between subject and object, thought and the world. For Adorno—and this is essential for the course I wish to illuminate here—there is a constitutive, exclusionary violence always at work in the processes of conceptualization, as the conceptual drive for identity guiltily excludes the non-identical elements of its object. The first step of immanent critique is the recognition of this basic structural violence. Yet the claim that cognition has a “guilty” relationship to its object implies not only that thought does violence to objects, but also that it recognizes this violence in some sense, as such recognition is necessary for the “debt” and “obligation” (in the sense of “*Schulden*”) it has to its object. Guilt cannot exist without the acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

In the context of the relation between concepts and objects, this sense of debt indicates that thought sees, in some sense, the violence it does to objects. The self-reflexive character of thinking dictates that both thought’s attempt to cognize objects and the inevitable failure of that attempt must be apparent to thought: “[w]hile doing violence [*Gewalt*] to the object of its syntheses, our thinking heeds a potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously obeys the idea of making amends to the pieces for what it has done.” (ND, 19) Thought, on an unconscious (*bewußtlos*) level, acknowledges both its dependence on objects and the violence it does to objects, and it desires to “make amends” to those “pieces” of objects it excludes. It is this reflexive, self-critical character of thought that, in a general sense, opens up the possibility of “hope” and “redemption” for Adorno. However, what should be emphasized here is Adorno’s insistence on the “unconscious” nature of this amending desire: this unconsciousness suggests that, while thought is driven to recognize its

violent relationship to objects, something in the structural logic of conceptualization impedes this recognition.

The unconscious nature of thought's reparatory desire toward its object is the result of the fact that the "pieces" of the object that are excluded in the process of conceptualization, the pieces to which thought is driven to make amends, are precisely the non-identical elements of the object that thought's identitarian logic cannot account for in identification, and, consequently, cannot cognize. The desire of thought to do justice to its object, to make amends for its violent misrepresentation of objects, thus remains structurally unrealizable, insofar as the dialectical nature of conceptualization undermines thought's identitarian drive. There will always be, Adorno argues, a certain violence in the relationship between thought and the world; and "guilt" registers both this inherent exclusionary violence as well as the unconscious and critical desire of thought to do justice to its object. It is the dialectical interplay between these two opposing drives that lies at the heart of Adorno's project, and one finds an insistence on the structural entanglement of violence and critique across Adorno's corpus: from his early work on natural history and enlightenment to his later work on aesthetics, the culture industry, and the critique of fundamental ontology. However, what is central for my analysis here is that Adorno is quite clear about how this structural violence of exclusion is necessarily a material violence.

In his lectures on metaphysics, published as *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, Adorno develops his account of the exclusionary violence entailed in the failure of objects to go into their concepts without leaving a remainder. More specifically, Adorno details how "the movement of abstraction" that characterizes the exclusionary violence of conceptualization emerges materially as an exclusion of the unique time and space of the objects subsumed under concepts. In order for the processes of conceptualization to render objects visible in thought—in order to produce, for example, the concept "1"—it is necessary, Adorno says, to abstract the unique time and space of objects: "For in referring to the items which I have just called '1' as the concept...I generally disregard the special spatial and temporal position of the elements subsumed under the concept." (M, 70) The formation of concepts is at root a grouping by similarity, an amalgamation of shared attributes, a process that must necessarily exclude or mute the differences and uniqueness of the objects so grouped. This means that in order to generate a concept, one leaves out, first and foremost, the spatial and temporal specificity of objects, excluding each object's unshared or unshareable elements. The

process of conceptualization does not randomly exclude this or that aspect of objects; rather, it excludes the very essence of objects, excluding those spatio-temporal elements that make an object's existence unique—essence marking what it is to be (*esse*) this object and not another. Hence, for Adorno, the structural, metaphysical claim that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder has its material corollary in the exclusion of the unique spatio-temporal specificity of each object from its concept. To be clear, this exclusion of spatio-temporal elements and the eventual concealment of this exclusion through the process of detemporalization is material here in a very general sense, as this kind of violence would, on Adorno's terms, be evident in all acts of conceptualization. Yet even at this general level, the relationship between Adorno's metaphysical and practical concerns are clearly marked: the structural, exclusionary violence of the dialectical relationship between subject and object mirrored by the material exclusion of the essence of objects in their reduction to abstract concepts. However, in his commitment to Marx and, more specifically, in the connection he draws between the exclusionary violence of conceptualization and the exchange logic of advanced capitalism, Adorno links this general material violence to concrete social and political violence.

Despite the tendency of some of Adorno's commentators to downplay the importance of Marx for his thinking, there has been, as outlined in the introduction, a longstanding critical interest in Adorno's Marxism. For commentators such as Deborah Cook, one simply cannot understand the social ramifications of Adorno's project without appreciating his critique of capitalism and adherence to a Marxist politics.⁶ This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the way in which he links his metaphysical and practical projects to Marxism. More specifically, Adorno contends that there is a direct relation between the violent, exclusionary logic of identity and the exploitation of the capitalist form of exchange and wage labour, the logic of exchange being nothing less than the "social model" of the identitarian logic of thought. (ND, 146)

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno defines the "exchange principle" (*das Tauschprinzip*) as "the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours," and he draws a parallel between this principle and the logic of identification, insofar as they both work to make "non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical." (ND, 146) The capitalist logic of exchange, like the conceptual logic of identity, operates to reduce a

⁶ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 2.

diverse set of individuals and forms of labour to the singular, abstract category of “wages.” This reduction diminishes all the spatial, temporal, and material elements that distinguish one worker or profession from another into wage differences. Under the system of wage labour, one factory worker is commensurable with any other, insofar as they do a similar job for a similar wage, and the difference between a factory job and any other profession is also reduced to a mere difference of wage. For example, a doctor may very well be paid more for her labour than a factory worker, but this does nothing to challenge the equivocating logic of exchange, as within this system all differences between labour are rendered as mere differences of wage (*e.g.*, a doctor is equivalent to some number of factory workers). Like the category of the concept, the notion of wage marks not the essence of any particular worker or her labour, but the abstract role or site she and her labour occupy within the system of exchange. For Adorno, the principle of exchange mirrors the violent effects of thought’s relationship to its object at the level of society: the abstract notion of wages exercise dominion over workers and their labour by excluding all the real, material differences between workers that cannot be rendered as differences of wage. Like the abstracting logic of the concept, the social effect of this abstraction is the reduction of workers to their concept, such that every worker becomes commensurable with every other worker—a reduction that, Adorno argues, operates to make individual workers ultimately superfluous and fungible.

Adorno’s concern with the abstraction inherent in the logic of exchange is not merely that it excludes and limits the potentialities of living, breathing human beings, but that it ultimately makes the individual human being superfluous: “A situation has been reached today, in the present form of the organization of work in conjunction with the maintenance of the existing relations of production, in which every person is absolutely fungible or replaceable, even under the conditions of formal freedom.” (M, 109) By reducing every subject to the category of its earning potential, the system of exchange creates a situation in which every subject, insofar as she is a “worker,” becomes replaceable by any other subject. This replaceability is, for Adorno, “absolute,” insofar as the logic of exchange has no way to recognize the value of any individual outside her generalized function within the system of exchange. Like all systems of identity, the system of exchange operates to ensure the exchangeability of the elements subsumed under that system by relegating the particularity of any of its elements to absolute unimportance. Socially, this means that fungibility is the essential principle within a system of exchange:

each worker must be subject to radical liquidation, both in the sense that they can always be replaced by another worker and in the sense that all the elements of their subjectivity that are not recognized as valuable within the system of wages must be devalued. This is true, Adorno notes, even under formal conditions of freedom, insofar as any formally free subject is still exchangeable with any other wage-earning subject. Formal freedom does little to protect the subject from radical fungibility since, in a system in which the objective essence of workers is excluded and degraded, the workers' objective freedom will also necessarily be excluded and degraded. This explains, for Adorno, why individuals are subject to this "experience" of fungibility even in highly developed, affluent, and politically progressive societies. (M, 109) Hence, Adorno traces a direct relationship between the exclusionary violence of conceptualization and identity, and the social violence of exchange and fungibility; the liquidating violence of wage labour thus appears as a direct reflection of the exclusionary violence of the detemporalizing logic of conceptualization. Furthermore, he goes on to argue that both this liquidation of the material specificity of subjects and the structural violence of conceptualization are necessarily obscured by the logic of identity and exchange—a claim that further shows the direct connection Adorno charts between his metaphysical and political projects.

Following from Adorno's understanding of the abstracting and detemporalizing process of conceptualization (as outlined above) the result of this process is that concepts come to appear fundamentally timeless: "The concept as such, once established, is not temporal; it relates, of course, to something temporal.... But in the first place, through its formation, the concept is independent of time." (M, 70) Concepts can certainly refer to temporal categories ("contemporaneity" is Adorno's example) and themselves have unique, temporal histories; but through the abstracting process of their construction, they appear to transcend any particular time and space. This apparent independence from time emerges from the fact that concepts are the result of a process of detemporalization, in which the unique spatio-temporal elements of the objects they subsume are removed. In fact, concepts are nothing but the detemporalized and abstracted set of similarities shared by a group of objects irrespective of their differences. For Adorno, timelessness marks both the great utility and the great failure of conceptualization. It usefully allows concepts to apply to objects irrespective of their spatio-temporal differences and simultaneously marks the inability of concepts to represent objects as they exist in their own unique time and space. In the appearance of timelessness, we see

both the power of concepts to give an “invariant” and “abiding” order to the world, and their inability ever to capture the essence the world. (M, 71) Adorno here reframes the guilty logic of conceptualization through the notions of abstraction and detemporalization. He highlights both the material ramifications of this structural logic of exclusion—showing that thought excludes the real, spatio-temporal particularities of objects—and the fundamental “impoverishment” and “deficiency of the concept”; timelessness, for Adorno, marks thought’s essential “privation.” (*Ibid.*) Yet, in a move that Adorno describes as “the crucial fallacy in traditional philosophy as a whole,” this deficiency of thought is curiously recast as the essential “positivity” of thought and, ultimately, of its object as well. (*Ibid.*)

Adorno contends that the abstracting violence of conceptualization, the ability of concepts to subsume particular objects under a set of common elements, is followed by an additional moment of violence, as the detemporalized elements forming concepts come to be counted as the very essence of the objects they represent:

[W]hat could be described as the greatest paralogism of all in metaphysics...is nothing other than this de-temporalization of the meaning of concepts, which is produced by the way in which concepts are formed...[and] is attributed as an inherent property to that which they subsume. (*Ibid.*)

The logic of conceptualization not only groups objects together through a set of abstract elements, but also attributes these abstract elements to objects as their very essence. The fallaciousness of this tendency is that it “forgets” the abstract nature of conceptualization, operating as though the particularities of each object were merely accidental and inessential attributes. The act of making the spatio-temporal specificity of objects inessential is the material manifestation of the unconscious guilt of exclusion identified in the processes of conceptualization. The logic of conceptualization comes to justify and naturalize the violence it does to objects, concealing its violent misrepresentation of objects by reinscribing this violent detemporalization as a clarification rather than exclusion. Adorno suggests that thought, by its definition, can have nothing concrete to say about those aspects of objects that, because of their inability to be shared, it cannot identify. This logic leads thought to conclude that there is, therefore, nothing important to say about these aspects—a conclusion that both renders these aspects inessential to thought and gives primacy to the supposed timelessness of the conceptual. Furthermore, in a linking of the detemporalizing logic of concepts to real social domination, Adorno argues that this concealment of the vio-

lent reduction of workers to the system of wage labour is found socially in the tendency of workers to be led to embrace their own liquidation.

One will recall that at the heart of Adorno's critique of the abstracting logic of the concept was the "paralogism" by which the abstract, apparent timelessness of the concept comes to be attributed to objects as their essence. One finds an analogous paralogism in the relationship between exchange and subjectivity. On the one hand, the "truth" moment of subjectivity, its ability to abstract, comes to be used against the subject for the purpose of the subject's own liquidation. The principle of exchange, the social corollary of the subject's power of conceptual abstraction, is turned against the objective elements of the subject itself. Adorno sees the subject's disappearance expressed abstractly in the reduction of all subjects to objects, and concretely in the reduction of the subject to the wage labourer. On the other hand, in a move that mirrors the detemporalizing logic of conceptualization, the subject is led to embrace its liquidated form as its very essence:

Yet what he [the subject] knows to be meaningless is forced on him as the meaning of his life; indeed, a life which is really no more than the means to the end of his self-preservation is, by that very fact, bewitched and fetishized as an end. And in this antinomy—on the one hand the debasement of the individual, of the self, to something insignificant, his liquidation, and on the other, his being thrown back on the fact that he no longer has anything but this atomized self which lives our life—in this contradiction lies the horror of the development which I regard it as my duty to present to you today. (M, 109–10)

Reduced to an exchangeable unit of labour power, the subject is compelled to identify this wisp, this "atomized self," as her real self, her real life, for without participation in the wage labour system, the subject cannot preserve itself, literally cannot live at all.⁷ The need to survive makes the system of exchange seem, if not natural, at least necessary, as even the individuals who recognize the dominating force of this logic are still forced to engage in it for fear of death. Adorno's description shows not only how the system of exchange

⁷ The concept of "self-preservation," the question of the ability for one to live, is at the core of Adorno's project, as it enables all human "ideas, prohibitions, religions, and political creeds." Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, (ed.) G. S. Noerr, (tr.) E. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 184.

comes to dominate the subject externally, but how the subject is led to internalize this domination. In identifying itself, its life, the subject recognizes itself as a wage labourer, at least insofar as it participates necessarily in this role. Yet the universalizing tendency of this identification process leads the subject to understand this recognition as encompassing its totality, its near absolute identification with its labour as its life reflected and reinforced by the social processes of exchange. The violence of subjectivity is, thus, complete as the logic of identity and exchange touts the liquidation of the subject's real life as the highest form of its "subjectivity." Individuals can live only by giving up their claim to a life beyond the narrow confines of fungible wage labour. Hence, the process of conceptualization and its social reflection in the logic of exchange contains two interconnected instances of material violence: a first violence that excludes the unique spatio-temporal aspects of objects, which Adorno connects to the logic of exchange and fungibility, and a second that naturalizes this exclusion. These two moments of violence are both the necessary extension of the "guilty," "subconscious" logic of conceptualization and fundamental to the material realities of the system of exchange and wage labour. In both cases, Adorno insists, it is the inability of thought or the exchange system either to capture its object or consciously to admit its inability to do so that amounts to both a structural and material violence: the structural exclusion of the unique spatio-temporal elements of objects, and the material violence of marking those elements of an individual's life that cannot be captured by the category of wages as inessential and valueless. Here again we see Adorno tracing a clear path between his metaphysical, practical, and political concerns, showing how conceptual identity, exclusion, and domination of objectivity are realized socially in exchange, the exclusion of life, and the liquidation of the subject. At the heart of this connection is Adorno's commitment to Marx, the link between the identitarian violence of exclusion mirrored in the concrete social violence of the wage labour system—a connection to which I shall return in my conclusion. However, there is one additional and essential phenomenon that directly connects Adorno's metaphysical and political projects: the phenomenon of ideology.

What occurs in the reduction of objects to concepts and the liquidation of the subject is that primacy is given to the abstract over the concrete, the detemporalized over the temporal, and the ideal over the material. For Adorno, it is this last moment, the assertion of the primacy of the concept over the object, that links the processes of conceptualization and the logic of exchange to ideology—a link that also highlights the structural unavoidability of violence. The asser-

tion of the primacy of thought and of the detemporalized elements of concepts over the spatio-temporal specificity of objects marks the essentially ideological tendency of the logic of conceptualization. Ideology “lies in the substruction of something primary...it lies in the implicit identity of concepts and things, an identity justified by the world even when a doctrine summarily teaches that consciousness depends on being.” (ND, 40) Ideology emerges in the supposition of a direct identity between concepts and their objects, an identity that constructs thought as something primary in relation to objects. In this sense, thought’s tendency to justify its exclusion of objects is fundamentally ideological, in that these exclusions are justified by the assumption of thought’s primacy in relationship to an always secondary objectivity. This ideological moment is denied by the dialectical relationship of thought and objects, which shows that “consciousness depends on being.” Yet there is, for Adorno, some truth to this moment, for although thought does not correspond absolutely to its object, there is a relation. This truth moment of ideology affirms that the violence thought does to its object is unavoidable, insofar as this moment shows that there is no process of conceptualization that could absolutely forego the ideological tendency of thought. The importance of this question of primacy and ideology for my analysis is that it shows the way in which Adorno understands the structural and material violence of exclusion to lead to the violence of domination.

Later in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno addresses claims to primacy and origin:

The category of the root, the origin, is a category of domination. It confirms that a man ranks first because he was the first there; it confirms the autochthon against the newcomer, the settler against the migrant. The origin...is itself an ideological principle. (ND, 155)

Any notion of origin or of ontological or conceptual primacy is a corollary of domination. The idea of origin functions to support the unjustifiable claim that whoever or whatever came first has some kind of authority denied to those that come after. This authority derives from the inherently anti-dialectical, ideological nature of origin claims. Such claims suggest that since the origin emerged first, it must necessarily be independent from that which comes after, and this independence becomes the basis of the origin’s supposed superiority. For Adorno, the violence of ideology leads to the violence of domination, insofar as the ideological claim to primacy constructs thought’s opposite (objectivity) as inferior and subordinate: “Wher-

ever a doctrine of some absolute ‘first’ is taught there will be talk of something inferior to it, of something absolutely heterogeneous to it, as its logical correlate. *Prima philosophia* and dualism go together.” (ND, 138) There is thus, for Adorno, a direct link between the structural violence of exclusion inherent in the relationship of subject and object, and the concrete, dominating violence of primacy inherent in the ideological claim that the timelessness of the conceptual makes thought independent and superior to the objective world. This link further undermines the notion that there is an unbridgeable gap between Adorno’s metaphysics and his practical project. Adorno goes on to develop the real, material consequences of this subjective domination of objectivity by tracing how thought’s violent and ideological claim to primacy prompts a self-destructive, autoimmune reaction between human subjects and their material lives.

In the section “On Subject and Object” of his 1969 essay, “Dialectical Epilegomena,” Adorno argues that the concept’s claim to primacy over its object—its ideological essence—fundamentally alters the relationship between the thinking subject and its life: having assumed its ideological primacy over objects,

Mind then arrogates to itself the status of being absolutely independent—which it is not: mind’s claim to independence announces its claim to domination. Once radically separated from the object, subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object, forgetting (*vergißt*) how much it is object itself.⁸

In the relationship between thought and the world, the ideological primacy of the concept expresses itself as the subject’s claim to total independence from its object.⁹ This claim to independence provides the grounds for thought’s dominion over objects, as it establishes thought’s claim (outlined above) that whatever elements of objects cannot be captured by thought, whatever resists or disrupts conceptualization, is fundamentally inessential, inferior, and accidental. The irony of this reduction is that it causes the thinking subject to “for-

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, (tr.) H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 246.

⁹ Adorno argues in this section that one simply cannot think the abstract notion of the “subject” apart from the living human individual: “No concept of the subject can have the element of individual humanity...separated from it in thought; without any reference to it, subject would lose all significance.” (*Ibid.*, 245) This insistence is yet further proof that Adorno sees a clear and necessary connection between the metaphysical structures of reality and the real, material lives of individuals.

get” and, consequently, devalue its own bodily existence, the primacy or “surplus of the transcendental subject” marking, as Adorno puts it elsewhere, “the deficit of the utterly reduced empirical subject.” (ND, 178) In the process of conceptualization, the subject—the living, breathing human being—is devalued in order to allow it to fit into the abstract, universal concept; all those aspects of one’s life that cannot be used for shared, categorical identification are denied any value. In this process, the real, material elements that make one’s life not like that of any other creature are precisely the elements one is driven to marginalize in oneself; the fact that concepts always leave a remainder in their relationship with their objects is here realized in the exclusion of what remains of the subject’s life outside the logic of exchange. For Adorno, the ideological primacy of the concept, far from empowering subjects, leads rather to a self-destructive, auto-immune reaction in subjects against their own material life, pitting real life against an abstract concept of “life,” the subject becoming the ironic victim of subjectivity’s supposed superiority.

This exclusion of the material life of subjects, however, extends to the relationship between subjects as well, highlighting the importance of the concept of life for Adorno’s linking of the metaphysical and practical. Given the autoimmune logic of conceptualization in which the subject is led violently to exclude the value of its own bodily existence, one cannot, Adorno contends, separate metaphysics from real life: “the question of whether it is still possible to live is the form in which metaphysics impinges on us urgently today.” (M, 112) Returning to the two moments of “guilt” found in his account of the relationship between thought and the world, Adorno contends that the metaphysical relationship between subject and object reveals that to be a subject, to be a creature functioning in a dialectical relation to the world, is to be a creature enmeshed in the guilty logic of violent exclusion and forgetting:

It should be said, at any rate, that the guilt [*Schuld*] in which one is enmeshed almost by the mere fact of continuing to live can hardly be reconciled any longer with life itself. Unless one makes oneself wholly insensitive one can hardly escape the feeling—and by feeling I mean experience which is not confined to the emotional sphere—that just by continuing to live one is taking away that possibility from someone else, to whom life has been denied; that one is stealing that person’s life.... If we—each of us sitting here—knew at every moment what has happened and to what concatenations we owe our existence, and how our own existence is interwoven with calamity, even if we have done nothing wrong...if one were fully aware of all these things at every mo-

ment, one would really be unable to live. One is pushed as it were into forgetfulness, which is already a form of guilt [*Schuld*]. (M, 113)

The exclusionary violence of conceptualization—in which, in order to gather a set of objects under their concept, one must exclude the unique spatio-temporal aspects of the objects from the concept—is rearticulated here in terms of the denial of life to others and the forgetting of this denial. To live is to occupy a real, material position within the sphere of “life”—a position that, once occupied, denies that position to other individuals. In the same way that the logic of identity requires the exclusion of the spatio-temporal specificity of objects, my appearance as a “living” entity is conditioned on the denial of this appearance to others, my life requiring a structural and “predetermined” moment of death.¹⁰ For Adorno, life is always a living at the expense of life, in the same way that the logic of conceptualization is a thinking at the expense of the essence of objects. If we were, at every moment, aware of the violences associated with our existence, if we experienced each breath as the suffocation of another human being, life would be unbearable. Hence, Adorno contends, we are led to “forget” the violence in which our lives are always enmeshed. This forgetting perpetuates guilt, but at a distance, allowing one a space of livability; this forgetting mirrors thought’s “unconscious” guilt about its inability to grasp its object fully. For Adorno, the fee exacted for survival is that one always “resists too little” the violences to which one is party; thought’s “unconscious” desire to make amends to its object is recast here in terms of our “failing to be aware at every moment of what threatens and what has happened” to both our lives and the lives of others. (M, 113) This gloss hardly does justice to the importance of the concept of life in Adorno’s thought, particularly given the essential role it has for his ethical thinking.¹¹ Yet one sees here just how directly Adorno traces the path from metaphysical violence to social violence, the denial of life

¹⁰ On the entanglement of life/death in Adorno’s thinking, see J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 398, and Alastair Morgan, *Adorno’s Concept of Life* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 24.

¹¹ I develop a fuller account of the central role violence to life plays in Adorno’s ethical project in my essay “Ecological Experience: Aesthetics, Life, and the Shudder in Adorno’s Critical Theory,” in *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory*, (ed.) N. Ross (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 145–57. Also, for a relatively complete account of the concept of life in Adorno’s work, see Morgan, *Adorno’s Concept of Life*, particularly 24–33 and 100–107.

to others appearing as a direct reflection of the exclusionary violence done to objects by the logic of conceptualization. This clarity further reinforces the claim that there is nothing confused about Adorno's account of this relationship. However, it also shows that this link between his metaphysical and political projects—clarified necessarily though his profound commitment to Marxism and, more specifically, the link he draws between the dominating violence of conceptualization and the exchange logic of advanced capitalism—is not a mere accident of history, but is in fact necessitated by the very logic of dialectics, a fact that exposes the possibilities Adorno sees for resisting this violence.

Having intricately detailed the violent logic of conceptualization and its social corollary in the capitalist logic of exchange and wage labour, it might appear that there is little hope of resisting this logic. More specifically, Adorno's insistence on the "predetermined" and seemingly unavoidable character of subjectivity's ideological domination of objectivity, when moved to the level of society and lived experience, seems to paint a remarkably dark (if not hopeless) picture of the possibility of resisting this violence. It is primarily because of this seemingly bleak analysis that Adorno is so often read as either radically pessimistic or unreasonably utopian—this utopianism largely based on the tendency to read Adorno's politics as problematically aestheticized or messianic. Yet the problem with these readings is that Adorno himself directly details the possibility for real, social resistance to this logic. As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, "If no man had part of his labour withheld from him any more, rational identity would be a fact, and society would have transcended the identifying mode of thinking." (ND, 147) For Adorno, the overturning of the wage labour system and the realization of worker-controlled means of production would spell an end to the domination and violence of the social logic of exchange and the material violence of identity thinking. In a society where the logic of exchange is denied as the measure of human worth, so too is thought's ideological claim to primacy defanged. Adorno reasserts here the importance of the primacy of the object in a realized form, in the sense that thought cannot concretize its tendency toward violent exclusion in a world in which the material and social conditions deny the legitimacy of thought's claim to primacy. This is not to say that, should this revolution of the means of production be realized, thought's tendency toward ideology or exclusionary violence would be thwarted once and for all; rather, it is to insist that the material consequences of this tendency of thought and the scope of its social significance would be radically altered and diminished in a

world that did not mirror this logic in its modes of production. For Adorno, the violent, exclusionary logic of conceptualization and exchange has its antidote in the revolutionizing of the means of production. One might question the feasibility of such a solution, as well as Adorno's somewhat idiosyncratic reading of Marx—*e.g.*, his relationship to value-form Marxism and his critical inheritance of Georg Lukács's notion of reification. Yet what is beyond doubt is that one can trace, as I have done, a clear relationship between his metaphysical diagnosis of the violence inherent in the relationship of subject and object, on the one hand, and his account of social and political violence and resistance, on the other

The above analysis fundamentally contests the Habermas-inspired claim that Adorno is unclear about the connection between his philosophical project and his social and political concerns, as one can trace a direct path from Adorno's account of the philosophical logic of identity to the violent reduction of the living individual in modern society. It is crucial to understand that, for Adorno, identity and exchange are not merely analogous, but are concretely related in an intimate interchange whereby each emerges continuously out of real social processes that serve to maintain the other. The domination of the individual within the system of exchange leads the wage-worker to devalue and exclude forms of subjectivity that are not ultimately reducible to the categories of exchange and wage labour, enabling the radical fungibility of all workers. Through this interchange of identity and exchange, Adorno argues, subjects are driven to internalize their own fungibility and accept their identification as mere wageworkers. In this way, the logic of identity and exchange circumscribe and reduce life, violently curtailing the potentialities of what it means to live. Given the specificity with which Adorno connects the metaphysical questions of identity, difference, and exclusion to the concrete figures of exchange, domination, and life, it seems difficult to maintain that this connection in Adorno's work requires radical clarification or that it can only be detailed through an obscure aesthetics or religiosity. The power of this insight is that it helps to differentiate what is in fact obscure in Adorno's thinking from what is clear. There are things that Adorno leaves unanswered, and there is much work to be done on Adorno's relationship to Marx in particular. However, the connection between his metaphysical position and his ethical commitments is not one of them. Hence, the theme of violence positions clearly the nature of Adorno's ethical commitments—namely, that where there is identity and exchange, there will be violence: a violence to life that requires thinking and action, a violence whose resistance must take place at the level of

social production and reproduction if it is to have any possibility of taking place at the level of thinking and conceptualization.

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