

Society and History

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The connection between society and history¹, or more strictly, between the theory of society and the theory of history, is an essential one when it comes to analysing and presenting the fundamental, defining features of modern social formations. In these formations dynamism, change and acceleration go hand-in-hand with the fact that the forms adopted by social structures and relations lose their naturalness. 'Society' itself turns into an object of reflection and enables social theory(ies) to emerge. At the same time, the acceleration of the changes and transformations involved is at the root of what could be called historical consciousness of temporal becoming and social evolution. Within this framework, the idea of a universal history is associated with the creation of an all-encompassing and expansive global market: the capitalist market.

Speaking of society seems to situate us on a plane of objectivity with which individuals are confronted, which is not diluted into a mere collection of individual actions. We find ourselves in the face of structural

crystallizations and objectifications that condition or determine the actions of subjects. Speaking of history, however, situates us on the plane of action that results from subjective intentionality and presupposes a certain degree of freedom, discretion and choice. Speaking of society and history means connecting action and structure, subjectivity and objectivity, singularity and universality. On this specific question, the critical theory of society has made a significant contribution that cannot be ignored. This contribution was in opposition to the idealist construction of a relation of correspondence between the theory of society and the theory of history, whose main proponent was undoubtedly Hegel.

The object of the critique was Hegelian idealism and what it reveals and hides about the reality it interprets. The foundation for this critique was Marx's theoretical contribution. The testing and updating of this contribution in a new historical context posed some extraordinary challenges, as we shall see.

This was the fundamental task of the group of intellectuals whose work fell under the heading of Critical Theory, with their differences and peculiarities.

'CAPITAL' AND HISTORY: KARL MARX

Marx's theory of history is accused of being the last remnant of Hegelian metaphysics, from which he could not detach himself, however much he attempted to put the idealist dialectic 'on its feet' (or perhaps precisely because of this). The accusation of being caught in the traps of the philosophy of history is well known and widespread. The speculative viewpoint is reflected in a series of easily identifiable arguments: conceiving history as a totality that can be observed from a tipping point that opens up the perspective of an all-inclusive or absolute knowledge; conceiving history as a teleological process with an immanent orientation towards a pre-determined goal; integrating negativity into an unstoppable progress for the better and reducing it to the moment that it leads to a (happy) end; identifying a (privileged) subject of the historical process called to realize the (universal) idea (Reichelt, 1995; Heinrich, 1999). Since the dawn of the philosophy of history in the Enlightenment these are the main arguments, with variations, which have characterized hegemonic historical thinking in the modern period. According to these critics, Marx would be one further representative of that hegemonic thinking. One of the source texts for this conception of history, used as a basis for the formulation of Historical Materialism, is the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1859: 8–9). Undoubtedly there are a number of similar passages throughout Marx's work that support a positivist interpretation of the logic of capital. This logic is merely a 'reflection' of the objective process of reality. Critics of Historical Materialism have decried that the

critique of political economy has been turned around into affirmative economy in vulgar Marxism (Backhaus, 2011).

Despite the numerous passages throughout Marx's work that point in this direction, there may still be some reasons for controversy over his theory of history. This is due to the fact that Marx's contribution is not exhausted by this representation of historical evolution that is clearly contaminated by the philosophy of history. In fact, the 'de facto' bourgeois economic system can only be analysed and understood through a critique of the economic categories of the bourgeois theories of capitalism. Far from ontologizing dialectics, Marx unravelled the contradictions of social reality by unveiling the contradictions between the premises of bourgeois economics and the reality that they intended to reflect in their theories. Marx also made significant criticisms of speculative thinking about history and the claim to provide a philosophy of universal history. What seems central to Marx's contribution is his conception of the formation of capitalist society as an historical – that is, an unnatural – mode of production. The critique of political economy analysed this social formation as a conscious-unconscious – and therefore pseudo-natural [*naturwüchsig*] – organization of social production. At the same time, this critique provided the key to understanding (contingent) historical processes that made it possible to create this specific mode of production (for example, so-called primitive accumulation) and those (necessary) processes under the law of accumulation that generated the conditions for overcoming it (tendency of the rate of profit to fall, periodic crises, pauperization, etc.). Ultimately this analysis highlights the historical character of the capitalist mode of production: 'Economists do not conceive of capital as a relationship. They cannot do so, without having at the same time to conceive it as a historically transient, relative and not absolute way of production' (Marx, 1862–3: 269).

However, Marx made an observation regarding the fundamental historical condition of possibility for the constitution of the

capitalist mode of production that will prove highly relevant to what will be discussed later about critical theory authors. This concerned the existence of 'free workers' who sell their labour power on the market: 'This singular historical condition encloses a universal history' (Marx, 1890: I, 184). In what way is 'universal history' present in that singular condition, behind which the violence of primitive accumulation hides? How should this universal history be interpreted in the critical disentanglement of the present? This is in fact a present, lest we forget, generated and reproduced with violence. Marx's study of the historiography of his time, the inclusion of historiographic passages in his systematic works, and even some writings that might be called historical, show links to the (critical) historiography of his time, and the meaning that Marx attributed to the concept of 'universal history' (Krätke, 2014/15). But here is also where its limit is found. And not because of a lack of awareness of the violence accumulated in that history. Bourgeois historiography, and even critical or scientific historiography – which rejects the philosophy of history as an unacceptable metaphysics, and seeks to work on data which are schematically represented and used to construct general categories – derives from a model that could be called progressive-sacrificial, to which Marx himself was not immune (Zamora, 2010: 115–19):

Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as the social bond itself by the members of the society. Hence the great civilizing influence of capital; [...] For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognised as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. (Marx, 1857–8: 323).

His explanation about the British domination of India is another example of this progressive-sacrificial model:

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. (Marx, 1853: 133)

For Marx, civilizing progress and the domination of nature are not only conditions of possibility for establishing the 'automatic subject' of abstract value; also, the abstract socialization of a commodity-producing society constitutes progress with respect to all previous forms of sociality that were still trapped in the natural or mythical order. Commodity fetishism represents an advance over the magical or religious forms of the fetishization of social relations and relations with nature. Commodity fetishism harbours within it the possibility of final emancipation. But in this way of interpreting history, the destructive automatism of value threatens to be presented as an emancipating automatism.

THEORY OF SOCIETY AND HISTORY AFTER THE THWARTED REVOLUTION

The challenges faced by those critical thinkers who sought to interpret the present in the first third of the twentieth century from the perspective of the critique of political economy are well known. The historiography of critical theory or, as others prefer to call it, the Frankfurt School, reconstructed and contextualized these theoretical and practical challenges in great detail (Jay, 1973; Dubiel, 1978; Wiggershaus, 1988; Asbach, 1997; Demirović, 1999). Perhaps the term that best defines the challenges of critical theory is that of 'crisis', but it would be better to speak of a constellation of several crises: first, the economic crisis of the late 1920s; second, the crisis of the labour movement and the failure of the world revolution in 1917–1918; and third, the crisis of Marxism, which was

unable to provide an adequate response to the two other crises, and became a science of legitimation for the Soviet system. This three-fold crisis would be aggravated further with the coming to power of Hitler and the National Socialist regime.

With regard to the crisis of Marxism and the need for critical self-reflection, the publication of Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923) and Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) can be considered a turning point. Both works would serve as an essential point of reference for critical Marxism and assist Horkheimer in the construction of the methodological and programmatic basis for critical theory. However, the usual way of presenting the dependence of critical theory on Lukács normally disregards very significant differences (Brunkhorst, 1983, 1985; Habermas, 1988: 455–534). One of the fundamental elements of the theory of society and history that served as a reference for 'western Marxism' (Anderson, 1976) and was critiqued by Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1930s was the concept of 'totality'. Regardless of how this totality is conceived, the concept itself is considered to be idealistic (Horkheimer, 1936: 693). This category is burdened with the aporias of the Hegelian subject–object identity, and with an almost inevitable recovery of his metaphysics of history (Horkheimer, 1932a: 303). The Schopenhauerian pessimism of the young Horkheimer immunized him against the theodicy of history in all of its forms, even if it was concealed under the guise of materialism (Horkheimer, 1934: 326; Schmidt, 1974: 9–26). Lukács came under the same verdict as the bourgeois philosophy of history. The theory–praxis and the subject–object unit postulated under the concept of totality was a clear sign of idealism (Horkheimer, 1931b: 223).

But the critique of metaphysical materialism, of subject–object identity and of the Hegelian-Marxist philosophy of history was one of the two strands in the process of the development of critical theory. The other was the critique of specialization in the bourgeois

scientific apparatus and its reduction to finding and recording facts. In connection with this, critical theory exposed the failure of scientific research 'when faced with the problem of the social process as a whole' (Horkheimer, 1932b: 42). This dual strand defined the fields of influence in developing the programme of social research known by the term *interdisciplinary materialism*, which was first formulated at Horkheimer's inaugural lecture as director of the Institute in Frankfurt (1931a). The course of history and the crises mentioned above imposed the need to resort to psychoanalysis as an 'auxiliary science' of social theory and history (Horkheimer, 1932c: 57). Without its contribution it is impossible to answer the question of why individuals in a revolutionary context, instead of engaging in a liberating action, open their executioners' way to power. This is a key question for the theory of society and history from the Marxist perspective, and it cannot be answered without bringing together the critique of political economy with the theory of culture and psychoanalysis. This shift in the concept of society and history is one of the distinctive features of critical theory. The concept of ideology as the Marxian 'necessary false consciousness' was clearly insufficient and required the incorporation of the psycho-libidinal economy of individuals into analysis and critique.

The significance of Marxist materialism in the social research programme is not to be sought in the presupposition of a theoretical knowledge of the whole socio-historical process. Rather, it lies in knowing the dynamic and supra-individual 'structures and trends' and not offering a 'finished vision of the whole' (Horkheimer, 1932c: 53, 58). Nevertheless, since current misery is linked to the social structure, it is not possible to renounce theoretical knowledge and be satisfied with a mere description of the facts. Neither is critical theory a purely theoretical matter. Both the empirical material and the subject of knowledge are mediated by social praxis. The criteria that guide the knowledge

of critical theory are defined by the historical situation and the emancipatory praxis rooted in it, as no pre-established harmony exists between praxis and theory. It is concerned with showing the existing contradictions and the possibility of their practical overcoming. This is why it is not possible to dispense with the subjects of emancipatory praxis, as they introduce into the cognitive process their interest in a fully rational situation. This process is triggered by social negativity: by excluding a growing number of human beings 'from the happiness made possible by the widespread abundance of economic forces' (Horkheimer, 1933: 105).

The progressive historical problematization of these coordinates of critical theory in the 1930s led Horkheimer to ground them in his programmatic paper 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937) through a philosophy of the historical process, and in connection with supposedly objective emancipatory interests. Delving into these methodological questions of the original research programme thus loses its meaning. It is not difficult to recognize in this paper some of the arguments of the Historical Materialism approach: the global historical process, driven by its contradictions, enables a rational construction of society – if not through historical necessity, through a dynamic inherent to human labour. This process produces not only critical theory and emancipatory praxis, but also the subjects that lead society to a truly human state (Horkheimer, 1937: 203). Not that Horkheimer took a turn towards speculation. On the one hand, he continued to stress the non-identity between critical theory and the consciousness of the proletariat, and spoke of the 'mutual influence' and 'tension' between the two. On the other hand, he maintained the need for a link between theory and emancipatory praxis, in order for the contradictory totality to be understood as such, and for both its negativity and the possibility of radical transformation to be argumentatively presented.

The tragedy of this attempt at substantiation and resistance in view of the factual

course of events resonates with the text that Horkheimer published as an annex to the 'Traditional and Critical Theory' after an internal discussion at the Institute. In the absence of better arguments, he ended up settling for an anthropological concept:

As long as thought has not won a definitive victory, it cannot feel secure in the shadow of any power. It demands independence. But if its concepts, which sprang from social movements, today seem empty because no one stands behind them but its pursuing persecutors, yet the truth of them will out. For the thrust towards a rational society, which admittedly seems to exist only in the realms of fantasy, is really innate in every man. (Horkheimer, 1937: 224)

Although Adorno's contribution to the development of critical theory in the 1930s was not as important as that of Horkheimer, his reflections are still of interest, especially considering the developments that took place from the 1940s. Above and beyond the role allocated to Adorno in the field of culture within the 'interdisciplinary materialism' programme, his contributions to the central theme discussed here also deserve to be taken into account. His inaugural lecture on 'The Actuality of Philosophy' (1931) contained programmatic proposals somewhat different to those made by Horkheimer, who did not seem to particularly like them (Wiggershaus, 1988: 112). When looking at the differences, perhaps the most relevant is the one that affects the relationship between social materialistic philosophy and the results of the empirical research provided by the individual sciences. Adorno did not assign social philosophy the task of thinking about the 'global social process', into which the results of the particular sciences would be integrated. Thought is conceptually unable to cover the whole of reality, especially because that reality contradicts any demands of rationality. While the question about totality expresses the intention of the subject of knowledge to find meaning behind the phenomenal appearance of reality, the materialistic interpretation focuses on the fragments, the unintentional

elements, whose complete construction in constellations brings to light a reality that no longer needs any hidden meaning. That reality even makes such hidden meaning disappear in order for praxis to give meaning to events. His understanding of materialism is expressed in this renunciation of the search for meaning, present in major theoretical constructions.

Philosophy understood as interpretation cannot take social reality as it appears in its plural manifestations. This is what positivism does. It considers phenomena as 'facts' that have a kind of finality or indissolubility. If facts are indisputable, then all that remains is a classifying procedure in which the contradictions and tensions of capitalist society are particularized and masked. The key for unravelling social phenomena through interpretive construction is the category 'commodity'. The commodity form is the law to which everything tends to be subject in capitalist society. Adorno had no doubt that in bourgeois capitalist society the 'commodity' form produces an antagonistic totality and determines all of reality. He did not believe that reason is conceptually capable of encompassing this totality. To some extent this would involve taking a perspective that is external to it, a surplus or excess of spirit beyond reality (absolute knowledge, proletariat as subject-object, etc.). Rather, the interpretation should aim to appropriate that universal determination in the constellation of the elements of reality, through its construction. By means of these assembled elements, the antagonism of the social totality can be unveiled through the fragments analysed, without its interpretation needing to be presented as an autonomous magnitude capable of theoretically encompassing that totality. Thus, deciphering is at the service of a praxis whose task is to respond to the enigma posed by reality. A task that theory cannot fulfil.

The other programmatic aspect in which Adorno departed from the conventional view of the Marxist tradition is outlined in his lecture 'The Idea of Natural History' (1932).

This precisely specifies his understanding of the relationship between interpretative work and the philosophy of history. Despite the distance between Adorno's and Horkheimer's arguments, the former intended his lecture to be understood as a contribution to the 'immanent interpretation and deployment' of the materialist dialectics of Historical Materialism (365). The task of the philosophy of history is to disclose the dialectic interweaving of nature and history *through the fragments* mentioned in 'The Actuality of Philosophy'. This was now the way to realize the interpretation sought using that programme (360). For Adorno, the task of the philosophy of history is not to attain a unit that totalizes the discontinuous and disparate with the aid of a universal construction, nor is it to make the ruptures and breaks disappear into a global structure of any kind; rather, he focused on the ruins and fragments of the real and social world and inquired into the dialectic between nature and history contained within them.

It is well known that Adorno relied on Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* and Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, perhaps because he avoided the construction of philosophy typically found in universal history. The explanation of the dialectic of nature and history needs to demonstrate why history takes place as if it had a natural character, and how that second nature in which history has become frozen is in fact an appearance that can be removed by explaining its historical constitution. Historical reality is affected by the appearance of 'second nature' because, to a certain extent, it is imposed almost as a destiny and eludes our decision-making power. In this sense, it can be stated that *historical* phenomena manifest a *mythical* character. At the beginning of his lecture Adorno explained the meaning of the concept of 'nature' on which he relied. This can best be explained through 'the mythic conception', as he referred to 'what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is

substance in history' (345–6). From this perspective, the adjectives 'natural' and 'mythic' become synonymous with rigidity, inevitability, coercion and repetitiveness.

But in the dialectic of nature and history, Adorno wanted to show something else. The interpretation of allegory made by Benjamin offered him new categories with which to unravel the meaning of that dialectic. What is expressed in allegory, according to Benjamin, is the face of history as an enigmatic question. The fragments and ruins produced by history are like a scripture to be deciphered, a scripture which speaks of 'everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful' (Benjamin, 1925: 434). In the ruins and fragments of reality it is possible to recognize what has collapsed and decomposed; that which failed to complete the advance and vanished on the way; and that which was the victim of the historical process in its 'progress'.

This aspect of Benjamin's concept of allegory seems to have been of decisive significance for Adorno. From the allegorical interpretation of the world that has collapsed and decayed into ruins, something emerges that should be thought of as being complementary to the concept of 'second nature': 'Whenever something historical appears, it refers back to the natural element that passes away in it' (Adorno, 1932: 359). History cannot be interpreted as a triumphal march of the spirit that has subjugated nature. Precisely through that subjugation, history is primarily the history of suffering, the history of collapse and decay. Allegory therefore opens the way for the catastrophic dimension of history and individual life as they both go by. The crumbling stations that become visible in the ruins that progress leaves behind confirm the triumphal march of domination. But at the same time they belie it by exposing the discontinuity that cannot be subsumed under any structural totality: everything that is inherent to the civilizing process in terms of failure, regression and barbarism. In the sufferings of history, the mythical spell reigns. The ability to stop the

continuing catastrophe is far from being guaranteed, and it is inadmissible to raise it to the status of an ontological structure of history. This is why Adorno rejects both the ontologization of the catastrophic dimension of history and the postulation of a cunning of reason that leads everything to the ultimate good.

WALTER BENJAMIN: PROGRESSION AND CATASTROPHE, OR HOW TO SAVE HISTORICAL MATERIALISM FROM ITSELF

The importance of Walter Benjamin's work for Adorno's idea of 'natural history' increased over time as critical theory developed. Following Horkheimer's initial incomprehension of his approach to history in the paper for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* on Eduard Fuchs (Benjamin, 1937), its importance gradually increased, as was clearly shown in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It therefore seems relevant to briefly discuss some elements of his unique contribution here.

First, a radical critique of social democratic revisionism can be found in the theses entitled 'On the Concept of History' (1940). They also contained a critique of traditional Marxism that focused on some essential points, namely, the teleological nature of history, its evolutionary-progressive vision, and the determinism of the revolution: 'The experience of our generation: that capitalism will not die a natural death' (Benjamin, 1927–1940: 819). Benjamin's thesis was that faith in progress had become the most powerful ideology to leave the proletariat disarmed in the face of their tormentors. History is not a chain of events connected by a causal link. What is considered to be History (with a capital 'H') is in fact a historiographical construction that satisfies the needs of those who write it: it is the history of the victors. This view is not only recognizable in bourgeois historiography – against which Benjamin

formulated his critique of historicism – but has also taken over the conception of history within Historical Materialism. The idea of progress found not only in the bourgeois philosophy of history, but also in the social democratic and common Marxist conception of History, brings together the traits of infinity, continuity and irreversibility. And these are the traits that Benjamin revealed as being false. Under the idea of progress, the past appears as definitely closed, as a prelude to the present converted into a canon of a history represented as a sequence of events that form a continuum. Benjamin rejected this idea, among other things, because it was a history of victors, a stylized history in favour of those who dominate the present. And fundamentally, the key issue is the present; but not as a transition or as a small dot in an infinite series, but as a moment when time stops.

History as a continuum cannot be affirmed as a condition of possibility for a present characterized by domination and the threat of catastrophe for the oppressed, since what would be confirmed is the catastrophic present. This should be juxtaposed against a different construction of time. What did not fit the modern concept of progress was the idea of interruption. History takes place throughout an abstract time, and the present in each case is nothing more than a point on an infinite line. The procedure of universal history is ‘additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous empty time’ (Benjamin, 1940: 702). By a kind of sacrificial logic everything is functionalized to construct a supposedly better future that must be implemented more or less inevitably. However, what Benjamin perceived in the historic present that he lived in was that time has a catastrophic structure.

This is why he ventured to say that ‘the concept of progress is to be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things just “go on” is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching but that which is’ (Benjamin, 1939: 683). The interesting thing about this proposal to use the concept of catastrophe as a basis for the idea of progress is that such

catastrophe is not a future event; it is not so much an end or goal of progress, but its constitutive character. It consists in continually producing, through the force of its advancement, something that is dislodged, abandoned on the margins, something that cannot maintain the pace, which crumbles and becomes rubble because it fails to keep up with time. The modern idea of progress, both in its bourgeois and socialist variants, remains insensitive to this loss. It merely reproduces the dynamics of the merciless advancement of the logic of capital accumulation.

Memory at the time of danger, as a recollection of an already past future – the future that has not happened, which has been stolen from the oppressed – does not establish a historical continuum; rather, it enforces the open-ended character of past suffering and outstanding hopes of the victims of history. Only from that already past future is it possible to think that the current future has a chance to be more than the consummation of the catastrophe. Only from the memory of shattered hopes is it possible to recognize the true dimension of the threat, and curb the optimistic self-deception about the catastrophe that lurks at every moment. However, under the ruins of the past, under the ashes of the almost extinct memory, the time of waiting and desire has sought refuge from destiny: that is where the ember of a forgotten future is preserved. The sudden constellation of the archaic with the latest dialectical images unleashes the revolutionary force of what has been forgotten.

Only through memory does the present become truly actual, by actualizing a forgotten past by connecting it with the present. This requires political will to actively exercise freedom. In the constellations between the present and the past, in the qualitative simultaneity of the dischronic, materialist historians seek to unleash revolutionary energies nestled in the past, in their unfulfilled expectations, in their unfinished business, in their utopian hopes. Only what has escaped integration into the historical continuum of

the history of the victors, the moments of the past that were repressed and forgotten, can form constellations with the present that will interrupt the course of that history and open a gap for the truly new.

In addition to these critical reflections on the temporal pattern of Historical Materialism, Benjamin brought another fundamental concept to the creation of a materialist theory of knowledge from the point of view of the theory of history. This is the concept of 'proto-history' [*Urgeschichte*]. Bearing in mind that the set of writings that make up the *Arcades* project was conceived as a proto-history of the nineteenth century (Benjamin, 1927–1940: 579), it is clear that we are not talking about a remote source, a prehistory, the beginning of a chronological order. It is rather an interpretation of the *present* that is free from the prevailing teleological visions of history. Since this is a key concept in the interpretation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is surprising that the vast majority of interpretations of this work persistently read it as a negative *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a kind of reconstruction of universal history understood as a negative metaphysics of history.

Proto-history aims to establish a new, non-linear and consecutive configuration between past, present and future. Proto-history is produced and reproduced in history as a place where what is silenced, hidden and forgotten becomes visible. That is, proto-history allows the illusions that every present weaves around itself to be broken; it shows the natural-historical dialectic that perpetuates the domination of internal and external nature and social domination, resulting in destruction and suffering. This is not a history of origins, which may form the germ of the current catastrophe by following a causal chain. The concept of proto-history precisely runs counter to this teleological scheme, whether based on an optimistic concept of progress or on a pessimistic concept of decadence (Forster, 2009).

In line with the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism, the explosive force of

proto-history consists in showing the lack of freedom that is hidden in bourgeois freedom (of hiring), the coercion reproduced in the freedom of exchange, or the barbarism that lies in every attempt to dominate nature. Proto-history is primarily a work of memory intended to counteract the oblivion involved in the reification of fetishism. As we have seen, in Benjamin this work of memory is attributed to an unintentional constellation between past and present under dialectical images. The materialist historian constructs them in order to provoke an awakening from the dream in which the capitalist system has engulfed us (Benjamin, 1927–1940: 494). It involves taking hold of a memory that dispels the illusions about history as progress, and not as natural history. Adorno's 'Reflections on Class Theory' expresses this in the following terms:

Knowing the new does not mean adapting oneself to it and to the movement of history; it means resisting its inflexibility and conceiving of the onward march of the battalions of world history as marking time. Theory knows of no 'constructive force' but only of one that lights up the contours of a burned-out prehistory with the glow of the latest disaster in order to perceive the parallel that exists between them. The latest thing is always the old terror, the myth... (Adorno, 1942: 375)

Clearly, the idea of proto-history is essential for a correct interpretation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944), whose true character is to offer a proto-history of catastrophic modernity (Zamora, 2004: 125–85).

AUSCHWITZ AND THE DIALECTIC OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Adorno and Horkheimer saw in Auschwitz a caesura which forced the conventional means of rational analysis to question themselves, and the historical advance in which such an unfathomable abyss of pain and injustice had opened. The historical effectiveness of a supra-historical divine subject, but also of the

bourgeois subject, and of the dialectical process of production forces and relations, were suspended in the death camps of the Third Reich. A catastrophe of this magnitude, which began to systematically eliminate one part of humanity and could turn such annihilation into a purely technical and organizational problem, highlighted the seriousness of the failure of the forces and powers which had, until then, supported the various immanent hopes. Auschwitz represents, therefore, a *break with the civilizing process* (Diner, 1988: 31) which requires a radical rethinking about the way of looking at this process. It also prohibits, from a moral point of view, the desire to extend all that preceded. As Krahl says, 'Auschwitz cannot be explained by capitalist accumulation' (2008: 296).

Moreover, in Adorno's view it was not acceptable to reduce death camps to simply being 'a technical mishap in civilization's triumphal procession' (Adorno, 1951: 265). Considering them to be unique would be tantamount to a temporal, social and cultural delimitation of fascism, which would turn it into a kind of circumstantial anomaly. This relativizing would minimize and significantly reduce the relevance of Auschwitz in understanding the history and the society in which such a catastrophe could take place (Claussen, 1987: 9f.; 1988). This paradoxical situation led Adorno to formulate a phrase that, at first glance, seems oddly contradictory:

The identity lies in the non-identity, in what, not having yet come to pass, denounces what has [...] He who relinquishes awareness of the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation, but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that preceding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end. (Adorno, 1951: 266)

What must be avoided is, on the one hand, the spell of the philosophy of origin or *prima philosophia*, in which all of reality is more or less directly derived from a single principle. Within it, uniqueness is the expression or manifestation of the basic ontological structure of reality, regardless of whether the

structure is positively or negatively determined. On the other hand, it would be illicit to maintain a disconnection from phenomena, as this does not do the extent and persistence of historical negativity any justice (Adorno, 1956: 46). The identity of non-identity or *vice versa*, which the new horror allowed to be discovered, could be initially characterized as the stasis of social dynamics, following Marx. As society advances in an *antagonistic* and *pseudo-natural* way, the dynamics of its unbridled expansion remain a reproduction of the old antagonism, and are therefore static. The irrationality of cyclical crises, the impotence of socialized subjects against the advance of their own history, as well as the avoidable but persistent suffering, show that the 'historical dialectic leads, to a certain extent, to the confirmation of fatality' (Adorno, 1961: 234). The Marxian concept of 'prehistory', to which Adorno wanted to remain faithful with his idea of 'natural history', included the historical process under the umbrella of the persistent lack of freedom. So it is not positive continuity, but continuity of the history of suffering. When Marx qualified 'free' paid work as 'wage slavery', he aimed to prevent the appearance of blind progress against the continuity of coercion beyond its historical mutations that could not and should not be denied. The decision to eliminate the social coercion that causes suffering was still to be made. Therefore, for Adorno it was not enough just to expose human history as prehistory, as static in and through dynamics; instead, its hidden reverse needed to be revealed.

By assuming the Marxian concept of 'prehistory', Adorno did not intend a positive determination of domination as a negative and ontological foundation of history, but sought to prevent the relativization of suffering within it and in all historical periods. The unity of the discontinuous and chaotically scattered moments of history can be negatively seen as the continuity of destructive domination, since unjust suffering has not yet been eliminated from any of them. The latest

form of iniquity is an eye-opener to the current suffering at each moment, just as the persistence of unjust suffering is proof of the continued existence of destructive domination. Adorno did not intend to formulate a new – now negative – metaphysics of history with this construction of history as ‘natural history’, but sought to force a *change of perspective* in the way it was considered.

Walter Benjamin superbly formulated this in the theses: ‘The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule’ (Benjamin, 1940: 697). The ability to bring together ‘rule’ and ‘exception’ and – in line with Adorno – ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’, ‘identity’ and ‘non-identity’, depends on this change of perspective. The intention is not to ontologize discontinuity, the state of emergency or suffering, as if it were an essential, inescapable determination of history. Rather, what is required here is to adopt the perspective of the oppressed. The difference in perspective certainly leads to a different perception of historical events. For the oppressed in history, with their individual and non-interchangeable suffering, all progress is non-existent: ‘the last sacrifice is always yesterday’s’ (Adorno, 1953: 269). Each victim is like the negative of persistent coercion, and therefore, the denial that progress really existed. The opposite would be tantamount to integrating the victims into the movement of the totality towards a happy ending, to rising above the victims – in Hegelian terms – and relegating them to mere stations in the unstoppable ascent of the spirit or the human race. And in doing so, their suffering would be converted into a ‘*quantité négligeable*’ that they must inevitably pay as the price of that ascent. ‘The essential character of pre-history is the appearance of utmost horror in the individual detail. A statistical compilation of those slaughtered in a pogrom, which also included mercy killings, conceals its essence, which emerges only in an exact description of the exception, the most hideous torture’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944: 139).

If every reconstruction of history is an anamnesis of the process that has taken place, it is not less true that, to date, the historical reconstructions guided by the idea of progress have shown a curious complicity with amnesia. Such amnesia is determined by how the historical process has effectively occurred. It is not possible to move away from these historic constructions as if they were old furniture once the dirty game has been exposed, as they actually make it possible to discover why memory has always been mutilated (Baars, 1989). So whatever is not expressed (but implicitly hidden) by these constructions needs to be elicited. Real crimes against victims and amnesia are closely connected.

The only way to prevent suffering – which in Auschwitz reached unimagined heights – from disappearing from an interpretation of universal history, and from being reduced to a mere contingency linked to plural, and therefore relative, contexts, is to contemplate the totality of history bearing in mind the break marked by Auschwitz. The most singular – Auschwitz – forced a change of perspective on the totality, so that the dark night of history could be contemplated from its standpoint (Claussen, 1995: 19f.): ‘Certainly, the unprecedented torture and humiliation of those abducted in cattle-trucks does shed a deathly-livid light on the most distant past’ (Adorno, 1951: 266). Thus, ‘manifest history is also revealing its connection to that dark side, which is passed over in the official legend of states, and no less in its progressive critique’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944: 265).

This perspective makes it possible to understand the contribution of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* without turning it into a mere expression of a state of mind and a wrong assessment of the evolution of the capitalist system, as expressed in the theory of Pollock’s State capitalism (Türcke and Bolte, 1994: 44f.). In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the thoughts are composed in fragments, and the authors did not hesitate to use ‘exaggeration’. They tried to capture in

'dialectical images' the spell of an inscrutable negativity. And they also used 'protohistoric constellations' to suspend the advance of a way of thinking and a history that prolonged the old injustice against which they rebelled. These dialectical images were not intended to bring to light the hidden meaning of history or to rebuild it by the use of a philosophy of history or an evolutionary theory of it, albeit a negative one. Rather, they attempted to make visible the meaninglessness in history, in order to issue a wake-up call to a way of thinking that was well practised in oblivion. The objective of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was to bring to light the dialectics between nature and history in the sense discussed here, that is, that of breaking the deceptive appearance of a process of civilization which, despite possible setbacks, advances so irresistibly towards individual and social emancipation. The terms 'myth' and 'Enlightenment' that this work connects represent for the dominant consciousness in modernity the two ends of the process: the reassuring opposition that legitimizes the present as a liberation from the enslaving ties of a mythical past. Horkheimer and Adorno tried to build a constellation between the two ideas that both energized and problematized the self-satisfied modern consciousness that was blinded to the catastrophic nature of the present – and of history (Tiedemann, 1998).

Those who claim that the critique of the instrumental domination of nature prevails over the critique of social domination and see here a break with the critique of political economy tend to use a teleological scheme and interpret the concept of 'proto-history' [*Urgeschichte*] to mean that which temporarily existed in the beginning. Even though some formulations of the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* give reasons for this, the scheme of the bourgeois philosophy of history as a process of teleological-evolutionary cause–effect should not be projected onto them. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* discusses the historical and natural constitution of both modern society and instrumental

subjectivity, from the perspective of the social and cultural context which manifested itself in the culture industry, antisemitism and the Nazi genocide, and certainly as an ill-fated constitution. The purpose of this was to illuminate the reverse of the 'logic of things' deceptively transfigured by the ideology of progress. What the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* discusses, then, is the dialectic between the constitution of the self and its negation, between the domination of nature and its destruction, between progress and regression, between the universality of exchange and the liquidation of the individual. The diagnosis of a factual failure of the Enlightenment should not be confused, therefore, with its happy postmodern cancellation.

NEGATIVE TOTALITY AND THE NEGATIVE DIALECTICS OF HISTORY

According to Adorno, what confers on society a character of (negative) totality is that the all-encompassing and all-embracing social organization is characterized by antagonism. The way society is organized – supposedly aimed at ensuring the self-preservation of its members – generates and reproduces relations of domination of some individuals over others. These relations cannot be simply attributed to the necessary division of labour.

The ultimate goal of social organization – that is, ensuring that the needs of its members are satisfied and avoidable suffering is eliminated (Adorno, 1966: 203) – is thwarted by the relations of domination that cause an inversion in the relationship between the self-preservation of all individuals and social organization. The latter is no longer a means to achieve self-preservation; instead self-preservation – mediated by social relations of mainly economic domination – becomes a means to obtain profits (Adorno, 1968: 361). The natural thing is to work to have one's needs met, but capitalism reverses that relationship. It demands postponing the

immediate satisfaction of needs in order to increase capital. Paradoxically, in this way individuals are reduced to a mere struggle for self-preservation, and the autonomy that would allow them to pursue goals beyond it is thwarted. Such goals are only possible when the purpose of social organization truly pursues the self-preservation of all of its members.

As Marx and Adorno noted, this inversion is expressed in the concept of 'capital', the automatic subject of the social process. A social process is run by a kind of mechanism, the expanded reproduction of capital, which carries individuals along with it and reduces them to mere producers or consumers. For Adorno, social objectivity as an antagonistic totality is undoubtedly a real, all-encompassing unit. The inversion that constitutes it is primarily hypostatization, autonomized reification with respect to individuals. The form of the reproduction of capital is truly an inverted world. Through and within the actions that ensure its reproduction, it becomes independent from the individuals who engage in those actions, and develops its own dynamics under laws that operate behind their backs, so to speak. Both Marx and Adorno stated this, not without irony, as their concept of society primarily aimed to be a critique of the autonomization of social synthesis, which is both an ideological construction and an expression of the specific form of capitalist economic development.

This two-fold character comes from the fact that individuals are both subjects and objects at the same time. The system is constituted thanks to their actions, it results from them; its 'naturalness' is 'pseudo naturalness' [*Naturwüchsigkeit*]. But as such, it appears in opposition to them, following a dynamic that overruns them and turns them into mere executors and appendices of the objectivity they have produced (Adorno, 1969: 294). If a short-sighted positivism absolutizes this reified objectivity and omits its genesis, the sociology of (inter)action absolutizes the appearance of atomized individuals, whose

constitution as true subjects is hampered by the existing social organization.

Autonomized social objectivity appears as something external and opposed, whose genesis has become opaque, almost impenetrable for individuals who are not able to unravel the process of their autonomization – even though the real abstraction is nothing other than reification that is independent from the sum total of their labour. While autonomized social objectivity remains in force with respect to individuals, their freedom will be reduced to conforming to market laws, lest they be penalized with economic ruin or social marginalization. This means reproducing in one's own action the inversion that capital consists in, that is, to not pursue the satisfaction of needs as the purpose of their economic action, but to convert that satisfaction into an instrument of an economic action aimed at maximizing profit.

This compels us to enquire into the principle that unifies the antagonistic society. What is the origin of the inversion that is responsible for the autonomized reification of social relations and the opacity that shrouds it? Adorno used two concepts to describe the unifying principle of the antagonistic totality, which were not mere equivalents: exchange and the law of value (Görg, 2004: 249). While the latter is less important in Adorno's theory of society, in his writings he repeatedly used the terms 'exchange' [*Tausch*], 'exchange principle' [*Tauschprinzip*], 'exchange society' [*Tauschgesellschaft*] and 'commodity society' [*Warengesellschaft*] to refer to the capitalist form of economy. In the law of exchange, Adorno recognized the same 'heteronomous objectivity' expressed in the concept of capital that is presented to individuals in the form of coercion (Adorno, 1966: 172). Thus, the inverted world of autonomized social objectivity is grounded in the abstraction operated by exchange: 'Here originates the disregard for the qualitative specificity of producers and consumers, for the mode of production, even for the needs which the social mechanism satisfies as it were in passing, as a secondary

consideration. The primary consideration is profit' (Adorno, 1965: 13).

The principle of exchange levels and eliminates spontaneity and the unique qualities of the individuals who make up society, reducing them to a common denominator. It also tends to demand an abstract and universal equivalence. Under the terms of exchange, abstract labour, that is, the historically specific way of producing commodities as a unit of use and exchange value, becomes the universal social form of useful concrete work. Concrete work, transformed into the average performance of the labour force, becomes a reifying abstraction of human relations, because the social relationships of things decide on the universal social nature of specific jobs. In addition, the quality of things becomes the fortuitous appearance of their exchange value. The products of human labour are identified by quantitative magnitudes and all the products of abstract labour are identical in terms of being the personification of exchange value. According to Adorno, this logic of exchange determines not only the economic processes, but the whole of social life; it penetrates social reality in its entirety and implies a domination of the universal (society) over the singular (its members), whereby the particular ends up prevailing in the antagonistic society (Adorno, 1969: 294).

This domination of the universal over the singular is expressed in the Hegelian concept of 'world spirit' [*Weltgeist*]. This concept, better than those constructions that nominally organize endless facts, expresses the experience that history escapes from the control of individuals. 'The objective and ultimately absolute Hegelian spirit; the Marxist law of value that comes into force without men being conscious of it; to an unleashed experience these are more evident than the prepared facts of a positivistic scientific bustle' (Adorno, 1966: 295). While Hegel transfigures it into a self-conscious subject, Adorno identifies it as 'the negative' (298). It is not what it claims to be, but it is not simply nothing. It has truth content.

The cunning of reason turns individuals into mere means for its own ends, and expresses the hubris of history over them. In line with Marx, Adorno did not retain this concept to give it a negative metaphysical twist, but to offer a materialist reinterpretation of the World Spirit. This simultaneously brings to light its true content, without dismissing it as if it were an empty concept: 'The mythical adoration of the spirit is not pure conceptual mythology' (310). The critique of personification and the ideological affirmation of the objective hubris of history over individuals in the concept of World Spirit cannot ignore the objective character of this hubris and the experience of it that this concept expresses.

The thesis that society is subject to natural laws is ideology if it is hypostatized as immutably given by nature. But this legality is real as a law of motion for the unconscious society, as *Das Kapital*, in a phenomenology of the anti-spirit, traces it from the analysis of the commodity form to the theory of collapse. (349)

Instead, Adorno intends to develop the negative character of that experience: 'to experience the world spirit as a whole means to experience its negativity' (300). This is how he incorporated reflections on the character of natural history dating back to the 1930s. Negativity is the suffering accumulated throughout history that the Hegelian concept reduced to a necessary price. The individual experience of suffering is subsumed under a sacrificial logic. Not that Hegel ignored that suffering, but he subordinated it to the goal of the World Spirit that was imposed over the heads and bodies of singular individuals. Suffering was always perceived from the perspective of a speculatively projected reconciliation. But the falsehood of the World Spirit was, at the same time, its truth: the truth of the coercion that the antagonistic totality exerted on the individuals who reproduced their existence through it. The shift from reason to unreason is the same experienced by self-preservation when mediated through the revaluation of capital.

However, it should not be forgotten that the spell of the concept of the World Spirit, as an ideology of history, is produced by commodity fetishism: 'In human experience, the spell is the equivalent of the fetish character of the commodity. The self-made things become a thing-in-itself, from which the self cannot escape anymore' (339). Commodity fetishism is objectivity that produces a form of consciousness. This explains the difficulty in escaping the spell. But the purpose of asserting objectivity is not to ontologize negativity, which would reduce the critique of the World Spirit to the absurd, but to not underestimate its power. If there is any chance of breaking the spell, it would be a product of false universality itself. The coercion of the universal, and the unity it imposes between individual interests and the logic of the reproduction of capital, produces non-identity between them through the coercion and suffering that it generates (314f.). The domination of nature and social domination produce the breaks and cracks which, belonging to history, do not disappear in the identity of the World Spirit. It is in these breaks and cracks that the failure of that identity is made apparent, and the possibility of its elimination opens up ever again.

Note

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