

*Between Impotence and Illusion:
Adorno's Art of Theory and Practice**

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In general, the judgement generated within the student movement while it was breaking away from its teachers Horkheimer and Adorno and moving towards a more orthodox Marxism . . . has gained currency: that the Frankfurt School propagated a pessimistic resignation that prohibited political practice and privileged an ivory-tower quietism.

— Russell A. Berman, "Adorno's Radicalism"

Yet the conclusion remains that although Adorno's "Copernican turn" toward non-identity may have revolutionized theory, it is not yet a theory for revolutionaries.

— Susan Buck-Morss, "The Dialectic of T. W. Adorno"

The fact of the matter is that Adorno's talk of the mediation between intellectual praxis and political praxis remained abstract and vague. . . [T]he whole of his theoretical effort was to continue to interpret the world, whereas the point had been to change it.

— Susan Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*

The views expressed above retain their currency today. Despite a resurgence of interest in the Frankfurt School, and amidst an ever increasing proliferation of publications pertaining to their work, these charges of pessimism, quietism, and resignation lead an afterlife in contemporary

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Adorno scholarship. On one hand, the critique of Adorno's sheer negativity carried on in the eighties by Habermas and others brought the "conclusions" of Buck-Morss and the views of the student movement into the present. On the other hand, an entire field of Adorno literature has arisen that, though unconvinced of his irrelevance, leaves unaddressed the question of how his work might involve itself in matters of political practice. In the first instance, we stand before what is rapidly becoming an orthodox conclusion: progressive thought must abandon Adorno if it is to carry on with the project of emancipation. In the second instance, though the literature is sympathetic to Adorno, in not addressing specifically the question of the relation of Adorno's critical theory to practice, it leaves Adorno's, and ultimately its own, contribution to emancipation in question. It is only in a critical investigation of this relation that Adorno's contribution to the possibility of emancipation comes to light.¹ Indeed, such an investigation is a prerequisite for *any* authentic critical theory. We find it imperative, therefore, insofar as these two responses (dismissal and silence) remain predominant, to take up again the question of Adorno's failure to provide a theory for revolutionaries.

What is also intriguing about Adorno's supposed failure is the contrast it allows one to draw between an apparent later quietism and an earlier Frankfurt School commitment to the unity of theory and practice. Douglas Kellner construes the development of the school in such a way:

Secondly, Horkheimer's and Adorno's works abandoned any revolutionary intentions. The original critical theory, as we have seen, made the theory-praxis relation its foundation stone. . . . At least the 1930s work of critical theory was shaped by an emancipatory interest in the liberation and happiness of the individual and the construction of a socialist society. This revolutionary intention can be found in all its work on philosophy, art, Nazism, and the family. In the 1940s, however, members of the Frankfurt School surrendered this belief in the desirability of a more rational socialist society and even attacked rationality and the rationalization of society itself.²

1. This is not, of course, to suggest that recent work on Adorno outside the question of the relation of his thought to political practice is uninteresting or unproductive. It is rather to claim that the import of such work for the project of emancipation is uncertain until the question is addressed. Our work will focus primarily on this question and thus it will consider only that literature which explicitly addresses the relation, or nonrelation, of critical theory to practice.

2. Douglas Kellner, "The Frankfurt School Revisited: A Critique of Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination*," *New German Critique* 2.4 (Winter 1975): 146-47.

The question of Adorno's relation to political practice thus has implications for how one reads the history of the Frankfurt School. If one finds in the later works of Adorno (and Horkheimer) a dissatisfying spiral into political bankruptcy, a question of some pivotal turn for the worse will necessarily arise.³ In fact, locating "the fall" may be all that remains if one concludes, following Piccone, that taken as a whole "[t]he subject matter is no longer exciting."⁴ We see things otherwise. Adorno's later work is exciting, its dismissal is premature, and its critics beg the question against the very positions they would banish to the "No-man's land between the borders of East and West"⁵ or "the brink of what Lukács has called the 'Grand Hotel Abyss.'"⁶

I

Through the seventies and early eighties, assessments of Adorno nearly always began with the question: does he provide us with any avenue for positive political action? Most commentators answered negatively. In an attempt to problematize this still unchallenged response, it seems prudent to probe the commitments and expectations that inform the question Adorno's fate apparently hangs upon. What should also give us pause is the fact that the negative assessment noted above is accompanied, almost always, by a call for a return to the Frankfurt School's earlier demand that theory never supersede practice. Such a call merits investigation, for it supposes that this earlier commitment resulted from a clarity of vision that was not itself always already in question. The issue here turns on how one reads the development of the

3. Our task in this paper will be to defend Adorno's work against the critiques cited above. Though it is Adorno upon whom we shall concentrate, admittedly, the collaboration of Horkheimer and Adorno was an especially intense one, and it is for that reason not always possible to separate the two. As our analysis will conclude, however, with an interpretation of Adorno's aesthetic writings, it seems prudent in this case to distinguish between their contributions.

4. Paul Piccone, review of *The Dialectical Imagination* by Martin Jay, *Telos* 16 (Summer 1973): 150.

5. Susan Buck-Morss, "The Dialectic of T.W. Adorno," *Telos* 14 (Winter 1972): 143.

6. Piccone 149. There are two inappropriate dualisms that are often imposed upon Adorno's work and then interpreted as grounds for its dismissal. The first dualism involves locating Adorno's work on the continuum of optimism and pessimism. Robert Hullot-Kentor does an excellent job in exposing the facile nature of this imposition in "Back to Adorno," *Telos* 81 (Fall, 1989): 5-29. The second dualism invokes a constructive/nonconstructive opposition. It is the issue of Adorno's supposed "non-constructive" fall into theory that we take up here.

Frankfurt School. Is it simply a matter, as many commentators would have it, of regression from a "heroic period" to a postwar "failure of nerve," an abandonment of initial neo-Marxist aspirations? Perhaps, but the question is, how did that abandonment occur? Was it *simply* a failure of nerve, or can we see at work in the development of the Frankfurt School an intensification of its primary questions? Perhaps what seems so obviously to be a shift towards quietism in the later works will appear starkly different if one sees in the Frankfurt School's history such an intensification. Indeed, the very thought of what it would mean to make a positive contribution to political action stands in question. Kellner is correct: the issue of theory and practice is the "foundation stone" of the early Frankfurt School, but not only as a commitment. Above all, it founds as a question.

Already in Horkheimer's 1937 essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory," the question of the relation of theory and practice is evident. The essay begins with the question "what is 'theory'?" The question is crucial because, to parody Kant, practice without theory is blind. If practice is not to reduce to sheer nihilism, the destruction of the status quo for the sake of its destruction, it needs to be accompanied by a corresponding theory of emancipation, a description of what life beyond sundered life could be. But if practice without theory is blind, theory without practice is empty. "The issue . . . is not simply the theory of emancipation; it is the practice of it as well."⁷ The question therefore arises: what is the relation of the theory of emancipation to the practice of emancipation? One might envision the theoretical enterprise to be primarily constructive in nature, producing the categorical structures within which the practice of emancipation could be realized. At one point Horkheimer writes: "Constructive thinking, then, plays a more important role than empirical verification in this theory as a whole, in comparison with what goes on in the activity of common sense" (TCT 221; KT 169). This seems to suggest that theory and practice are two separate stages: theory produces the goals and practice pursues them. Horkheimer refuses this separation, however, for "in regard to the essential kind of change at which the critical theory aims, there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about" (TCT 220; KT 169). The vision of theory is limited to the heights of the

7. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury, 1972) 233; *Kritische Theorie II* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1968) 181. Cited hereafter within the text as TCT and KT.

shoulders it stands upon. While it might tinker with social forces, realigning them in apparently novel ways, such does not amount to the "essential kind of change" emancipation requires.

This creates a significant problem. Theory is unable to envision *ex nihilo* the goals needed to direct emancipatory practice. The very possibility of theory thus becomes an issue for theory. If it is assumed along with traditional theory that the role of theory is to generate goals to guide practice, the question remains simply one concerning how such goals might be discovered. But if theory will fail to generate these goals, and necessarily fail as Horkheimer suggests, then theory cannot be what we initially supposed it was and we must raise again the question "what is 'theory'?" Likewise, the very possibility of political activity, understood as a project involving theory and practice, becomes problematic. What, after all, could political activity mean without some sense of what the relation of theory and practice is or even could be? The issue is decisive because one cannot return to the illusion that theory could shape practice in a self-sufficient manner. Once that illusion dissipates, theory finds itself in a quandary, one exacerbating the tension already inherent within the traditional question of theory and practice. It is no longer just a question of proper relation, but also a question of what "theory" and "practice" are in and of themselves.

Horkheimer's response to this quandary is to call on theory "to determine for itself what it is to accomplish and serve, and this not in fragmentary fashion but totally" (TCT 242-43; KT 190). Indeed, in Horkheimer's view, this is not merely the present task of thinking, but its "characteristic mark." This response suggests two things. First, the relation of theory and practice does center the essay, but as a question, for the essay concludes with a task in which theory, unable to fathom its own relation to practice, is called upon to determine itself in this relation. On what this determination could be, however, the essay is silent. It seems superficial to suggest, therefore, that a staunch commitment to the inseparability of theory and practice anchors the work of the early Frankfurt School. In a sense it does, but it is a commitment without direction, given Horkheimer's inability to develop a successful model that shows how theory might relate to practice. In fact, the essay drives us to the quandary outlined above: theory, practice, and political action are terms about which we can no longer pretend to have any concrete understanding. Thus, the attempt to characterize the work of the later Adorno and Horkheimer as having forgotten practice is wrongheaded. Practice was always a question, and as we shall see, one intensified rather

than forgotten in the developments of the later work.⁸

To perceive such a continuity of questioning at work in the development of the Frankfurt School is not to deny, however, that differences do separate the early and later work; and this brings us to our second point. There is a naïveté in the claim that theory's "characteristic mark" is "to determine for itself what it is to accomplish and serve." The thought lingers in this remark that reason is somehow self-legislating, a thought Horkheimer himself terms an illusion. In works like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is precisely the persistence of this illusion that is scrutinized. The essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" is therefore not without internal tensions, tensions indirectly exploited in later works. Nevertheless, it is important to see how the spirit that animates later works like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* emanates from the warning Horkheimer directs toward all concerned with emancipatory practice at the conclusion of "Traditional and Critical Theory": "But conformism in thought and the insistence that thinking is a fixed vocation, a self-enclosed realm within society as a whole, betrays the very essence of thought" (TCT 243; KT 191). The exhortation is that thought must be kept open to critique, even to the point of a willingness to abandon traditional modes of thinking. In so abandoning them, however, one is less dropping them as worn metaphors than working through them. Out of this exhortation one could thus read the later works as ever more radical pursuits of questions already plaguing essays such as "Traditional and Critical Theory."

What needs to be shown at this juncture, then, is how works like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be viewed as intensifications of the very issue — the relation of theory and practice — that Horkheimer was already exploring with great difficulty in "Traditional and Critical Theory." If the Frankfurt School's development is viewed in this way, the very question of the relation of the later works to questions of political action becomes a revived one, with theory and practice centering the discussion. Rather than having fallen silent on the question, perhaps Adorno and Horkheimer never let it alone.

Amidst its genealogical excesses, one can find in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

8. In fact, we can see an interesting inversion of Marx's development in the Frankfurt School. Marx begins with an attempt to criticize ruthlessly all that exists and ends up trying to implement changes on the basis of socialist mechanisms. The Frankfurt School, on the contrary, starts out hoping to implement, along neo-Marxist lines, some changes on behalf of emancipation but ends up ruthlessly questioning "emancipation" and the relation of theory and practice.

a persistent theme: "The point is rather that the Enlightenment must consider itself, if men are not to be wholly betrayed."⁹ While pursuing the aims of emancipation, Horkheimer and Adorno raise the question of the extent to which emancipatory practice and theory already contribute to unfreedom and undercut emancipation. The fear is that while "social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought," domination may be so as well (DE xiii; DA 13). If so, "[i]f enlightenment does not accommodate reflection on this recidivist element, then it seals its own fate" (DE xiii; DA 13). Thought directed toward emancipation, if it is to be adequate, must concern itself with its own emancipation: "With the abandonment of thought . . . enlightenment has relinquished its own realization. . . . [T]rue revolutionary practice depends on the intransigence of theory in the face of the insensibility with which society allows thought to ossify" (DE 41; DA 58-59). Theory's turn to a rigorous self-critique is, therefore (as much in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as in "Tradition and Critical Theory"), a question of both the theory and the practice of emancipation. The moral here seems clear: not only is there a continuity between the early and later works surrounding the question of the relation of theory and practice, but also any attempt to ask of the later works their view of political action must take into account that the possibility of political action, understood as emancipatory practice, is precisely the issue. From "Traditional and Critical Theory" through the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the question of how "emancipatory practice" is to do just that, without regression, is always in the fore. To say with Susan Buck-Morss that what is needed is a "theory for revolutionaries" is to suppose this question already answered, that one already knows how theory would inform revolutionary practice. Moreover, not only does Buck-Morss's demand beg the question of the relation of theory to practice, it seals off from critique precisely the issue that is most in need of it: how a theory might be "revolutionary."¹⁰

There is a deeper moral here. If the question "Does Adorno provide us with any avenue for positive political action?" is to be asked, without presupposing in an unarticulated fashion what "political action" is, it must be seen that any question of political action is simultaneously a

9. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1986) xv; *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981) 15. Cited hereafter within the text as DE and DA.

10. Buck-Morss's critique that Adorno has revolutionized theory but failed to provide a theory for revolutionaries is premature. It assumes that the question of a revolutionary theory has been answered, when in fact, as we have seen, it remains a crucial question.

question of reason and its critique. The question is: how is thought to function in the attempt to overcome alienated life without becoming a co-conspirator in the practice of domination? To construe the question differently is to act as if the problems of theory and practice were already resolved; but, again, from as early as "Traditional and Critical Theory," the absence of such a resolution was apparent. Granted, there was some expectation that resolution might be forthcoming, but even then, those expectations were held in check, and as their work developed toward the 1944 publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, those expectations gradually diminished until finally they were taken up as questions themselves. The question of the relation of theory and practice was, therefore, present from the beginning. What underwent transformation as their work progressed was the very expectation that this question could be resolved in its present form.

II

If one claims that the question of political activity is a question of reason and its critique, one is simply asking how emancipation could be carried out without a regression into positivism or a leap into the fanatical terrorism that all premature revolutions bring. The worry over positivism is the philosophically deeper one. On the one hand, our present situation is sundered, and the need for alternatives is obvious. On the other hand, how are we to generate new values if all we are capable of is reaction?

[A] thought which is worth anything at all must absorb the weight of reality and not simply flee from it. Otherwise, we end up with that which Kafka called "the empty, happy journey." There is a difference, however, between integrating this power of the existent into thought and merely capitulating before it.¹¹

If we are not to fall into an "empty, happy journey," the mystery of this "integration" must be unlocked. Theory must give practice, in some fashion, a manner in which it can both "absorb" and transform the real. This gives us, then, yet again, the question of how theory is to relate to practice.

Since Kant, achieving the correct relationship between theory and practice has amounted to selecting the right means given particular ends. Confronted with corrupt means, the left, in order to criticize

11. Theodor Adorno, "On the Historical Adequacy of Consciousness," interview with Adorno and Peter von Haselberg, *Telos* 56 (Summer 1983): 102.

existing structures, pursued immanent critique: prevailing practices were judged in terms of the very ideals they aspired to. After successful immanent critique, however, a poignant problem arises. In the search for new means to achieve the ideals that prevalent practices fail to accomplish, it becomes apparent that theory has no understanding of these ideals apart from their role in those practices found to be deficient. While the temptation is to substitute ideals, one cannot simply replace one set of ideals with another without falling prey to the illusion that reason is self-legislating.¹² This leaves emancipatory theory between a rock and no-place: it has neither the ends nor the means with which to achieve emancipation.

The space between the rock and no-place is tighter than might first appear. Without ends or means, it is a serious question whether there is any possible content to the idea of emancipation itself. Indeed, the structure of ends-means rationality itself comes into question. It appears we must either do the impossible — generate new ends *ex nihilo* — or pursue the Sisyphean path of incrementalism, assuming the direction of deficient practices. What would it mean to pursue emancipation through an ends-means rationality, when the very idea of what it is to be an “end” or a “means” is radically in question? This is a problem of the independence of theory from the tainted practices it is trying to reform. This is not just a question *for* theory, however, but for projects of reform as well, because when theory proceeds without independence, so does practice.

The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice; the recovery of theory’s independence lies in the interest of practice itself. The interrelation of both moments is not settled once and for all but fluctuates historically. Today, with theory paralyzed and disparaged by the all-governing bustle, its mere existence, however impotent, bears witness against the bustle. This is why theory is legitimate and why it is hated; without it, there would be no changing the practice that constantly calls for change. Those who chide theory anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful as thwarted. (ND 143; NDK 144-45)

12. Adorno unveils this illusion in *Negative Dialectics*: “Theory does not contain answers to everything; it reacts to the world, which is faulty to the core. What would be free from the spell of the world is not under theory’s jurisdiction.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973) 41; *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1966) 39. Cited hereafter within the text as ND and NDK.

At this juncture, then, it would appear that political activity must either proceed without the direction of theory or not proceed at all. As the usual interpretations would have it, Adorno opted for the latter. But this is a false dilemma, because it supposes that one already knows what "political activity" is. This is, of course, given the silence one is driven to when asked about the relation of theory and practice, precisely what we have shown not to be the case.

Despite this problematic silence, the demands that theory serve the desires of practice have not abated. Theory has not only been called "anachronistic" but vilified as impotent as well. What is required, the slogan runs, is a theory at one with practice; however:

The call for unity of theory and practice has irresistibly degraded theory to a servant's role, removing the very traits it should have brought to that unity. The visa stamp of practice which we demand of all theory became a censor's placet. Yet whereas theory succumbed in the vaunted mixture, practice became nonconceptual, a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of; it became the prey of power. (ND 143; NDK 144)

Practice demands of theory not only that it produce the idea of emancipation, but also that it do so in such a fashion that the idea will conform to the present possibilities open to practice. Practice demands "emancipation" from theory without paying attention to what is demanded by its demand. After all, in order to provide practice with emancipation, both a conception of emancipation and an understanding of how one would relate such a conception to practice is required. The point Adorno's work drives one to again and again is the painful lack of both.

Admittedly, demands for the practical relevance of theory strike a sharp chord with those committed to resolving the contradictions evident in contemporary social life. No one would want to confess impotence in the face of such pressing needs. And yet, Adorno says one must. His claim is precisely that such impotence must be faced if anything like "emancipatory practice" is to be possible.

I would prefer to close our conversation by urging reflection on a fact that is all too easily repressed precisely in the zeal of the will to change: that attempts really to change our world drastically in any particular field are immediately exposed to the overpowering

force of the status quo and seem condemned to impotence. Whoever wants to change things can apparently do so only by making this impotence itself and his own impotence as well into a factor of what he does.¹³

Note that the impotence under discussion here is not solely the impotence of theory, but also the impotence of those “attempts really to change our world drastically,” that is, it is the impotence of practice as well. One stands before alienated life and demands a change — something, anything else. Alas, one comes to see that the theoretical vantage points one occupies are impoverished by the same status quo one seeks to escape. A feeling of impotence is accompanied by the realization of one’s implication in the functioning of the system. Thus the issue of one’s own self-formation/deformation comes to the fore. To approach critically what is, one must critically approach oneself. To do so, to ask the question of self-formation, is to ask the question of the independence of theory, to examine critically the objective conditions which make thought what it is.

While our position remains one between a rock and no-place, it is a no-place that arises less from a “failure of nerve” than from persistently following the question of the relation of theory and practice. The questioning of Adorno and Horkheimer has brought critical theory to this paralyzing juncture because in the absence of any resolution of the problem of theory and practice, the very structure of ends-means rationality collapses. With this collapse of a means-ends portrayal of emancipation, the expectation of the arrival of new, revolutionary ends in any form can no longer be maintained. They can neither be generated *ex nihilo* nor somehow culled out of existing ways of life via an instrumental rationality; either procedure is blind to how its own self-formation/deformation incorporates what it seeks to overcome. One might suspect that such a fate is tantamount to the end of reason; Adorno would have it otherwise. The question of reason itself remains, even in this awkward position. His suggestion ironically echoes Horkheimer’s at the end of “Traditional and Critical Theory.” Yet rather than determining “for itself what it is to accomplish and serve,” reason must now, Adorno insists, undertake an analysis of its own self-formation in order to uncover its *inability* to determine itself.

13. Theodor W. Adorno, “Education for Autonomy,” interview with Hellmut Becker, *Telos* 56 (Summer 1983): 110.

III

The question of reason and its self-formation is a question Adorno takes up in "Subject and Object." He begins with an acknowledgment of the severe difficulties reason encounters in trying to account for itself: it always seems to presuppose the relation it is struggling to determine. Yet rather than attempt to provide a new account in the face of these difficulties, given the problems inherent in producing anything "new," he turns instead to an investigation of previous attempts. He traces in these accounts how various efforts to demarcate the boundaries of reason's relation to the world fail to consider reason's (and their own) self-formation.

Adorno's approach, his starting point in "Subject and Object," is unique. He commences without any provisional definition of how subject and object relate to one another. This illustrates his commitment to the demand that theory recognize itself in the impotence remarked upon earlier; in fact, the entire essay is written within a confession of the depth of its own impotence. To write concerning subject/object without having established any critical account of their relation, and without being able to, necessarily, is paradoxically to develop a position while placing its fundamental commitments radically in question. Adorno is thus true to his own admonishment of would-be critical theorists: "Proponents of the abstract thesis that every man's thought is conditioned should be most concretely reminded that so is their own, that it is blind to the supra-individual element which alone turns individual consciousness into thought" (ND 36; NDK 44). The issue here is not simply revisability, however. A commitment to revisability is meaningful only given provisional accounts of what the issue in question could be. Such accounts are, however, precisely what Adorno eschews. Instead, he turns toward his theoretical inheritance in the hope that critical reflections thereon might produce new possibilities for thought. Such possibilities emerge negatively, however, arising out of the collapse of what amount to present impossibilities. With regard to the question of political action, these analyses are Adorno's legacy. What remains to be seen is whether Adorno's attention to such failures achieves any positive result for our understanding of the relation of theory and practice and the possibilities of political action.

"Subject and Object," as a meditation upon reason's relation to its own self-formation, signals a methodological departure from *Dialectic of*

Enlightenment. In 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer attempted to explain the failure of the enlightenment to become enlightened about itself by giving a genealogical account of the formation of enlightenment rationality. They addressed the question of reason's self-formation via a positive account of how reason had come to assume, by the late 1930s, a fascist form. In "Subject and Object," however, in radically following out the question of theory and practice, Adorno offers no such account. Thus one need not accept the accuracy of the genealogical account that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers in order to find oneself between a rock and no-place. As any "theory for revolutionaries" will need to confront the question of theory's relation to practice, a critical theory must necessarily involve itself with the question of reason and its self-formation.

This raises an issue with Habermas. He argues that the totalizing critique of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reduces to an uninhibited skepticism with regard to the possibilities of enlightenment rationality. "On their analysis, it is no longer possible to place hope in the liberating force of enlightenment. Inspired by Benjamin's now ironic hope of the hopeless, they still did not want to relinquish the now paradoxical labor of conceptualization. We no longer share this mood, this attitude."¹⁴ Habermas rejects this mood because he feels that with such skepticism Horkheimer and Adorno deprive themselves of any measure with which to engage in constructive critique. Habermas assumes, though, that no constructive moment emerges from the negative critique carried out in work like "Subject and Object." Our claim, however, is that the question of how reason is to bear its self-formation is, in fact, a constructive attempt to work out of "no place," and thus not wholly skeptical.¹⁵ The challenge Adorno takes up is to find a way of thinking about emancipation wherein reason's critical but necessarily sublimated enactment of its self-formation does not translate into barbarism.

As noted above, the discussion of subject/object entails seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Both the subjective and objective moments of a given relation are in danger of perpetual equivocation:

14. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT, 1987) 106.

15. Robert Hullot-Kentor confronts Habermas's charge in another manner. He argues that Habermas's reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is terribly one-sided. Instead of being a quasi-Nietzschean abandonment of reason, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is, according to Hullot-Kentor, much as we suggest, an intensification of reason's self-critique. See Hullot-Kentor's "Back to Adorno" 9-14.

The terms [subject and object] are patently equivocal. "Subject," for instance, may refer to the particular individual as well as to general attributes, to "consciousness in general" in the language of Kant's *Prolegomena*. The equivocation is not removable simply by terminological clarification, for the two meanings have reciprocal need of each other; one is scarcely to be grasped without the other.¹⁶

In order to determine anything as a subject — as a particular individual — one must employ a generic concept; that is, one must designate the subject as such via something objective. "Even in proper names, a reference to that universal is still implied. They mean one who is called by that name, not by any other; and 'one' stands elliptically for 'one human being'" (SO 498; KG 741). Speech that would consider the subject can do so only with reference to what is an object. On the other hand, to begin with the "object," viewing the subject as derivative, is to begin with nothing at all, for something can only become an object given a point of view from which it is considered. Thus one can establish priority in either moment only with the assumption of an uncritical formulation of the other moment. Any attempt to define subject and object already presupposes an understanding of how they are related.

Although Adorno's analysis appears only to draw out the impossibility of defining the relation of subject and object, it does, in fact, uncover the "interdependence" of the subjective and objective moment. This tension allows subjects and objects to be what they are since any attempt to speak of either moment necessarily invokes the other. Moreover, as we shall see, this tension-laden "interdependence" can neither be demarcated into a binary relation nor resolved into an organic unity. The issue then is twofold: what results from resolving this tension, and what would it mean to maintain it?

While remaining attentive to this interdependence, Adorno demonstrates how accounts of reason that ignore or artificially resolve this fundamental tension necessarily uncritically appropriate their own self-formation and thus blindly perpetuate their social and intellectual inheritance. This is evident in attempts to prioritize the subject. Kant locates reason's activity in the subject, in the space of transcendental

16. Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982), eds. J. Arato et al., 497-98; *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 741. Cited hereafter within the text as SO and KG.

subjectivity. He claims that the transcendental unity of apperception (TUA) amounts to pure subjectivity. The functioning of this pure subjectivity, the unifying operation that transcendental subjectivity is, must have “something” to unify in order to itself be what it is: a providential power unifying inner and outer sense into coherent experience. This “something” belongs, however, not to the transcendental, but to the empirical. TUA, in order to establish coherency in experience, must first already have before it some content as an intuition. Moreover, if there is to be such a content there must first be an empirical agent at work in the world. Thus TUA and the content that it unifies must be equally primordial. The empirical subject cannot be understood as an instantiation of a prior pure subjectivity because such “pure subjectivity” already draws an empirical sustenance from the very object it is supposed to construct — empirical individuals. “It is evident that the abstract concept of the transcendental subject — its thought forms, their unity, and the original productivity of consciousness — presupposes what it promises to bring about: actual, live individuals” (SO 500; KG 744). That this leaves reason to the workings of the status quo is clear. In prioritizing the subjective, Kant circumscribes the powers of reason within transcendental subjectivity. Reason is able to treat, “autonomously,” whatever comes before its jurisdiction, that is, whatever becomes conscious. Reason’s contribution to human activity takes place only after its transcendental structures have allowed whatever is at issue into consciousness. Reason must, in operating in this manner, assume without question the form of these transcendental structures. If we are committed to the view that these structures are the result of our social and intellectual inheritance, however, then to assume the Kantian paradigm is to accept these structures as given.¹⁷ In such an account, reason enters into human activity too late to confront critically the limits of its self-formation. In what is supposed to be the subject’s rise to self-legislation, one finds instead only self-abnegation.

At the other extreme, prioritization of the object likewise imprisons reason within the status quo. To expel the subjective moment from reason in the name of an “objectivism” is to proceed as if objects showed themselves from themselves without any admixture of social forces. If reason is treated as an empty conduit for knowledge, it is left at the

17. Roughly put, the view that human beings are social products locates the set of relations through which transcendental subjectivity operates in an already existing set of social relations; e.g., language games, institutional structures, locally contingent patterns of interpersonal behavior, etc.

mercy of social forces that always already inform both subjective and objective moments. Ironically, this reduces to a pure subjectivism because the forces constituting subjectivity (thus giving the knower his or her point of view) are given free reign; "the supposedly pure object lacking any admixture of thought and visibility is the literal reflection of abstract subjectivity" (SO 503; KG 747).¹⁸ Hence the attempt to move to a pure objectivism also prevents reason from critically appropriating its self-formation.

If it remains untenable to privilege either the subjective or the objective moment, perhaps one could find resolution in a fusion of the two. Any such attempt, however, renders reason impotent in the same manner in which objectivism does. In claiming that reason emerges out of events that fuse the subjective and objective moments, one directs one's attention toward what is required to achieve that fusion. One takes what is distinct as given and passes uncritically over the conditions responsible for that distinctness. Whereas objectivism treats reason as a "sphere of being of absolute origins," fusion disregards the problems of origin altogether and with them the possibility of a critical treatment of its self-formation.

Another route one might take to escape what appears to be an irresolvable tension between subject and object posits their antecedent unity in unarticulated experience. Such a unity would prefigure, as a precondition, the articulation of any distinction between subject and object. The problem with such an appeal is twofold. In the first instance, it is a mystery what such a unity could be, given that any attempt to articulate it, *ipso facto*, loses it. Moreover, from the standpoint of the question of theory and practice, such a unity is both uninteresting and unhelpful because it cannot, in principle, contribute to practice. In raising an issue for practice one is involved in articulate experience and thus, as the antecedent unity fades, the troubling questions surrounding the relation of subject and object return. Therefore, appeals to an antecedent unity of subject and object, regardless of how questionable these might be in and of themselves, provide no direction for issues of political practice.

The tension between subject and object appears, therefore, to be an irresolvable one and necessarily so. It has become evident that any attempt to prioritize one moment above another, or to dissolve the relation

18. Adorno also writes: "The reified consciousness that mistakes itself for nature is naive: having evolved, and being very much mediated in itself, it takes itself — to speak in Husserl's terms — for a 'sphere of being of absolute origins'" (SO 505; KG 741).

into either an antecedent or an achieved unity, results in abandoning reason to the arbitrariness of its self-formation.¹⁹ The question of subject and object arose negatively out of the question of reason and its self-formation, which itself grew out of the question of theory and practice. A theory of emancipation — “a theory for revolutionaries” — that forgets its own self-formation can, given the above analysis, be neither revolutionary nor emancipatory. But suppose the question of self-formation is kept at the fore, suppose one decides to accept and maintain this seemingly irresolvable tension. What then? The problem then becomes that we do not really know what it would mean to “maintain” this tension. To recognize that it needs to be maintained is not to achieve anything, but only to, perhaps, prevent one’s falling into the regressive scenarios outlined above. Something more, as Horkheimer notes, is needed. “Present meaning and future verification of a proposition are not the same thing. The judgment that a man is sick, or that humanity is in agony, is no prognosis, even if it can be verified in a process subsequent to its formulation.”²⁰ This sounds like a royal return to the space between the rock and no-place — precisely the location where the critics of Adorno and Horkheimer expected to find us. If the above analysis is correct, however, these critics are here as well. The issue then, as stated earlier, is whether any positive moment, any glimmer of what it would mean not to dissolve the tension between subject and object, emerges from this negative critique.²¹

IV

If the subject does have an objective core, the object’s subjective qualities are so much more an element of objectivity. For it is only as something definite that the object becomes anything at all. In the attributes that seem to be attached to it by the subject alone, the subject’s own objectivity comes to the fore. (SO 502-03; KG 747)

19. Thus one does not have to read Adorno “against the grain,” as Andreas Huyssen suggests, in order to rescue him from the charge that his work betrays a nostalgic yearning for a strong bourgeois ego. In fact, the main thrust of the work displaces such a conception. See “Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner,” *New German Critique* 29 (Spring-Summer 1983): 8-38. For a thorough refutation of the charge of nostalgia see Calvin Thomas, “A Knowledge That Would Not Be Power: Adorno, Nostalgia, and the Historicity of the Musical Subject,” *New German Critique* 48 (Fall 1989): 155-75.

20. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1947) 44.

21. In “A Knowledge That Would Not Be Power,” Calvin Thomas is content to

With this, Adorno provides an extreme redirection for critical thinking: in order to maintain the tension between subject and object, it must move through the subject. In contrast to traditional views in which thought achieves purity via departure from the subject, Adorno suggests that "adequate expression of a matter does not involve an elimination of subjectivity, but rather that the matter itself can be brought to language only through the most extreme refinement and exertion of subjectivity."²² To demand that thought begin with the subject is simply to confess that beginning with the object is impossible. One cannot go through the object, for the object only appears always already under description. If it were without "the subjective moment [description], the object would come diffusely apart like the fleeting stirrings and instants of subjective life" (SO 509; KG 756). Thus the demand that thought begin with the subject amounts only to a demand that thought acknowledge its own contingencies.

Any social practice could be treated as a subject, as an idiosyncratic production of an age. Viewed in this way, the import of a philosophy is largely a matter of how it relates to and enacts its social and historical conditions. In "Subject and Object," Adorno approaches Kant with these concerns and discovers, somewhat ironically, that the remarks Kant makes about "transcendental subjectivity" provide a better measure of the empirical subject than Kant's overt descriptions of "empirical subjectivity." Kant, and German idealism more generally, incorporated into transcendental subjectivity all the ideals the bourgeois individual supposedly embodied: creativity, spontaneity, autonomy, and freedom. But having wedded these traits to the transcendental subject, Kant tacitly betrayed their absence in the lives of empirical subjects. Empirical life lacks the splendor of the achievements carried out at the transcendental level. For example, TUA unifies the temporal flow (and thus all of experience), but in a way that necessarily can never be experienced without loss of that unification. Furthermore, the properties of transcendental subjectivity are so distinct and foreign to empirical life

remain in this negativity in his effort to free Adorno from the claim that his work on subject and object amounts to a regressive nostalgia for a unified ego. While accentuating the negative moment of Adorno's work accomplishes this, it does little to answer the question of its relation to political practice.

22. Adorno, "On the Historical Adequacy of Consciousness" 102. What is radical in Adorno's treatment of this point, in contrast to traditional neo-Kantian views, is that it not only prioritizes the subject, but also problematizes the status of the "subject," that is, it raises questions concerning what the demarcation of the "subject" amounts to.

that Kant is only able to locate these ideals within the space of transcendental subjectivity via transcendental deduction. While they serve as the condition of the possibility for empirical individuals, they themselves never become manifest. In a sense, therefore, what Kant gives to the empirical subject on the one hand — its most prized ideals in transcendental subjectivity — he withdraws on the other, because these ideals are never actualized in the empirical subject. “We” are told of “our” world-making powers, but the “we” is impersonal and faceless, far removed from the bustle of empirical life.

There is no mistaking the ideological function of the thesis. The more individuals are really degraded to functions of the social totality as it becomes more systematized, the more will man pure and simple, man as a principle with the attributes of creativity and absolute domination, be consoled by exaltation of his mind. (SO 500; KG 744)

Ironically, Kant’s philosophy, which in elevating the transcendental subject effaces the empirical subject, nonetheless provides an accurate portrayal of social life. In rendering creativity, freedom, spontaneity, and autonomy faceless, Kant captures the impotence of the empirical subject before the seemingly external political and social structures that dictate its fate.

There are two salient features of Adorno’s critique. First, it reveals how, despite Kant’s attempt to prioritize the subject, the object reemerges, rupturing the veneer of a supposedly self-sufficient subjectivity. “That even man as a *constituens* is man-made — this disenchants the creativity of the mind” (SO 504; KG 749).²³ The second and more important feature is how a dialectical analysis allows objectivity to emerge from subjectivity. While “subjectivity” here just refers to the historically contingent philosophy of Kant, the manner in which “objectivity” is thought against this “subjectivity” is key.²⁴ Those forces that are extrasubjective, that inform and constitute existing particular, individual events (including persons), are “objective.” Every particular identifiable as such will be a product of the interplay of numerous

23. See also ND xx; NDK 8: “To use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity — this is what the author felt to be his task ever since he came to trust his own mental impulses.”

24. In place of “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” one could here substitute “universal” and “particular” as Adorno himself does at various times throughout the essay. (See, for example, SO 498; KG 741.)

“objective” forces. These forces, however, are only analyzable insofar as they emerge in the particular they constitute. This produces something of a paradoxically self-critical nominalism:

The subject's reflection upon its own formalism is reflection on society, and results in a paradox: on the one hand, as the late Durkheim intended, the form-giving constitutive elements have social sources, but on the other hand, as current epistemology can boast they are objectively valid; in Durkheim's argumentations, they are already presumed in every proposition that demonstrates their contingency. The paradox is likely to be at one with the subject's objective imprisonment in itself. (SO 510; KG 757)

We call this a “paradoxically self-critical nominalism” because while there are only particulars, universals having no independent existence, particulars themselves are but concretions of extrasubjective forces that in giving shape to particulars are historically contingent “universals.” On the one hand, to say that “[t]he subject's reflection upon its own formalism is reflection on society” is to highlight the contingency of what has been called the universal or objective moment of this paradox. The universal, the particular's “form,” has “objective validity,” but it is a validity that has its roots in historically situated social forces, not in nature. On the other hand, to speak of “the subject's objective imprisonment in itself” is to undercut the nominalistic aspect of this paradox: the particular or subject can only be such within the interplay of universal or objective (that is, extra subjective) social forces.

This self-critical paradoxical nominalism does not appear to answer Adorno's critics, however, for it can do nothing to further our understanding of how one might maintain the tension between subject and object. The results of the analysis of Kant appear wholly negative; all that becomes evident is that releasing the tension of subject and object forgets reason's own self-formation. This offers nothing constructive to the question of political action, except perhaps a repetition of the warning, acknowledged as contentless, not to resolve artificially the tension between subject and object. More insidiously, Adorno's attempt to go through the subject to extricate critical theory from its precarious position between “a rock and no-place,” seems to have failed. Rather than having achieved extrication, Adorno's analysis appears only to have heightened critical theory's consciousness of its own impotence.

Closer scrutiny, however, reveals greater gains. The call to go through the subject provides critical theory with a powerful strategy. Adorno's

peculiar self-critical nominalism frees the particular and establishes it as the locus of concern. This amounts to a demand that critical theory consider actual practices in its analyses. In doing so, it arrives at a concrete strategy for pursuing the question of theory and practice.²⁵ What the move to the subject uncovers is relations between subjects and objects, universals and particulars, already embedded in practices. Theory no longer finds itself as the custodian of abstract values, chiefly concerned with the question of their application. Instead, theory directs itself to established relations of subject and object, attending to the universals that emerge therein. It probes these relations for moments of domination, for instances, like those found in Kant, where one moment is denied, the objective-empirical, in favor of the other, the subjective-transcendental.

It might be objected, citing this very analysis of Kant, that Adorno's project can serve only to expose notable failures. But what if the project encountered a practice that maintained the tension between subject and object? What if it encountered a practice whose very possibility rested upon a self-effacing nominalistic interplay of universal and particular? Perhaps "speculation on the state of reconciliation" along these lines might deepen our understanding of the thought that "peace is a state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other" (SO 499-500; KG 743).²⁶

V

Martin Jay, in *Adorno*, writes:

Denying the possibility of intersubjective communications in favour of aesthetic experience, which was essentially individual, does not, however, suggest a very plausible programme for realizing Critical Theory's utopian potential. Remaining "fearlessly passive" in one's epistemology may be understandable as a defense against concept imperialism, but it is hardly a formula for political activism.²⁷

25. Perhaps this is what Adorno has in mind when he writes: "In places where subjective reason scents subjective contingency, the primacy of the object is shimmering through — whatever in the object is not a subjective admixture. The subject is the object's agent, not its constituent: this fact has consequences for the relation of theory and practice" (SO 506; KG 752).

26. In "A Knowledge That Would Not Be Power," Calvin Thomas cites this line in order to distinguish Adorno's sensibility from a "phallic nostalgia for a lost plenitude" (162-63). He does little, however, to explore the more important question, namely, what might such a state be.

27. Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984) 78.

We see here, once again, the familiar charge that Adorno offers us no “formula” for political activity. More specifically, Jay claims that in the turn to aesthetic theory Adorno effectively abandons critical theory’s efforts to construct a “plausible programme” for realizing its utopian aspirations.²⁸ We reject Jay’s analysis for two reasons. Along with critics like Buck-Morss and Kellner, Jay appeals to an implicit critical measure when he argues that Adorno’s work fails to produce “a formula for political activism.” He assumes an understanding of what such a formula could be and then criticizes Adorno for not having one. The question is, however, as we have argued throughout, what could such a “formula” be? In the absence of such a measure, Jay’s criticism amounts to posturing.

What is also problematic in Jay’s analysis is where he locates Adorno’s failure — in the turn to aesthetic theory. One could read Adorno’s work in aesthetic theory in terms of the analysis exacted upon Kant above; except in the case of artworks, Adorno finds a practice that maintains the tension between subject and object. Jay criticizes the turn to aesthetic theory because it privileges “aesthetic experience” over the “possibility of intersubjective communications,” but it is not clear that Adorno’s reflections on art are as concerned with aesthetic experience as they are with how artworks work, how they emerge out of a “precarious balance” between objective and subjective moments. To read Adorno as privileging aesthetic experience is to misread his demand that thought go through the subject. Cast in terms of aesthetic experience, the “subject” is limited to individual human beings, but, as argued above, the “subject” refers to any particular practice. Therefore, one could read the turn to aesthetic theory not as the abandonment of the concern with political action, but as a furthering of the questioning we have followed from “Traditional and Critical Theory” to “Subject and Object”: the questioning of the possibility of emancipatory theory and practice in the need to maintain the tension of subject and object.

The first notable feature of Adorno’s remarks on art is that he identifies artworks as the very maintenance of the tension between subject and object:

28. With a different emphasis, Adorno’s turn to aesthetic theory is often maligned as an abandonment of all Enlightenment ideals. As Robert Hullot-Kentor points out, however, a concern with the role of reason in aesthetic judgment is in fact typical of Enlightenment thinking. See Hullot-Kentor’s “Back to Adorno” 14-18.

For the art work as well as for aesthetics, subject and object are moments. Their relation is dialectical, which means that the several components of art — material, expression, form or whatever — are each simultaneously subjective and objective. . . . The reciprocal relationship of object and subject in art works is a precarious balance, not an identity of the two.²⁹

The artwork exists, then, as a force field, as a constellation of moments at once both subjective and objective. The crucial questions are: how is it that artworks exist in this way, that is, how do they maintain this tension, and what results from this maintenance? We will pursue these questions through an analysis of one particular aesthetic moment “construction” — the logic through which individual works of art are organized.

The principle of construction enters the aesthetic force field in opposition to art’s nominalistic tendency. The particularity of artworks presents the illusion that art could somehow be purely particular, following a logic exclusively its own. Construction belies this illusion. “The need to force the reluctant nominalistic moment to objectify itself brings into being the principle of construction. Construction is that form which is neither imposed ready-made from outside nor emerges from the interior of works; instead, it springs from their being reflected in subjective reason” (AT 316; ÄT 330). While construction does give the artwork a logic of its own (particularity is, of course, just a concretion of extrasubjective forces), it does so only through the manipulation of these forces. This logic, however, has no independent standing outside the work, but emerges only as these extrasubjective forces coalesce within the work’s particularity. Extrasubjective forces (materials, genres, themes, etc.) are brought in construction to a problem of form. The problem is, how are these forces to be synthesized into a particular arrangement? The synthesis of these extrasubjective forces within a problem of form is the reflection of these forces in subjective reason. As before, “subjective” does not refer to the individual artist, but in this case, to the specificity of a particular problem of form. “The subject in a work of art is neither the viewer nor the creative artist nor some absolute spirit. It is spirit, to the extent to which it is embedded in, and mediated and preformed by, the object” (AT 238; ÄT 248).³⁰

29. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1984) 238; *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 248. Cited hereafter within the text as AT and ÄT.

30. Of the individual artist, Adorno writes that “the artist’s absolute act is of

In bringing to bear extrasubjective forces on a particular problem of form, construction is able to appropriate its social inheritance in a critical fashion. Construction's vehicle of resistance is not a transcendental moment of human freedom, but the very problem of form it would resolve. "[W]orks of art, and that includes the so-called individualistic ones, speak the language of a 'We,' not of an 'I,' and they do so to the extent to which they refrain from conforming in some extrinsic fashion to that 'We' and its idiom" (AT 240; ÄT 250). Artworks are able to refrain from conformity because the manner in which they enact their social inheritance does not merely reproduce their historical heritage. In the alignment of extrasubjective forces around a particular problem of form, such forces are drawn into a new force field and thus transformed. New interplays of moments result in new possibilities for organizing extrasubjective forces. In aesthetic construction, therefore, one can see a glimmer of how one might respond to the need to maintain the tension between subject and object.

The moment of construction is not without liabilities, however, particularly in an age dominated by instrumental rationality. In the synthesis of these extrasubjective forces there is always the risk that a structure of domination may arise:

What distinguishes construction from composition in the broadest sense — the sense in which we speak for instance of a "pictorial composition" — is the unmitigated subjection not only of all that comes to it from outside but also of all partial moments inherent in the artistic process. To that extent construction is an extension of subjective domination which increasingly dissimulates its essence as it is being pushed farther and farther. Construction tears elements of reality away from their original context, altering them individually until they become susceptible to a new unity which is as heteronomous and superimposed as the original one. (AT 84; ÄT 91)

This danger does not inhere in construction *per se*, however, but presents itself only when the principle of construction is "pushed farther and farther," hypostatized as *the* artistic moment. Construction is only a meaningful moment within its dialectical interplay with mimesis and expression, among others (AT 65-67, 422-23; ÄT 72-74, 452-53). Furthermore, construction is a principle only within particular works and thus

minuscule importance. He mediates between the problem he confronts as a given and the solution as it potentially inheres in his material" (AT 239; ÄT 249).

should not be fetishized into an abstract directive for all artistic endeavors.

Constructing impeccable diagonals, axes, and vanishing lines in a picture, taking an economic approach to motifs in music — none of this has any relevance unless it is developed in reference to a particular picture or composition. This is the only use of the term “artistic construction” that seems legitimate and does not fetishize the concept of construction. (AT 406; ÄT 433)

Thus in situating construction as one aesthetic moment among many, a structure of domination may perhaps be avoided. It is by bringing these extrasubjective forces into an alignment that can itself be integrated with other aesthetic moments that construction successfully produces a particular work of art.

We have treated the moment of construction as a microcosm for the artwork as a whole. If we reinsert it, however, into a dialectical interplay with other aesthetic moments, into the full play of the artwork, as it were, the reasons for Adorno’s turn to aesthetic theory become evident. In the works of an artist the caliber of Beethoven, Adorno finds nothing less than the “emancipation of the subject from myth and the reconciliation of both” (AT 303; ÄT 316). He writes:

The incomparable achievement of Beethoven, whose music is as deeply affected by the nominalistic motif as is Hegel’s philosophy, was to have injected into intervention (which is demanded by the problem of form) the autonomy and freedom of an increasingly self-conscious subject. What, in the eyes of a self-subsistent work of art, looked like repression Beethoven legitimated in terms of its substance. (AT 315; ÄT 329)

As before, “subject” must not be mistaken for the individual human being, here Beethoven, but is to be understood in terms of the practice in question, in this instance the particular work of art. To speak, therefore, of the “subject’s” freedom and autonomy is to speak of its relationship to its social inheritance. Beethoven’s work is momentous in the way in which it appropriates its self-formation; namely, in the manner outlined above in the discussion of construction — through a realignment of social forces around a formal problem. It does not achieve its individuality through a deceptive repression of its self-formation, but rather through its transformation of this inheritance into its own “free” and “autonomous” particularity.

In 1944, twenty-five years prior to the publication of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno found just such a remarkable instantiation of freedom in Beethoven's late quartets:

When mortally sick, Beethoven hurled away a novel by Sir Walter Scott with the cry: "Why, the fellow writes for money," and yet proved a most experienced and stubborn businessman in disposing of the last quartets, which were a most extreme renunciation of the market; he is the most outstanding example of the unity of those opposites, market and independence, in bourgeois art. Those who succumb to the ideology are precisely those who cover up the contradiction instead of taking it into the consciousness of their own production as Beethoven did: he went on to express in music his anger at losing a few pence, and derived the metaphysical *Es Muss Sein* (which attempts an aesthetic banishment of the pressure of the world by taking it into itself) from the housekeeper's demand for her monthly wages. (DE 157-58; DA 180-81)

In analyzing achievements such as Beethoven's, we can put our finger on the pulse of Adorno's hope in his turn to aesthetic theory. Whereas the analysis of construction provides a faint sketch of how one might proceed to maintain the tension between subject and object, the above analysis points toward what might be possible through such maintenance — the existence of particulars free from domination. Art demonstrates such freedom, however, only in a microcosmic sense, given that the aesthetic moment is engulfed by the whole of social relations. Thus art does not provide us with a ready-made road to freedom, but rather prods our thinking toward what such freedom could be. Such freedom is, of course, a property of practices, not persons. Persons become free only through participation in practices that are themselves free.³¹

VI

In Adorno's readings of the history of music Beethoven's works reach heights that remain unsurpassed: "Subsequent to Beethoven,

31. With this point we take ourselves to be in substantial agreement with Jameson's claim that freedom for Adorno is a question of heteronomy. (See Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism* [London: Verso, 1990] 82-83. Cited hereafter as LM.) Jameson, unfortunately, leaves the content of heteronomy undetermined. In locating freedom as a property of practices, not persons, and in specifying as free only those practices that maintain the tension between subject and object, our analysis attempts to overcome this problem.

there has not been a single work that matches his late quartets in terms of truth content" (AT 298; ÄT 310). His works reveal and, in some sense, establish a possibility for maintaining the tension between subject and object. And yet, it is not as if, in the interest of adding further content to the concept of emancipation, one could continue to produce works in the manner of Beethoven. Beyond the sobering realization, noted earlier, that artworks embody freedom only in a microcosmic sense, it is also necessary to recognize that the objective conditions that made Beethoven's achievements possible were unique (AT 298; ÄT 310). Thus, insofar as these conditions have changed, the time for such works has passed. "For the subjective art of Beethoven what is constitutive is the highly dynamic form of the sonata, and along with that the late-absolutist style of Viennese classicism, which reached its peak with Beethoven. Nothing of the sort is conceivable again because style has been annulled" (AT 295; ÄT 307). The problem is twofold. Style — "[c]onventions that are in a state of equilibrium, however tentative, with the subject" (AT 293; ÄT 305) — has been annulled due to the increasing impossibility of integrated works in art's loss of its "collective validity," in its loss of an understanding public, in its estrangement from the receptive capacities of its audiences and even its critics.³² The grandiose equilibrium that characterizes so much of Beethoven's work even with its moments of dissonance is no longer possible without regression into ideology, without writing as if social reality were itself receptive to such internally differentiated complexity. Instead, the social inheritance that must now be formally absorbed into a work of art is precisely its collective invalidity.³³ Thus, the integral wholeness of Beethoven's works, a

32. See also *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Seabury, 1973) 7-11; *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975) 16-19. Cited hereafter as PMM and M. Adorno argues here that this process of estrangement leads to a triumph of kitsch over the avant-garde.

33. In some sense, this was already a problem for Beethoven. Adorno writes: "The reprise is the very crux of the sonata form. It endowed what was decisive since Beethoven — the dynamics of thematic development — with a retroactive confirmation, like the effect of a film on a viewer who stays on after the ending and watches the beginning all over again. Beethoven mastered this by way of a *tour de force* which became his trademark: in the optimal moment of the final reprise, he presents the result of those dynamics and of that process as the ratification and justification of the earlier moment, of what had already been there in the first place. This marks his complicity with the guilt of the great idealistic systems in philosophy, with the dialectician Hegel, in whom finally the very essence of the negations, and thereby of becoming itself, flows back into the theodicy of the already existent. By way of the reprise, then, music — itself a ritual of bourgeois freedom — remains, like the society in which it exists and which exists in it, in thrall to mythic unfreedom." *Mahler* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1960) 127. Translation by Fredric Jameson in *LM* 170.

constitutive force in his development of subjects free from domination, is presently an objective impossibility.

Beethoven's status for the present is further problematized when one realizes that his was, in fact, a "subjective art," one whose principal variations were brought together within the work's development through his own musical genius. The time of the liberal subject is, however, over: "the artist has become the mere executor of his own intentions, which appear before him as strangers — inexorable demands of the compositions upon which he is working" (PMM 17; PNM 25). Given the dissolution of the subject into an increasingly seamless social whole, the artist, much like the ego, can no longer pretend to be master in his or her own house. Beethoven's example is, therefore, no longer exemplary. "Only today, when subjectivity in its immediacy can no longer be regarded as the supreme category since its realization depends on society as a whole, does the inadequacy of even Beethoven's solution, which extended the subject so as to cover the whole, become evident."³⁴ Two central moments in Beethoven's productions of free particulars (integrated compositions and the principle of subjective variation) are thus no longer open possibilities. One cannot help but wonder then, whether our claims in the preceding section were nostalgic at best. We have claimed that Adorno's turn to aesthetics gives critical theory an invaluable prod toward thinking concretely what freedom might be, and yet insofar as the prod presupposes the work of an artist whose time is past, its import is once again suspect.

Given that it may be anachronistic to turn to Adorno's analysis of Beethoven in order to argue for the relevance of his aesthetic work to questions of political practice, it seems prudent to explore some of his investigations of a more contemporary aesthetic phenomenon, that is, modernism.³⁵ Whereas Beethoven produced free particulars, modern music, according to Adorno, produces only negativity: "Its [modern music's] truth appears guaranteed more by its denial of any meaning

34. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT, 1981) 157; *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 162.

35. In what follows, we are concerned neither with the accuracy of Adorno's theory of modernism nor with the possibility that the present, in perhaps being "postmodern," opens possibilities (e.g., in popular culture) that escape, as Jameson suggests, Adorno's criticisms of the culture industry. Our goal is simply to show that despite the paradoxical negativity of modernist works, Adorno's turn to aesthetics nevertheless provides a concrete future for critical theory. With that in mind, we have limited our discussion to a cursory presentation of Adorno's reading of Schoenberg's twelve-tone system.

in organized society, of which it will have no part — accomplished by its own organized vacuity — than by any capability of positive meaning within itself. Under the present circumstances it is restricted to definitive negation” (PMM 20; PNM 28). Amidst the barbaric achievements of the twentieth century and within an increasing cultural division of labor, music and art in general no longer find any meaning to give voice to. Of course, the import of this atrophy of meaning extends well beyond the history of musical form. “The subject of modern music, upon which the music itself presents a case study, is the emancipated, isolated, concrete subject of the late bourgeois phase” (PMM 57; PNM 59). As social document, therefore, modernist pieces, in their lack of meaning, function as *de facto* obituaries of the liberal subject.

According to Adorno, bourgeois music strives to maintain the integrity of the individual work by synthesizing individual moments into the equilibrium of the whole, by placing a premium upon developmental consistency. In an effort to maintain this consistency as the bourgeois period progressed, an increasing emphasis was placed upon the requirements demanded of the work by its thematic material (that is, its form). As noted earlier, such a synthesis is achieved in Beethoven via the subjective variation of individual moments through the development of the work; variation occurs, but “the identity of the thematic material remains firmly established” (PMM 55; PNM 58). Brahms further integrates the principle of variation. In his work, “[s]ubjectification and objectification are intertwined. Brahms’s technique unites both tendencies, forcing the lyric *intermezzo* and academic structure into meaningful union” (PMM 56-57; PNM 59). In this further unification nothing coincidental or superfluous takes place. All moments, both subjective and objective, are thematically derived from the material of the work itself. At the height of bourgeois subjectivity one sees nonidentity in identity. The moments of the work are distinguished from one another and yet indistinguishable from the thematic material of the work itself.

Schoenberg’s works are an even more radical attempt to preserve the integrity of the work. They exemplify, inexorably, the bourgeois program of allowing the logic of form to dictate the development of an individual work, thereby realizing in a hyperbolic manner a principle of bourgeois subjectivity. In the twelve-tone system, the logic of the rows exhausts the piece by dictating every possibility. “Static twelve-tone technique actualizes the sensitivity of musical dynamics in the

face of the unconscious recurrence of the same. This technique makes such a sensitivity sacrosanct. The tone which recurs too early, as well as the tone which is 'free' or coincidental in the face of totality, becomes taboo" (PMM 64; PNM 65). What was freely derived in Beethoven and Brahms is, in the twelve-tone system, ordered into formation. Schoenberg reproduces the nonidentity in identity of his predecessors, yet not in their mutual interplay; rather, his works arise in the mutual dissolution of both.³⁶

The seamless consistency afforded the subject by the employment of the twelve-tone system simultaneously ensures the subject's disappearance. Bourgeois subjectivity originally turned to the logic of form in order to maintain the integrity of the work. In doing so, it treated material necessities as means of control — means that could enable the unhindered, and therefore free, unfolding of the work out of its material necessity. Instead of providing liberation, however, these mechanisms of control became a means of enslavement. The twelve-tone system, in depriving variations of the identity against which they might be nonidentical, deprives them also of their freedom. Each moment is assigned a place with frightening precision, and the subject stands before the work's progression in the garb of a technician. There are no longer moments within the whole but only the whole. "Thus the technique becomes the designation of the material, establishing itself as alien to the subject and finally subduing the subject by its own force" (PMM 68; PNM 68). The twelve-tone system, in ossifying under the weight of its own logic, renders the subject obsolete. In the triumph of the whole over the particular one loses not only the subject, but otherness *per se*. Any potential moment (e.g., expression) external to the logic of the twelve-tone system is barred entrance into the work from the outset. What before gave voice to free particulars through the logic of its form (that is, the bourgeois musical work), now *eo ipso* excludes them and gives voice only to itself.

In excluding all otherness, in forsaking all reference beyond itself, the twelve-tone system produces works of art that are wholly without meaning. "The dissolution of the illusory features in the work of art [moments outside of the logic of the system] is demanded by its very

36. Adorno writes: "Everything yet nothing is variation; the procedure of variation is again relegated to the material, preforming it before the actual composition begins" (PMM 61; PNM 63).

consistency. But the process of dissolution — ordained by the meaning of the totality — makes the totality meaningless” (PMM 70-71; PNM 71). In order to have meaning a work must either refer to something outside of itself (that is, be symbolic) or be itself internally differentiated such that the interplay of its moments (e.g., form and expression) give voice to one another. Thus, it is clear why Adorno insists that the artworks of modernity have no meaning. In existing only within the confines of their own logic such artworks collapse in upon themselves and give voice not to their engagement with an other but only to their alienation: “[P]ure identity becomes the identity of what has been annihilated, the identity of subject and object in a state of complete alienation.”³⁷

Whereas the truth content of Beethoven’s work involves free particulars, Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system eliminates the possibility of free particulars and dissolves the subject in the process. And yet, Adorno claims, the truth content of the latter is precisely this negativity. What Adorno writes of Beckett’s play *Endgame* applies equally here: “Meaning nothing becomes the only meaning” (NTL 261; NZL 305). Meaninglessness becomes the truth content of twelve-tone works because it articulates concretely the inevitable despair that riddles attempts to achieve meaning in alienation.

In an historical hour, when the reconciliation of subject and object has been perverted to a satanic parody — to the liquidation of the subject in objective presentation — the only philosophy [and music] which still serves this reconciliation is one which despises this illusion of reconciliation and — against universal self-alienation — establishes the validity of the hopelessly alienated, for which a subject itself scarcely any longer speaks. (PMM 27-28; PNM 34-35)

A musical attempt to overcome alienation would succeed only in mystifying the conditions responsible for that alienation. Modern music becomes true therefore, albeit paradoxically, only in absorbing the radical untruth of the present social situation. It thus assumes, as it

37. Theodor W. Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” *Notes to Literature* 1 (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 251; *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp) 293. Cited hereafter within the text as NTL and NZL. Adorno’s analysis of Beckett almost mirrors his analysis of Schoenberg. On Adorno’s reading, Beckett’s play also collapses in upon itself, thus giving voice to the absurdity of modern subjectivity: “art cannot break the spell of a detached subjectivity; it can only give concrete form to solipsism” (NTL 249; NZL 291).

must, its social inheritance, that is, its collective invalidity.³⁸ Trapped within its own tautological logic, modern music can only remain true in formally decrying its self-imprisonment.

The stringent brevity and compression of some of Schoenberg's greatest movements likewise manifest the unfreedom of the modern age. The characteristic grandiosity of Beethoven's compositions disappears in twelve-tone works along with the subjectivity that mediated it.

No works could exhibit greater concentration and consistency of formal structure than Schoenberg's and Webern's shortest movements. Their brevity is a direct result of the demand for the greatest consistency. This demand precludes the superfluous. In so doing, this consistency opposes expansion in time, which has been the basis for the conception of the musical work since the eighteenth century, certainly since Beethoven. The work, the age, and illusion are all struck by a single blow. Criticism of the extensive schema is interlocked with criticism of the content, in terms of phrase and ideology. Music, compressed into a moment, is valid as an eruptive revelation of negative experience. It is closely related to actual suffering. (PMM 37; PNM 43)

This brevity and compression of movement captures the withdrawal of music and musical experience into an isolated quadrant within an ever increasing cultural division of labor. At a more macroscopic level, the reduction of time to the succession of tersely defined and exhaustively organized moments suggests the attenuation of free and variable time in the administered world. Thus one sees again in this negativity of modern music, in its meaninglessness, the emergence of a truth content.³⁹

We turned to the issue of modernism because, although an analysis of Beethoven yielded some content for the thought of emancipation, the objective conditions that made such content possible no longer hold sway. The investigation of modernist works, however, offers nothing to further our understanding of emancipation beyond the negative point

38. This collective invalidity is a more complicated affair than we have thus far acknowledged. Not only has modern music withdrawn from the understanding of its public, but also in its very existence it both affirms a "cultural" division of labor and betrays the guilt of its privilege.

39. It is worth noting that on Adorno's reading, the history of music from the bourgeois period to the modernism of his time duplicates the dialectical history of the Enlightenment. In both movements, what would serve the interests of freedom and emancipation produce overly rationalized systems that result in unfreedom and the domination of nature. (See PMM 64-71; PNM 65-71.)

point that the dissolution of subject and object results in unfreedom. While Adorno takes this to have some emancipatory value, it has such only in a privative sense. "The concept of modernism is privative, indicating firmly that something ought to be negated and what it is that ought to be negated; modernism is not a positive slogan" (AT 30; ÄT 38). This appears to return us to the space between a rock and no place. Aesthetic theory in the modern period can show us only how to avoid the "ideological misuse of our existence." Thus, it would seem that the hope for a more concrete depiction of emancipation, having met with frustration in the developments of modernism, must be postponed.

Before considering whether the fate of modernism problematizes our claims concerning Adorno's relevance to questions of political practice, it is important to be clear on what Adorno's analyses of Beethoven's successes amount to. The free particulars produced in Beethoven's late quartets, for example, are not directives in the form of ends for present practices. Nor are the works themselves taken means that current practices ought to mimic. Instead, Adorno's aesthetic analyses carry out the program of "going through the subject" in pursuit of a practice that might vindicate and concretize his intuition that the key to emancipation is the maintenance of the tension between subject and object. In Beethoven's work one discovers precisely that vindication and concretization. In the maintenance of the tension between subject and object free particulars emerge. Adorno's aesthetic analyses have thus identified for critical theory a distinguishing feature of those practices germane to emancipation.

Read in a larger context, the importance of Adorno's work becomes even clearer. The call to go through the subject, that is, to analyze existing practices, provides critical theory with a concrete future. In a sense, Adorno has answered the question: in what direction would it be most productive for critical theory to direct its energies? Moreover, Adorno's analyses of aesthetic phenomena have provided critical theory with a sense of what it ought to look for. We are not claiming that the future of critical theory lies solely or even predominantly in continuing Adorno's research in aesthetic theory. The point is not that art itself is the key to emancipation, but that it exemplifies, at least in the case of Beethoven, the type of practice that could contribute to the realization of emancipation.⁴⁰

40. Thus we disagree with Jameson's claim that Adorno's aesthetics is significant only insofar as it leads philosophy back into history (see LM 239). Adorno's aesthetics not only turns us back into history, but it does so having provided us with concrete strategies for exploring history.

Yet what is the import of the sheer negativity of modernist artworks? Or, asked differently: given the eclipse of the bourgeois subject, are not the fruits of the analyses of Beethoven irrelevant? One might suppose that the very notion that free particulars are a matter of maintaining the tension between subject and object is itself tied to the historical situatedness of the bourgeois era. Given the passing of that era, such a thought is no longer relevant to the project of emancipation; that is, in announcing the dissolution of the subject and the absence of free particulars, the fate of modernist art falsifies any position that would claim that bourgeois art is relevant to emancipation. Such is not the case, however, for modernist works announce their negativity only through relinquishing the tension between subject and object. Hence, rather than falsifying the claim that maintaining the tension between subject and object is central to the project of emancipation, such works serve to vindicate it by manifesting unfreedom in its opposite. If the tension between subject and object is lost, unfreedom occurs. The collapse of modernism into tautology does not, therefore, problematize the claim that Adorno's turn to the analysis of concrete practices (e.g., aesthetics) provides a significant redirection for critical theory. In fact, it strengthens this claim.

VII

We began with the question: does Adorno provide us with any avenue for positive political action? In thinking through this question we have arrived at the question of art's relation to thoughts on social emancipation. That Adorno believed there is a connection was never in doubt. After all, he wrote: "The notion of artistic objectivity goes hand in hand with social emancipation, the latter being a situation where something frees itself on its own steam from social convention and control" (AT 328; *ÄT* 343). What was in doubt, however, was whether this connection could amount to anything. We take our analysis to have shown that it can. We have argued that Adorno's turn to aesthetic theory is a turn to a certain kind of thought experiment, one in which we might envision how the tension between subject and object could be maintained. Art is valuable to the project of emancipation not because it can retrieve, in its imagination, utopia from no-place, but because it can instantiate a subject-object relation that is not wholly forgetful of its own self-formation, one that, in rare and great moments, produces free and autonomous particulars.

What is all the more startling is how closely the artwork's production of a free particular resembles the few pronouncements Adorno allowed himself on the state of emancipation. In "Subject and Object," he wrote:

If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. Not until then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own. (SO 499; KG 743)

And in *Minima Moralia*: "An emancipated society, on the other hand, would not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences."⁴¹ The movement of emancipation appears remarkably similar to the emergence of the particular out of extrasubjective forces in the work of art. A work of art is possible only given a reconciliation of differences. Moreover, art arises neither from the "undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility" but from the mutual interplay of aesthetic moments that, taken together, form an irresolvable force field. Art contributes to the pursuit of peace, "the state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other," because it *is* such a state. In being such a state it contributes, however, only as a thought experiment, since, "[l]ike theory, art cannot concretize Utopia, not even negatively" (AT 48; ÄT 55). Achieving emancipation is not a matter of producing new contents that depict unshattered life, a matter of producing new ends toward which present practices could be directed. Instead, and this is Adorno's contribution to the question of political activity, the road to emancipation begins with analyzing practices, like art, that do not dissolve the tension between subject and object.

Implicit in our analysis is the claim that this matter of analyzing practices does not signal a radical departure on the part of Adorno from the early commitments of the Frankfurt School. On the contrary, the turn to art is yet another turn in Adorno's attempt to follow out a line of questioning in which the Frankfurt School began, a line of questioning in pursuit of how critical thought might contribute to the practice of emancipation. This line of questioning took many forms (the

41. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1985) 103; *Minima Moralia* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980) 114.

question of theory's relation to practice, of reason's self-formation, of the relation of subject and object, of art), but at each stage the commitment was to the *question* of the possibility of emancipatory practice.

Earlier we cited Martin Jay's claim that Adorno's turn to aesthetic theory denied "the possibility of intersubjective communications in favor of aesthetic experience." Much like the claim that Adorno's later work abandoned early Frankfurt School aspirations, however, Jay's view is misguided. Given our analysis, it seems clear that the turn to aesthetic theory had no such intention. The work on the possibility of subjects and objects belonging together in forms free of domination is, in Adorno's own view, work on the possibility of communication. In fact, it is only through such work that "the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come[s] into its own." Any plausible theory of communication must begin with an analysis of practices because not to do so leaves it with the insurmountable difficulty of engendering practices that might embody it. Thus, Adorno's turn to aesthetic theory does not so much abandon the possibility of "objective communication," as it does seek out its exemplification in the practice of artworks.

If we are to answer the question with which we began — does Adorno provide us with any avenue for positive political action? — we will only be able to do so by taking up the analyses that his work on the movement of subject and object in art initiated. This demands concrete analysis of actual, existing practices, artistic and otherwise. Adorno's thought, therefore, seems less on the brink of the "Grand Hotel Abyss," than at the frontier of where a critical theory must go. It seems premature to call for Adorno's "theoretical autopsy."⁴² Not only has "rigor mortis" failed to set in, but the *corpus* still breathes.

42. See Piccone 149. Piccone does not actually call for such an autopsy because he believes such a task would be both uninteresting and unnecessary. He does suggest, however, that those who would engage in an analysis of Horkheimer's and Adorno's post-1950 work are condemned to carry out this unpleasant task.