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Adorno, ideology and ideology critique

Abstract Throughout his work, Adorno contrasted liberal ideology to the newer and more pernicious form of ideology found in positivism. The paper explores the philosophical basis for Adorno's contrast between liberal and positivist ideology. In Negative Dialectics, Adorno describes all ideology as identity-thinking. However, on his view, liberal ideology represents a more rational form of identity-thinking. Fearing that positivism might obliterate our capacity to distinguish between what is and what ought to be, Adorno sought a more secure foundation for his critique of existing conditions. He found this basis in liberal discourse. In the concept of freedom, for example, Adorno located ideas or ideals that negate and transcend the given. One of the conditions for the possibility of critical thought lies in such ideas; critical thinking consists in wielding the more emphatic content of concepts against the pathic rationality of existing conditions. Far from prescribing mimesis as the antidote to a damaged social, political and economic reality, then, Adorno advocates a more dialectically inflected use of concepts as the basis for social criticism.

Key words Adorno · Critique · Identity · Ideology · Liberalism · Positivism

Tracing the growth of spirit, G. W. F. Hegel sought to demonstrate at the beginning of his Phenomenology that the immediate spatio-temporal ‘thisness’ of sense objects ‘cannot be reached by language’ because language ‘belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal’. As soon as we speak, what we mean or intend (meinen) begins to ‘crumble away’. What we intend to express is ‘unutterable’, and the unutterable ‘is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant’. Often admired for incorporating the irrational – in the form of error and contradiction – into his phenomenology, Hegel could
not accommodate the untrue and irrational when these took the form of immediate otherness. Any attempt to express the uniqueness (or ‘haecceity’) of objects in time and space necessarily flounders in contradictions; thinking and speaking already entail the assimilation of objects by universal concepts. Yet, as compelling as his arguments undoubtedly are, Hegel’s demonstration of the primacy of universals has not gone uncontested. Challenging what he saw as Hegel’s reduction of particular objects to universal concepts, Theodor W. Adorno tried to give the ‘irrational’ its due. He called this attempt negative dialectics.

Within the more philosophically materialistic epistemological framework sketched in Negative Dialectics, Adorno accorded preponderance or primacy (Vorrang) to the object. Though we must pass through concepts in order to express objects, the temporal priority of concepts should not be mistaken for logical priority; and it certainly cannot serve as grounds for reducing objects to concepts. In conjunction with the primacy he granted to objects, Adorno also stressed the somatic and material dimensions of the subject of knowledge. To borrow a phrase from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the Adornian subject is an incarnate, or embodied, subject: a particular object in the socio-historical world in which it acts (often instinctively), and which it seeks to know. Using concepts that are themselves historically conditioned, the socially mediated and historical subject relates itself to objects in a variety of ways. Some of these object-relations are ideological in character. In fact, Adorno drew from his reflections on ideology some important lessons for a more dialectically inflected epistemology.

Despite the large body of literature that now exists on negative dialectics, commentators have not yet explored the more salient connections between Adorno’s views about ideology and his conception of negative dialectics. I want to make these connections here, especially since they illuminate what Adorno claimed was a more defensible mode of identity-thinking (of subsuming objects under concepts). This latter mode of identity-thinking – which Adorno called ‘rational identity thinking’ – has been treated all too rarely in the secondary literature, and even then only summarily. In Negative Dialectics, rational identity-thinking serves as the more philosophically germane counterpart to the mimetic activity that has been the focus of so much commentary on Adorno’s work. After sketching some of the epistemological considerations that lie behind Adorno’s conception of negative dialectics, I shall show how liberal ideology provided Adorno with the conceptual tools needed in order ‘rationally’ to identify objects. In this its more emphatic dimension, liberal ideology stands in sharp contrast to the current positivistic version of ideology. After I have outlined Adorno’s critique of positivist ideology, I shall end the paper by considering the role and practice of ideology critique in his work.
The dialectic of subject and object

According to Adorno, it was the primal fear of nature that first spawned identity-thinking. In fear, the subject slowly differentiated itself from objects while attempting simultaneously to assimilate them by equating them with its concepts. But far from escaping the powers of nature through such conceptual assimilation, the subject was actually binding itself all the more to nature by perpetuating ‘a thinking that identifies, that equalizes everything unequal’. Nature remains binding for the subject because, in dread of its powers, the subject is ‘blinded to the point of madness by the sight of whatsoever will elude its rule’. 4 On Adorno’s reading, Hegel himself implicitly sanctioned such blindness. Mocking those who claim to have knowledge of the intrinsic reality of sense objects, Hegel wrote that even animals show they understand the mysteries of the ancient Greek schools of wisdom regarding such objects when they ‘fall to without ceremony and eat them up’.5 For Adorno, in its ‘compulsion to achieve identity’ (ND, 157), Hegel’s idealism is the conceptual analogue to this physical devouring of particulars; it represents ‘the belly turned mind’ – a mind that will tolerate nothing that is not identical to its concepts (ND, 23).

In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer located the decisive moments in the formation of the subject. Attempting to protect itself in the face of a threatening natural environment, the subject evolved as it distanced itself from that environment by means of language. Odysseus’ encounter with Polyphemus illustrates this attempt at self-preservation. While drinking the wine Odysseus had given him, the Cyclops asked Odysseus for his name. Odysseus responded by naming himself Οδύσσεας, meaning both someone and no one. Whereas Polyphemus represents the selfless state of nature, the more self-prepossessing Odysseus ultimately affirms his own identity only by denying it. The escape from nature does succeed, then, but only at the cost of self-denial: the denial of nature in the subject. Odysseus ‘acknowledges his name to himself by disavowing himself as “Nobody;” he saves his life by making himself disappear’. More generally, in the Odyssey, the constitution of the subject as non-nature, as an ego lacking content, is bound together with the growing rift between words and the objects they intend. For Horkheimer and Adorno: ‘the price of the perennial bindingness of words is that they distance themselves from all fulfilling content and from this distance they refer to all possible content, to “Nobody” as much as to Odysseus himself.’6

Owing to the increasing rift between concepts and the objects to which they refer, the subject has become the victim of the very concepts it once brought to bear on nature in order to tame it. Yet this rift, or chorismos, cannot be healed by returning to a prelapsarian state of
nature (as one of Adorno’s contemporaries, Georg Lukács, had advocated in his Theory of the Novel). Moreover, although Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy is in many respects the philosophical inspiration for the analysis of the Odyssey in Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno would not countenance a more Dionysian reconciliation with nature in order to overcome the suffering imposed by the principium individuationis. To return to an undifferentiated state would be pure regression – exemplified psychologically in that ‘oceanic feeling’ characteristic of the primary narcissism that Adorno believed was symptomatic of many individuals under late capitalism. Rather than endorsing the return to an allegedly original state of ‘wholeness’ or unity with nature, Adorno attempted to rethink the epistemological relationship between subject and object, insisting that negative dialectics use concepts more critically in order to communicate with that from which these concepts are separated (ND, 163). In this way, negative dialectics endeavours to express what Hegel deemed inexpressible.

Commentators on Adorno’s Negative Dialectics almost invariably stress Adorno’s epistemologically motivated critique of identity-thinking. They often maintain that Adorno one-sidedly (and thus undialectically) rejected identity-claims in favour of what they call non-identity-thinking. This latter is equated with the mimetic activity characteristic of some artistic practices (though, ironically, the mimetic activity that these commentators are opposing to identity-thinking is simply an inverted mode – albeit a more self-effacing and non-conceptual one – of identifying: a way of likening oneself and one’s concepts to objects). However, some textual support can be mustered to confirm this widespread but mistaken interpretation of Adorno’s work. For example, Adorno maintained that ‘in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories’ (ND, 13). In order to ‘represent the mimesis it supplanted, the concept has no other way than to adopt something mimetic in its own conduct, without abandoning itself’ (ND, 14). In a later passage, Adorno sounds all the more as though he were advocating a non-conceptual mimetic ekstasis. Since negative dialectics ‘is suspicious of all identity’, its logic is one ‘of a disintegration of the prepared and objectified form of the concepts which the cognitive subject faces, primarily and directly’. Encountering ‘the non-identical in the phenomenon’, the dialectical thinker recognizes the ‘untruth’ of identity-thinking and moves towards ‘the individuum inef-fabile’ (ND, 145).

Nevertheless, the more self-effacing mimetic relation to particulars, which many commentators identify with Adorno’s position, by no means exhausts his conception of negative dialectics. Throughout Negative Dialectics, Adorno constantly asserted that the conceptual
mediation characteristic of identity-thinking was necessary in order to think at all. Although the particular is not ‘identical with the universal’, Adorno also approved Hegel’s claim that the ‘particular would not be definable without the universal that identifies it’ (N.D., 173). According to Adorno: ‘the ideal of identity must not simply be discarded’ (N.D., 149). One reason why this ideal must not be abandoned is because, under existing conditions, the particular has itself been incorporated into the false totality of the totally administered world. This is why a mimetic making-oneself-like existing particulars is unacceptable; it posits an affinity between the mind and its objects that is untrue to the extent that this affinity ‘is posited as something positive’ (N.D., 150). In conjunction with this criticism of the positive affinity between concepts and objects that is effected by mimetic activity, Adorno also maintained that the ‘negative moment of identitarian philosophy has remained in force: nothing particular is true; no particular is itself as its particularity requires’ (N.D., 152).

In both its mimetic mode, where it uncritically likens itself to objects, and its conceptual mode, where it uncritically likens objects to its concepts, identity-thinking is problematic. But, since Adorno also recognized that thought could not dispense with concepts, he sought to reconceptualize identity-thinking in order critically to express particulars. The thinking he championed in Negative Dialectics received its most succinct formulation in the seminal section ‘Concepts and Categories’. For Adorno, negative dialectics entails the reciprocal ‘criticism of the universal and of the particular; identifying acts which judge whether the concept does justice to what it covers, and whether the particular fulfils its concept – these constitute the medium of thinking about the nonidentity of particular and concept’ (N.D., 146; translation modified).

Rational identity and liberal ideology

Commentators often neglect or ignore the second question Adorno poses for critical and dialectical thought: whether the particular fulfils its concept. For example, in their otherwise excellent article, ‘Between Impotence and Illusion’, Michael Sullivan and John T. Lysaker focus exclusively on the inadequacy of concepts with respect to particular objects. They argue that negative dialectics ‘directs itself to established relations of subject and object, attending to the universals that emerge therein’. It stresses the ‘moments of domination’ in the use of concepts by probing subject-object relations for ‘instances, like those found in Kant, where one moment is denied, the objective-empirical, in favor of the other, the subjective-transcendental’. Still, the procedure that these
writers outline - which concentrates on the deficiencies of conceptual thought - must be supplemented with its dialectical counterpart: the critique of the inadequacy of objects with respect to concepts. It is in connection with this aspect of critique that Adorno introduces the idea of rational identity.

Adorno criticizes the inadequacy of objects with respect to concepts in a number of passages in Negative Dialectics. Lysaker and Sullivan indirectly recognize this (without, however, developing a more dialectically inflected conception of negative dialectics) when they write: ‘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 it is the case that particulars have been ‘tainted’ by the pathetic rationality of these social forces, then to install the particular as ‘purely and simply extant is a complementary ideology’ because it also ‘ hides how much of the particular has come to be a function of the universal – something which in its logical form it has always been’ ([ND], 313). Insofar as the socio-economic order exemplifies the assimilative power of the universal, given the ubiquity in it of the exchange principle, it has triumphed over particulars, by turning them into numerically commensurable entities, and reified them. This suggests that the mimetic mode of knowing particulars (which many commentators equate with Adorno’s position) is actually irrational: likening oneself and one’s concepts to a damaged social reality would entail a simple capitulation to, or identification with, it.

In his historico-philosophical reconstruction of Adorno’s philosophical materialism, Simon Jarvis sketches an Adornian version of speculative thinking in which mimesis plays a more restricted – because dialectically inflected – role than it does in Lysaker and Sullivan’s work. With his ‘appeal to the mimetic component of language’, Jarvis writes, Adorno is simply ‘giving an account of what reason is like’. Conceptual thought is always already ‘contaminated with experience’. It is simply the case, then, that thinking is partially mimetic in character. On Jarvis’s account, Adorno is not so much prescribing mimetic activity as a way of knowing particulars as he is describing the mimetic dimension of thought. But Jarvis’s choice of words is also interesting: for Adorno, thinking is contaminated with experience. ‘Contamination’ is actually a good word to use; under prevailing conditions, experience has become reified. If thinking can be said to require a corrective, then this would need to take the form of a decontamination from such experience (to the limited extent that this is possible). Adorno believed a remedy for the contamination of thought by a reified and largely irrational reality could be found in ‘the negativity of the universal’, that is, of ‘the utopian particular that has been buried beneath the universal’ ([ND], 318).

Of course, the more assimilative mode of identity-thinking also
requires a corrective. Although particulars have increasingly been made uniform as a consequence of the domination of the exchange principle, identity-thinking is wrong to treat them as simply uniform. Such thinking lies when it tells the truth - ‘it is not total identification that has the last word’ - and it tells the truth when it lies - particulars have indeed fallen under ‘the spell of identification’. In contrast to this mode of identity-thinking, negative dialectics insists on recognizing ‘the difference [between particulars and universals] that has been spirited away’ (N D, 172). It recognizes this difference by attempting to grasp objects prospectively, to express with concepts ‘the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one’ (N D, 52). To the extent that thinking implicitly and critically confronts an irrational reality with its better potential, it can be said to be rational.

In fact, Adorno claimed that some identitarian judgements themselves already refer indirectly to potentials that might be released in objects under improved conditions. In such judgements are embedded utopian elements that are ‘contradictorily tied to the breaks in the form of predicative identity’. Classical philosophy (especially that of Aristotle) already ‘had a word for these breaks: ideas’. Ideas are ‘negative signs’; they ‘live in the cavities between what things claim to be and what they are’ (N D, 150). Not only are objects made intelligible to the thinking subject by virtue of the ideational content of its concepts, it is also the case, Adorno claimed, that this ideational content may indirectly express the as-yet-unrealized potential in objects. Indeed, given the pathetic rationality of existing conditions, Adorno believed that many objects could not be completely subsumed under concepts, not simply because objects are particulars and concepts universals, but also, and more importantly, because these objects fail to fulfil their concepts, or to manifest the better potential intimated in them.

Rejecting the view that every concept is a universal class or category derived exclusively from the observation of particulars, Adorno adopts what he describes as an emphatic, or normative, conception of some universals - a conception that relies very heavily on his views about ideology and ideology critique. The example Adorno offers of an emphatic concept is instructive; he cites the concept of freedom. This concept (the analysis of which occupies an entire section of Negative Dialectics) is not derived solely from the experience of individuals. There is a contradiction between such experience and what is predicated of it under the concept of freedom because the concept of freedom ‘feeds on the idea of a condition in which individuals would have qualities not to be ascribed to anyone here and now’ (N D, 150). Individuals are both more and less than what is attributed to them by the emphatic concept of freedom: they are more because the concept of freedom does not
exhaust the particularity of individuals, but they are also less because no individual has yet fulfilled the possibilities or potential intimated in (or conveyed by) the concept. The particular ‘would come to itself only by voiding that contradiction – in other words, by achieving an identity of the particular with its concept – the individual’s concern is not only to hold on to that of which the general concept robs him; he is equally concerned with that “more” of the concept compared with his need’ (N D, 151).

The concept of freedom renders individual human beings themselves intelligible. It does so in part because human beings, in the course of their historical development, have been constituted, through self-reflection or self-consciousness, as relatively autonomous entities (in the Odyssey chapter of Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno trace the emergence of this self-consciousness). Before the advent of self-consciousness, it would have been ‘an anachronism to talk of freedom, whether as a reality or as a challenge’. Moreover, there have been periods of history in which both the concept and the reality of freedom have been lacking entirely, and there may yet arise periods in which ‘the concept might be wholly extinguished again, perhaps without leaving a trace’ (N D, 218). The truth-content of freedom is therefore ‘suspended and frail, due to its temporal substance’ (N D, 34). So, although it is more than a simple abstraction from these, the concept of freedom has also been instantiated, if precariously, in historical practices and activities. For Adorno: ‘the picture of freedom against society lives in the crushed, abused individual’s features alone.’ Moments of freedom have become ‘concrete’ in those ephemeral experiences of spontaneity and autonomy that exemplify ‘resistance to repression’ (N D, 265). Acknowledging that freedom has never been instantiated fully in such experiences (and that the concept has also functioned to legitimate conditions of unfreedom), Adorno nonetheless claimed that historical reality had itself given some substance, however partial, to this concept.

But if the concept of freedom (along with other liberal concepts, such as autonomy and individuality) simply reflected historical conditions, it would provide a poor corrective for the assimilative mode of identity-thinking. Arising within a particular socio-historical context, this concept also transcends that situation by virtue of its truth-content. Like Marx, who believed that religion had a truth-content inasmuch as it posits a world that eclipses or exceeds the reality of industrial capitalism, Adorno claimed that liberal ideology also served as an index of truth. Indeed, Adorno went somewhat further than Marx when he argued that the ideational content of concepts was not entirely a function of their historical genesis. To claim that all concepts merely express particular and historical (class) interests would be ‘to extirpate with the false, all that was true also, all that, however impotently, strives
to escape the confines of universal practice, every chimerical anticipation of a nobler condition'. On the one hand, then, a concept such as freedom ‘lags behind itself [bleibt hinter sich zurück] as soon as we apply it empirically'. Historical conditions falsify the concept. On the other hand, if the concept of freedom were stripped ‘of what philosophical terminology used to call its idea’, it would be diminished arbitrarily ‘for utility’s sake, in comparison with what it means in itself’ (N D, 151).

The concept of freedom is not simply a product of false consciousness, not only because we have had experiences of freedom (however much this concept may ‘lag behind itself’ in such experiences), but also because the culture from which this concept emerged has occasionally established itself - often indirectly - in opposition to the coercive identity imposed by the exchange principle. In other words, like some instances of artistic culture, philosophical culture has sometimes enjoyed a measure of autonomy with respect to existing conditions. In ‘Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre’, Adorno maintained that ideology emerges from the social process as something spiritual [ein Geistiges]. As such, ideology is ‘independent, substantial, and has its own standard’. While it is untrue because ‘of this separation . . . its renunciation of a social foundation’, the truth-content in ideology also ‘clings to such independence’. In Negative Dialectics, however, Adorno offered a somewhat different explanation for ideology’s relative autonomy or independence. There, he asserted that it is made possible by the character of the activity of thinking itself. Like Hegel, Adorno defined thought in general as ‘an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it’. The activities in which thought engages are ‘negative already - a revolt against being importuned to bow to every immediate thing’. Thought resists ‘mere things in being'; it intends in the object ‘even that of which the object was deprived by objectification’ (N D, 19).

As a historical product of the resistance of thought to the pathic rationality of existing conditions, the concept of freedom makes manifest discrepancies between existing conditions in which freedom is often denied and conditions under which it might actually be realized. Inasmuch as it intimates or evokes a state of affairs that does not yet exist, this concept is not a mere reflection of historical conditions. Hence Adorno insisted, in Minima Moralia and elsewhere, that one could not simply throw out the ‘baby’ of freedom (and of other liberal concepts) with the ‘bathwater’ of false consciousness (M M, 43–5). Commenting on Karl Mannheim’s complete rejection of ideology as a form of false consciousness, Adorno diagnosed it as an expression of ‘rage against whatever . . . might represent the possibility of something better’ (BI, 473). In fact, Adorno repeatedly claimed that it is not ideology per se that is untrue ‘but rather its pretension to correspond to reality’.
truth-content in emphatic concepts lies in their indirect but prospective reference to qualitatively improved historical conditions.

Liberal ideology cannot, therefore, be simply rejected as the false consciousness of existing conditions because it also provides a basis or foundation for the critique of these conditions. Because its emphatic concepts are not identical with the experiences they subsume, liberal ideology contains an historically conditioned moment of truth (Wahrheitsmoment) against which the pathic rationality of existing states of affairs can be judged. Ascribing to objects properties they could acquire only under qualitatively improved conditions, liberal ideology tacitly denounces existing conditions. It posits the rational identity of objects (similar in a number of respects to Ernst Bloch’s Novum), and in so doing it enacts the mode of identity-thinking that exemplifies the freedom enjoyed by thought to think beyond the given, revealing that ‘[w]hat is, is more than it is’. This ‘more’ is not imposed upon the object ‘but remains immanent to it as that which has been pushed out of it’ (N D, 161). Far from merely reflecting existing conditions, then, liberal ideology may prospectively indicate – if only in a negative and indirect way – the conditions under which objects would fulfil their emphatic and more speculative concepts.

The pathic rationality of positivist ideology

In Negative Dialectics, Adorno argues again (as he did in Dialectic of Enlightenment) that the ‘fatal part of ideology is that it dates back to biology’. From the beginning, Adorno wrote, the content of self-preservation has been the ‘tautology of identity: what ought to be is what is anyway’ (N D, 349). In spite of its more emphatic concepts, liberal ideology certainly makes this tautological claim as well. Yet, while it may imply that what ought to be already exists, and so may legitimate existing conditions by identifying its concepts with them, liberal ideology can be contrasted with positivist ideology because the latter is defined exclusively by such tautological modes of identity-thinking. Whereas liberal ideology still has a truth-content that allows it to be used critically against existing conditions, positivist ideology consists in an uncritical and identititarian reflection - a distorted and pathic one - of the way things are.

In a number of respects, Adorno’s critique of positivist ideology is an extension of Husserl’s critique of objectivism. Objectivism endeavours simply to establish ‘what the world, the physical as well as the spiritual world, is in fact’.15 For both Husserl and Adorno, this fact-based notion of ‘objectivity which dominates our positive sciences with respect to method . . . is the basis for the support and widespread acceptance of a philosophical and ideological positivism’.16
These ideas come to the fore in Adorno’s denunciation of Karl Popper’s positivism. In science as Popper conceives it, the emphatic or normative element of thought is lacking entirely. Moreover, in the social sciences generally, ‘the scope of concepts’ has been reduced to a simple abbreviation of ‘particular existent facts’ and does not ‘lead beyond their compass’. Science merely attempts to register the facts; it never goes beyond existing states of affairs. In contrast, Adorno contended that ‘the idea of scientific truth’ should not be divorced from the more emphatic idea ‘of a true society’. This latter idea may supersede existing socio-economic conditions by virtue of its ideational content. Adorno therefore insists that the concept of criticism be extended ‘beyond its limitations in Popper’s work’ where it is reduced to the criticism of logical inconsistencies. Since society is incompatible with the very goal it posits for itself – the goal of preserving humankind and satisfying its needs (PDGS, 27) – it must be confronted with the truth-content of this goal which remains unrealized.

Currently, however, scientific truth entails identifying ‘facts’ – themselves conceptual constructs – with allegedly neutral descriptive-explanatory concepts. Adorno believed that science had become idealistic in a purely subjective sense because it remained satisfied with ‘the pure identity of thought with itself’. The certainty offered in positivist science is ‘illusory; the pure non-contradiction, to which it contracts, is simply a tautology – the empty compulsion to repeat, which has developed into a concept’ (PDGS, 58). Under the ‘spell’ of positivism, the critical distinction between what is and what ought to be has been eliminated in favour of a simple depiction of what is. While it is certainly the case that both liberal and positivist ideologies fall prey to identity-thinking, as a hybrid of both truth and falsity, liberal ideology also contains ‘a rational element on which criticism can work’ (BI, 465). In contrast to positivist ideology, then, which ‘even in its most radical lie, falls back on the argument that things are like this, a simple finding which coincides, for it, with the good’ (MM, 211), the false legitimation of existing states of affairs offered by liberal ideology can at least be confronted with its own truth.

These remarks about positivist ideology are echoed in many of Adorno’s essays. For example, in ‘Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre’, Adorno argues that, since individuals lack any other convincing ideology, reality has become its own ideology by virtue of its incessant duplication. Whereas liberal ideology once clung ‘to a consciousness which was more than the simple impression of what exists’, the ‘hallmark of ideologies today is more likely the absence of this independence’ (BI, 474). Ideology is no longer a veil, ‘but simply just the world’s threatening face’ because it ‘scarcely says anything more than that things are the way they are’. For this reason, its ‘own falsity shrinks away to the axiom that things
could not be other than what they are' (BI, 477). Reiterating these ideas in Negative Dialectics, Adorno observed that ‘ideology is no longer added to things as a vindication or complement’; it has turned into ‘the seeming inevitability and thus legitimacy of whatever is’ (ND, 268). Positivist ideology implicitly asserts that what exists should exist simply by virtue of the fact that it exists. Also implied in this tautological form of identity is the idea that things cannot change, that the only option left open to individuals is to accept and conform to existing conditions.

But, though Adorno criticized the social sciences for their positivism, he also believed that this mode of identity-thinking had become far more pervasive than its instantiation in these sciences might suggest. As Adorno would maintain throughout his work, the culture industry, with its virtually global reach, has become the principal vehicle for positivism. In one of their early descriptions of the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote:

Value judgments are taken either as advertising or as empty talk. Accordingly ideology has been made vague and noncommittal... Its very vagueness, its almost scientific aversion from committing itself to anything which cannot be verified, acts as an instrument of domination. It becomes a vigorous and prearranged promulgation of the status quo. The culture industry tends to make itself the embodiment of authoritative pronouncements, and thus the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order. Ideology is split into the photograph of stubborn life and the naked lie about its meaning - which is not expressed but suggested and yet drummed in. To demonstrate its divine nature, reality is always repeated in a purely cynical way. Such photological proof is of course not stringent, but it is overpowering. Anyone who doubts the power of monotony is a fool. The culture industry refutes the objection made against it just as well as that against the world which it impartially duplicates. The only choice is either to join in or to be left behind.18

The culture industry ‘limits itself to placing once more before the eyes of the people what makes up the condition of their existence anyway’. As facile reflections of the world as it is, cultural commodities generally lack that critical and speculative moment which can still be found in some less commodified instances of culture. Yet, by proclaiming ‘this existence as a separate norm at the same time’, the industry is also ‘tied to pure existence in faithless belief’ (BI, 476–7). With its tautological claim that what is is, the culture industry also serves to legitimate existing conditions by suggesting that things cannot be other than what they are. In this way, commodified culture fills ‘empirical life with a false meaning whose deception the viewer can scarcely see through’.19 Since it consists in the simple claim that things are what they are, positivism is an extremely weak form of ideology. Even so, Adorno stressed its pernicious character: ‘The gesture of the unthinking That's-how-it-is
is the exact means by which the world dispatches each of its victims' (MM, 211–12).

Attempting to duplicate reality right down to the most insignificant details, the culture industry remains pseudo-realistic. Its products are standardized, pseudo-individualized, stereotypical and schematic in character. Although it appears to mirror the existing world impartially and objectively, the industry ends by imposing abstract and general concepts, norms and standards on objects. Like science— which tends 'both to fetishize its object and, in turn, to degenerate into a fetish' (PDGS, 72) when it pretends to 'examine an object by means of an instrument, which through its own formulation, decides what the object is' (PDGS, 73) — the culture industry finds nothing in the world but what it has put there. Adorno wrote: 'Even what is accidental, what appears unaffected by the plot', is corrupted by the industry's pseudo-realistic portrayal of reality because 'it is created under the abstract category “contingency of everyday life” '. Moreover, as Adorno had noted in 'Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre', such 'finely-tuned pseudo-realism prevents what has been decreed from being seen through as something already pre-formed for the purpose of social control' (BI, 476).

Like his critique of identity-thinking generally, Adorno's critique of the veridical character of the culture industry can be formulated in a paradox: the industry lies when it tells the truth, and it tells the truth when it lies. While reproducing reality as 'truthfully' or adequately as possible (with its 'photological proof', the camera never lies), cultural commodities make 'existence itself a substitute for meaning and right'. Yet as a purely ersatz form of realism, the industry is also telling the truth because it simultaneously confirms and reinforces 'the pure essence of that into which the course of the world has turned people'. With their standardized formulas, stereotypes and schemata, cultural commodities indirectly reveal how much damage has been done to particulars. Commenting on such damage in Negative Dialectics, Adorno wrote: 'This much of Hegel’s insistence on the universality of the particular is true: in its perversion, as impotent individualization at the universal’s mercy, the particular is dictated by the principle of perverted universality' (ND, 344). Particulars have fallen under the 'spell' of the false totality. Under this spell, which Adorno described as the 'equivalent of the fetish character of the commodity', 'the reified consciousness has become total' (ND, 346; translation modified).

**Ideology critique**

In ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ Adorno observed that, where it was once the case that ‘the prevailing theory was the ideology and the
opposing praxis was in direct contradiction’ with it, it is currently the case that ‘theory hardly exists any longer and the ideology drones, as it were, from the gears of an irresistible praxis’. Unlike its liberal counterpart, positivist ideology has no relative autonomy in the ‘superstructure’ because it can ‘no longer claim a truth of its own’ (N.D., 268). This situation poses peculiar problems for ideology critique. Indeed, Adorno offered a striking description of some of these problems in Minima Moralia. Claiming that the ‘difference between ideology and reality has disappeared’, because ideology now ‘resigns itself to confirmation of reality by its mere duplication’, Adorno also complained that, under the spell of positivism, there is not ‘a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail’ (M.M., 211). In its simple identification of the real and the rational, positivist ideology lacks a transcendent or speculative moment against which its own untruth can be judged.

Nonetheless, negative dialectics itself represents an attempt to find a fingerhold in the cliff of the established order. Since ideology takes ‘the primal form of identity’, negative dialectics assumes the role of ideology critique by making the critique of identity-thinking its central task. Criticizing the claim ‘that the non-I is finally the I’, negative dialectics takes direct aim at ideology. Ideology critique is not, therefore, ‘something peripheral and intra-scientific, not something limited to the objective mind and to the products of the subjective mind’. On the contrary: ‘Philosophically, it [ideology critique] is central: it is a critique of the constitutive consciousness itself’ (N.D., 148). As I have tried to show, the concepts that philosophy has inherited from liberal ideology are central to this critique of ‘constitutive consciousness’. Acknowledging occasionally that these concepts had become borderline values – one does not really ‘dare’ to set forth the concept of freedom ‘even as a complementary ideology’ (N.D., 274) – Adorno himself continued to use them critically against the assimilative mode of identity-thinking exemplified in positivism.

In another passage in Minima Moralia, Adorno argued that critical and dialectical thought depends on its distance from objects. Essential to such thought ‘is an element of exaggeration, of overshooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it’ (M.M., 126-7). In contrast to positivism, which never doubts its ability to reach its target, dialectical thought ‘must aim beyond its target just because it never quite reaches it’. In its critique of positivism, such thought must ‘prove, by criticism of knowledge, the impossibility of a coincidence between the idea and what fulfils it’ (M.M., 127). Since positivism is ‘no more than a provisional abbreviation for the factual matter beneath it’, it has lost ‘not only its autonomy with
respect to reality, but with it the power to penetrate reality’ (M M, 126).
Criticizing positivism’s identity-claims, negative dialectics takes a more
speculative and normative form in its emphatic critique of existing
conditions. Indeed, as Simon Jarvis points out, Adorno rejects any tre-
chant distinction between prescriptive and descriptive judgements. For
Adorno, as for Hegel, speculative thinking renounces ‘both . . . a radical
separation of “is” and “ought” and . . . their abstract identification’. 25

Even as he criticized Hegel’s notion of speculation for being exces-
sively positive, for ending by identifying identity and non-identity,
Adorno also praised Hegel for his view of the life of the mind as a form
of play. If thought must constantly acknowledge to itself that its
concepts are not identical with objects, it is no less true, and for that
very reason, that thought must also become aware of itself in its very
‘volatility . . . which forever escapes what it judges’ (M M, 127). In
according preponderance to the object, then, the dialectician is not
authorized to reject as untrue the more universal and diversionary
elements in concepts, to treat ‘the universal as a soap bubble’. Accord-
ing to Adorno: ‘Such treatment would let the theory grasp neither the
universal’s pernicious supremacy in the status quo nor the idea of con-
ditions which in giving individuals their due would rid the universal of
its wretched particularity’ (ND, 199). With rational identity, which
respects both the non-identity of concept and object as well as ‘the
concept’s longing to become identical with the thing’ (ND, 149), theory
apprehends both the pathic rationality of the universal, its spurious
reflection of existing conditions, as well as its infrequent and largely
implicit reference to the unfulfilled prospect of a better rationality under
improved conditions. It is for this reason that Jarvis can assert that the
speculative moment in negative dialectics ‘concerns not the identity of
identity and non-identity but the (differentiating) reconciliation of the
identical and non-identical’. 26

Critics might object that Adorno’s notion of rational identity is far
too ‘negative’. Its more subsumptive moment consists in its pledge ‘that
there should be no contradiction, no antagonism’ between concepts and
objects (ND, 149). Predicating rational identity to particulars reveals
that this pledge has not been honoured: what ought to be does not yet
exist. For its part, the non-identitarian moment of rational identity-
thinking highlights the failure of existing conditions to make good on
that pledge: what exists has not yet become what it ought to be. Unlike
Hegel, who thought that speculation unfolded ‘the Substance, the
essence and the notion’ of what exists27 – and so claimed that it revealed
positive truths by making manifest the rationality of the real – A dorno
maintains that the predication of rational identity to particulars exposes
the pathic rationality of the real, its untruth. But, if this is the case,
negative dialectics can also be criticized for its entirely oblique reference
to a qualitatively improved state of affairs. It is here that the charge that
negative dialectics is a secular version of negative theology carries some
weight. The ‘utopian’ world to which speculative concepts refer can only
be glimpsed indirectly: it is other – in an almost completely unspecified
and unspecifiable sense – than what currently exists.

Even more problematic is the entanglement of speculative thought
in the very conditions it criticizes. Given the historical character of
speculative concepts, this entanglement cannot be avoided but it also
partially compromises the ground or foundation of negative dialectics
as ideology critique (i.e. the rationality of its identity-claims). Specu-
lative critique is not the medium for a movement that would lead of
necessity to the improved conditions intimated prospectively, though
negatively and indirectly, in its concepts. Moreover, owing to its his-
torically contingent ‘foundation’, speculative critique also confronts
another problem. It is entirely unclear whether its emphatic concepts
can continue to function even indirectly as an index of truth because
their speculative content is eroding within a culture that increasingly
thwarts or forbids critical transcendence of any kind. Such concepts are
now used in a completely identitarian and affirmative way. Indeed,
Adorno’s concern that the critical dimension of thought might be lost
to a seamless, one-dimensional culture seems more justifiable today than
it was at the time Adorno was writing. Freedom, for example, is now
identified almost exclusively with freedom as it currently exists: the
freedom granted to a privileged few in the Western world to consume
an apparently infinite variety of goods. It is possible that liberal ideology
is losing, or has already lost, that speculative and critical moment
Adorno once claimed it had.

Finally, as a purely cognitive activity, negative dialectics could also be
criticized for lacking an analogue in the realm of practice. Yet if Adorno
is correct, positivism is in the process of eliminating even that slim thread
of hope represented by the capacity partially to transcend existing con-
ditions – if only in thought. Concerned that positivism would succeed in
closing the cognitive breach between the way things are and the way
things ought to be, Adorno sought those avenues that remained open to
thought to think beyond the given. Although liberal ideology’s loss of
trenchancy may yet compromise genuinely critical thinking, this loss may
still be made good by deploying concepts that have retained their specu-
lative content, or by exposing to critique the contemporary one-dimen-
sional use of liberal concepts. Indeed, I would argue that Adorno’s
attempt to redeem and recast the speculative moment in thought should
be sustained because it actually represents an exploration of some of the
preconditions for practical change. Adorno explored those speculative
and cognitive practices that challenge the inroads positivism has made on
our very ability to think critically. In his work, the preconditions for
change lie in those modes of thinking, making and behaving which both
respect and critically transform the distinction between particular and
universal, object and concept, fact and value.

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Notes

I would like to thank both David Morris at Trent University and an anonymous
reviewer at Radical Philosophy for their critical comments on my Hegel presen-
tation.

1 G. W. F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford:

2 Martin Jay makes some preliminary remarks about these connections in his
been generated by the need to justify a problematic social condition, which
was perceived as such. Although apologetic in intent, ideologies also
contained a critical impulse in the space between their justifications and the
reality they claimed to embody. But the Nazi experience, Adorno lamented,
when no one took the content of ideology seriously as more than a tool of
manipulation, signalled the collapse of this distance.’ Unfortunately, Jay
never follows up these remarks with a more detailed analysis. In a more
recent work, Adorno: A Critical Introduction (New York: Routledge,
1998), Simon Jarvis recognizes the importance of rational or ‘speculative’
identity in Adorno’s work but he does not make the connection between
this form of identity and Adorno’s views about ideology and ideology
critique.

I have myself already attempted to make this connection in the fourth
chapter of my book The Culture Industry Revisited: Theodor W. Adorno
on Mass Culture (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), as well as
Rethinking Marxism 9(1) (Spring 1996–7): 58–74. This paper represents a
further refinement of this attempt.

3 It was Gillian Rose who first recognized the importance of rational identity
for negative dialectics. In The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the
Thought of Theodor W. Adorno (New York: Columbia University Press,
1978), p. 44, Rose writes: ‘According to Adorno, there are three ways of
thinking: identity thinking, non-identity thinking, and rational identity
thinking. . . . Concepts also refer to their objects, and by this he [Adorno]
means to the conditions of their ideal existence. This is the utopian aspect
of identifying. For the concept to identify its object in this sense the particu-
lar object would have to have all the properties of its ideal state. Adorno
calls this condition rational identity (rationale Identität).’ See also Theodor

4 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 172.

5 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 65.


7 There are numerous examples of such readings in the secondary literature. On p. 87 of his Adorno (London: Fontana, 1984), Martin Jay claims that Adorno manifested a ‘sympathy for non-identity as an end itself’. On p. 52 of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), Lambert Zuidervaart writes: ‘Dialectical logic must sometimes be suspended on behalf of the “non-identical”.’ These interpretations of Adorno’s work give short shrift to the important function filled by universal concepts in negative dialectics.


9 ibid., 101.

10 On p. 172 of Negative Dialectics, Adorno deemed ‘pathic’ the prevailing rationality that is characterized by identitarian thinking: ‘The circle of identification . . . was drawn by a thinking that tolerates nothing outside [of itself] . . . . Such totalitarian and therefore particular rationality was historically dictated by the threat of nature. That is its limitation. . . . For the present, reason is pathic [pathisch]; to cure ourselves of it would be rational [Vernunft].’ I have modified E. B. Ashton’s translation.

11 Simon Jarvis, Adorno: A Critical Introduction (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 178. In fact, Jarvis argues that ‘thinking needs to be contaminated with experience in order even to be possible’. But if thinking is possible only when it is so contaminated, such contamination must be conceived as the condition for the possibility of thinking in general (as, indeed, Jarvis argues earlier in his discussion of Adorno’s critique of Kant). It is, therefore, somewhat misleading to claim that thought needs to be contaminated with experience since this claim seems to imply that such contamination is an optional requirement, i.e. that thought could exist without it.


16 ibid., p. 7.
17 Theodor W. Adorno et al., The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology, trans. Glyn Adley and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 29. Cited henceforth in the text as PDGS.
18 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, pp. 147-8.
20 ibid.
21 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 148.
23 Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, p. 29.
24 This passage is also cited in Jay’s Adorno, p. 43.
26 ibid., p. 229.
27 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 37.
28 It is in this crucial respect that Adorno’s emphatic concepts differ from Habermas’s normative ideal of rational consensus. Although it is itself instantiated in particular speech-acts, as a quasi-transcendental ideal, rational consensus does not have the historical contingency that Adorno attributes to his emphatic concepts. Whereas Habermas originally located the ideal of rational consensus in a specific set of historical practices (the emergence of a relatively autonomous public sphere in the 18th century), he now believes that this was too ‘idealistic’. Once he had repudiated his earlier ‘idealization’ of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas began to claim that the ‘normative foundations of the critical theory of society [can] be laid at a deeper level’. As he wrote in ‘Further Reflections on the Public Sphere’, there is a ‘rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices’, which can be traced ‘back beyond the threshold of modern societies’ – see Craig Calhoun (ed.) Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 442. This potential can be located in rational consensus as an ideal that regulates communicative practices universally. To quote Thomas McCarthy, rational consensus is grounded in ‘universal pragmatic features of communication’. The basis for political justice in Habermas’s work ‘becomes what all could will . . . as participants in practical discourse, whose adoption of the moral point of view enables them to transcend not only interest-oriented perspectives but also value-based perspectives’ (see Thomas McCarthy, ‘Practical Discourse: On the Relation of Morality to Politics’, in Habermas and the Public Sphere, p. 52).

In contrast to Habermas’s characterization of the ideal speech-situation, Adorno stressed the historically contingent nature of ideals such as freedom: ‘What . . . congeals as values for historical memory are, in fact, question-forms (Fragegestalten) of reality.’ Values are projected on to demands arising from a particular historical situation; for example, the claim that all human beings should have something to eat is the value-form of the demand that hunger be abolished ‘in view of the available and potential wealth of goods’ – see Adorno et al., The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology,
p. 62. Similarly, the moral claim that all human beings should be free is itself tied to demands made under conditions in which unfreedom could be avoided either actually or potentially. These conditions may well change. If Habermas ascribes a universal status to rational consensus, Adorno believed that the rational identity on which his critique was grounded was thoroughly historical and thus itself ‘particular’. Moreover, in historical conditions like our own, which are characterized by increasingly successful social integration, particular ideals such as freedom might actually wither away without a trace because our experience would no longer be such as to allow us even to formulate the demand that unfreedom be abolished.