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Philosophy of History

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‘Wait, I thought Progress was Progressive?’ Progress as Domination, not Liberation:

Adorno and Horkheimer’s Critique of Teleological History

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were thinkers in the realm of critical theory arising from the Frankfurt School. Their ideas served as a ruthless critique of capitalist society, uprooting all normative forms of knowledge, culture, and historical understanding. Building on Marxist ideas of historical materialism, Adorno and Horkheimer departed quite a bit from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, assuming a brutal pessimism that functions as a critique of the aforementioned theory for its inability to be radical and conclusive enough while extending these ideas to late-capitalism. In my paper, I seek to further explore Adorno and Horkheimer’s writings, particularly the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and the concepts of the domination of nature, the history of humanity as moving towards a form of regress as opposed to the Hegelian notion of “progress”, and the proliferation of totalitarianism and instrumental rationality, wherein reason is used as an instrument of power -- all problems which I hope to discuss. In doing so, I hope to present partial answers to the questions of revolution and its feasibility, whether or not Marx’s theories regarding revolution have been fruitful in garnering revolutionary spirit (at times describing Adorno’s critiques of Marxist theory), the problem of the weight of history (“stopping the steam-roller of history”) in its attempt to inform historical narratives of progress, and how the ideals of the domination of nature and the Enlightenment have stifled liberatory ones -- from the perspective of Adorno. I am in sympathy with Adorno’s ruthless rejection of claims regarding

history as progressing for some liberatory end and I posit that Adorno was right in his determination that the weight of history inevitably results in an increase in domination, thereby hindering possibilities for revolutionary and liberational outcomes, as well as operationalizing the notion of progress the way he conceives of it -- as the progress of domination.

Hegel's teleological view of positive historical progress is diametrically opposed to that of Adorno. First and foremost, Hegel believed in the idea of universal progress, arguing that history moved toward a progressive end. Hegel argued that the consciousness of freedom is that which progresses throughout history. This framework of regarding the progress of history can be understood as a change in the development of ideas over time. Spirit's realization of itself is the very thing that constitutes progress in history -- this occurs through the attainment of freedom. Freedom and progress are attained through conflict and even regression, where a dialectical relationship involving clashing ideologies is formed, and progressive ideas come to fruition and manifest historically, thereby overhauling draconian ideas of regress and non-freedom. Progress, therefore, involves the gradual liberation of the human Spirit, where ideas are the things shaping material conditions. The distinct ways in which the development of history occurs "is not just a harmless and peaceful process of growth like that of organic life, but a hard and obstinate struggle with itself" to realize the idea of freedom (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, p. 127). This realization of freedom is reflected in the nation-state and its workings in order to produce societies of free individuals comprising a whole. Not all states are constructed peacefully, and war and conflict are sometimes necessary elements in their formation. Beneath the nightmarishness of catastrophe lies the potential for development of progress. History is an ever-changing, shifting process in which rationality takes root, albeit this instantiation of it is not

immediately evident. The cycle begins anew until the end goal of history is achieved -- complete realization of Spirit, whose content includes freedom.

Adorno is a harsh critic of the notion of universal history, arguing in his work *Negative Dialectics* that “Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it” (p. 190). According to Hegel, the means by which history progresses involves the cunning of reason. The cunning of reason uses non-rational motivations to achieve a rational historical end -- thereby comprising the content of history and progress. Reason is a cunning animal which shapes the goals of the means. But, for Adorno, to place so much undue faith in reason (a dominating force) as a progressive force and to ascribe such meanings to atrocity is a folly. In Adorno’s view, history is a vicious cycle of violence, propagated by the ruling classes and exacerbated by machines -- technology used to further subordinate individuals and groups within the technocratic system profiting off of misery. To him, the progress of history is a misguided notion, one that harbors too much optimism for it to have merit -- “Not to be denied for that reason, however, is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history—the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men’s inner nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (p. 190). This critique would serve as the foundation for his critique of Enlightenment rationalist thought, of positivism, and of history itself and all of its catastrophic baggage. If historical events mean anything in the traditional Hegelian sense, they represent struggle in their most material and literal sense -- “Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it; the profit interest and thus the class relationship make up the objective motor

of the production process which the life of all men hangs by, and the primacy of which has its vanishing point in the death of all. What historically made this possibility may as well destroy it. The world spirit, a worthy object of definition, would have to be defined as permanent catastrophe” (p. 190). The increase in domination, therefore, is the thing responsible for producing a teleology of history or a totalistic explanation of it which imbues events with significance, albeit a relatively horrific one. However, he does not abandon the idea of universal history entirely, or favor a theory of historical discontinuity -- rather, he argues that universal history and discontinuity ought to be united, resulting in the domination of nature, others, and finally, man himself.

The doctrine of instrumental rationality as originating out of Enlightenment modes of thinking has been nothing short of disastrous, in Adorno’s view. Control societies have exercised their potential for the complete subjugation of human thought and corporeality as we know it through the rationalism that has permeated these very lines of thinking. This is because instrumental rationality represents authoritative forms of knowledge which operate in a calculative, efficiency-driven, and result-centered way, wherein the mental processes of rationalization are extended into the social realm of relations, processes, and productions, which lends itself to the endorsement of technocracy, whereby a “techno-scientific rationality” is deemed a valid measure of progress, rather than substantive, humanistic progress founded on the basic tenets of altruism, welfare, and overall goodness. Reason therefore acts as an instrument of domination to extend its sway into the natural world, in its precedence over it. There is something innate to the logic of Enlightenment that renders it anti-rational -- “The light of reason, which dawned in that impulse and is reflected in the recollecting thought of human beings, falls, even on the happiest day, on its irresolvable contradiction: the calamity which

reason alone cannot avert” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 187). The progress of science and reason reinforce totalitarianism and other ideologies of control, because reason has become abstracted away from humanity and applied to the workings of capital. Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* write, “Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins” (p. 2). The vicious percolation of Enlightenment ideals can be found deeply entrenched in culture, and counterintuitively, Enlightenment contributes to its own regression -- “For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion. Once the movement is able to develop unhampered by external oppression, there is no holding it back. Any intellectual resistance it encounters merely increases its strength. Enlightenment is totalitarian” (p. 3-4). Progressive movements, because of their inherent lack of coldness and calculability, their inability to operate the capitalist war-machine, falter under the weight of instrumental rationality. It is here that Adorno and Horkheimer lay the groundwork for the denunciation of Enlightenment (not so much the movement as much as the advancement in ways of thinking) and its consequences for the human race.

The progression of Enlightenment thought in Adorno and Horkheimer’s view engendered the rise of totalitarianism that took place during the time of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* being written. With the existence of all of the different historical iterations of fascism in a post-WWII world, it became increasingly clear to Adorno and Horkheimer that historical possibility being taken to its revolutionary “logical” conclusion as theorized by Marx was less and less likely, and that the workings of a far more grim reality ensured the domination of all things. Enlightenment

had gone astray, because it aimed to render man masters of nature -- “Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world” (p. 2). This echoes a kind of Faustian bargain, where a person resigns their morality or soul for power or opulence -- or knowledge, as is the case here. This knowledge does not serve a liberatory purpose, however. The opposite idea is articulated -- the goals of Enlightenment being “liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (p.2). The word “master” implies the existence of a slave, the thing or person being subject to domination. The mastery over nature, self, and others is the means by which one facilitates the inadvertent goals of Enlightenment. The domination of nature in particular is exacerbated by the domination of self, in an attempt to free oneself from the domination of nature. Our thoughts then become subject to the abstraction that is far-removed from any sense of humanity, taking place as a result of hyper-rationalization, positivization, and objectification -- “Not only is domination paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind” (p. 21). The barbarism that has ensued as a result of the objectification of thought has produced genocide, tyranny, and the commodification of all people and objects alike. The reconciliation of a theory of revolutionary praxis with the state of material reality is not one that lends itself to predictability, in the way that Marx envisioned. Circling back to Hegelian notions of universal history, how could freedom or Spirit be realized when, quite frankly, all of history has been one big horror show, leading up to its eventual destruction? In addition to Adorno’s pessimism in the domain of history, he was a critic of the culture industry, arguing that “The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behavior on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational

one” (p. 21). The standardization of behavior renders any form of variation or departure from normativity as a taboo, and the normative standards as being the only appropriate way of behaving. This stems from the permeation of Enlightenment ideology within the media and other avenues of production, whereby certain presentations of existence are deemed desirable, and certain narratives are pushed forth in order to articulate the values of pragmatism, rationality, temperance, and detached, uninterested observation (in the face of...societal collapse?). In conjunction with this seeping of abstract Enlightenment values into culture, the individual becomes incapacitated and defanged, unable to glean meaning from their cogging existence in ways that don't involve their relation to or mediation by capital -- “Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures. Their criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schemata assigned to it” (pg. 21-22). Such is the fate of Western civilization, which has been all-consumed the modus operandi of rationality that is so deeply interwoven with the evil that exists and will continue to exist.

The weight of history cannot be expected to yield into existence an end-all be-all solution to the problem of history. This problem cannot merely be solved as more events become borne out of struggle; history cannot solve its problems with itself. This is why Adorno and Horkheimer are so adamantly opposed to Hegelian teleology -- “it seems somewhat whimsical to try to construe world history, as did Hegel, in terms of categories such as freedom and justice” (p. 184). Any liberational movement that has occurred in epochs prior functioned to “unleash machinery, just as the emancipation of women has culminated in their being trained as a branch of the armed forces. The mind, and all that is good in its origins and existence, is hopelessly implicated in this horror” (p. 185). Hegel's philosophy of history becomes something of a moot

argument, because despite whatever progress has occurred, we seem to be moving closer and closer to ensuring the complete domination of nature, subsuming the entirety of human thought and life in its grasp. All systems aimed at explaining the course of human history and elucidating and purporting notions of progress and goodness (including idealism, materialism, and Christianity) have been responsible for “the villainies committed in their name. In proclaiming power -- even a benign power -- they became themselves highly organized historical powers, and as such played their bloody role in the real history of the human species: as instruments of organization” (p. 186). There is no causal mechanism that ensures the movement of history as leading to a progressive end, and no working out of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather than championing a logic of universal history, it may be worth exploring alternatives of explaining it -- such as the study of naturalized parts of it as subjects of study which can be used to explain and potentially offer solutions to the weight of history rather than relegating it to a grand narrative (perhaps with the existence of fields like sociology, critical theory, or psychology). Stopping the steam-roller of history through the process of stepping away from it can alleviate some of the (if not historical problems) existential problems that arise from being encaged within it.

Marx argued that the modes of production, or the exploitation of labor and the accumulated capital of the ruling class are the things constituting historical progress. The subsequent liberation of labor is the thing that evolves through the progress of world history. In his understanding of how the progress of world history occurs, Marx concerned himself with questions regarding how conditions influence life and how conditions can be changed through action. Marx believed that we are beings entrenched in a material world, and that the relation between man and nature was constituted by production and the satisfaction of needs. The “modes

of production” are characterized by the relevant periods and technologies/ideas available at the time. The modes of production generate a division of labor wherein relations of ownership are established and maintained. As division and labor gets more complex, the question of freedom becomes increasingly at stake. Even with the risk of perpetuating unfreedom through the division of labor and continually exploitative modes of production of material and consciousness, will the revolution that spurs greater freedom still be possible? Progress in the social sphere is thus defined as progress in the material world through the development of technology, capital, and ideas. The division of labor is the source of class struggle, where production is organized around class and everybody wants control of production. Marx believed that the modes of production not only organized labor relations, but also life and ideas as people understand them -- consciousness of existence -- ideologies justifying ways of life. The material conditions of societies produce ideas which influence the workers’ understanding of needs and their satisfaction with their lot in life. The division of manual and mental labor subsequently produces the ideology of the ruling class. Revolutions come from a disruption of the mode of production. They arise out of the development of production coupled with the creation of a mass of propertyless workers, and a revolutionary set of ideals. As more wealth is produced, the worker becomes more exploited -- “And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work...” (*Capital*, p. 295). Social conditions must change in order to produce revolutionary ideas in the first place -- “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (“Preface to Critique of Political Economy”, p. 209). Civil society is thus explained by its political economy and its modes of production. The conflict

between the relations and means of production is the breeding ground for revolution. Marx believed that the means by which progress is instantiated involves changes in ownership of wealth. His view of history included the necessary progression of societies by way of stages, where capitalism is preceded by feudalism which is preceded by slavery. In each stage, the ruling class uses the technology and dominant ideas of the time to exploit the working class. However, intolerable internal contradictions arising from material conditions within these stages yield results by necessitating the overthrow of the ruling class -- "At a certain stage of development, it brings into the world the material means of its own destruction. From that moment, new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society, forces and passions which feel themselves to be fettered by that society" (*Capital*, p. 298). Marx believed that the proletariat would overthrow the ruling class and claim ownership of the means of production under communism when the relation of production no longer supports material progress.

Adorno's disillusionment with traditional Marxist considerations of revolution have informed much of his stances in regard to harnessing revolutionary spirit. Adorno raised many criticisms of Marx that he would outline in his writings. For example, he resists the image of Marxism as a science "of the laws of nature and history, which seemingly turned into a forever valid theory of the absent revolution" (Bartonek, 131). I presume that this has something to do with his resistance to scientific courses of study in general, as well as the inherent fault within Marxism to relegate the motions of a revolution to a scientific process, when this seems not to be the case. Theorist Anders Bartonek, author of *Hegelian Marxism: The Uses of Hegel's Philosophy in Marxist Theory from Georg Lukács to Slavoj Žižek* argues that "Adorno finds in Marx a critique against any philosophical attempt to derive abstract principles, out of which it is possible to deduce reality. A crucial moment in Marx's thinking is the relation between theory

and praxis, and Marxist theory can therefore never only be a theory about reality as it is, it must transform it” (p. 131). But, at which point does the theory become praxis? Adorno believed that Marx did not go far enough in his critique of capitalism, because he could not have conceived of the advent of late-capitalism in all of its terrifying grandeur. He seeks to extend Marx’s argument not merely to capitalism but to late capitalism, due to the occurrence of man-made horrors beyond comprehension that Marx could not have foreseen. Despite the phrase “late capitalism” implying a finitude to its reign, “In the eyes of Adorno, it is an essential characteristic of late capitalism that it has integrated the proletariat (and thereby defeated its revolutionary potential), making individuals conform with the economic principles of society and suffocating all critical possibilities from inside” (p. 133). The proletariat is equally if not more entrenched in and commodified by the nightmarish dominion. This affects the proletarian cause insofar that “...the paths to a genuinely society-changing and oppression-negating praxis are almost entirely blocked within late capitalism. The main reason for this is, for Adorno, society’s ability to channel and disarm resistance” (p. 137). However, this is not to say that praxis isn’t possible -- it is a matter of approaching it in a way that does not solve the problem of history with more history, and progress with more progress -- “Indeed, for Adorno, historical progress will not occur until the identity principle, which degrades and destroys all that is heterogeneous, is broken. Therefore real progress would mean the exit from the curse of progress; progress will not be progress until progress ends” (p. 133). There seems to be an inherently Hegelian logic to the progress of domination in history which acts as an onslaught to autonomy and liberation. Because “progress” is construed by Adorno to merely be the progress of domination, “progress” needs to be slowed down -- or halted -- in order to dialectically ensure the prevention of catastrophe -- the true meaning of “progress” from the perspective of Adorno. Because the concept of revolution carries

with it a progressive view of history, to reiterate, stopping the steam-roller of history is perhaps our best bet in ensuring that the human species will not “...tear itself to pieces or take all of the Earth’s fauna and flora down with it” (p. 186). Contrary to the Hegelian idea that freedom is borne out of historical struggle, “Adorno also writes that the self formatting process of society is not being fulfilled beyond or despite the inner conflicts and antagonisms of society but precisely because of and through them...Capitalist society is being formed and upheld through this inner tension, but also faces the risk of self-destruction” (Bartonek, 134). Society mirrors this process of the rational becoming irrational, with respect to Enlightenment reason. The seemingly needless and irrational destruction that takes place is simultaneously rational and calculated -- existing dialectically, deductively, even -- in order to affirm capital’s iron grip -- “through societal antagonism, counter-images against capitalism are being kept alive by capitalism itself. In functioning through this contradiction, capitalism prevents society from becoming entirely homogeneous” (p. 135). This is the logic of capital, propagating itself and permitting the discursive permutations and percolations of anticapitalist sentiment and praxis. Liberalism has only ever served to accelerate destruction and to unleash machinery in its reach. Thus, a positive notion of progress is potentially rendered dangerous and unfavorable as a result -- history just can’t take it anymore, and for the record, neither can we.

Adorno and Horkheimer provide a compelling critique of the process of history, the machinations of late capitalism, and the perversions of instrumental rationality, positivism, and Enlightenment thought. Even more compellingly, Adorno and Horkheimer criticize the very philosophers which lay the groundwork for their critiques. I am in agreement with Adorno’s ruthless opposition towards ideas of universal history and its progression, and his reconciliation of its continuity and discontinuity, both of which “must be conceived together” (Negative

Dialectics, p. 319). I appreciate Adorno's presentation of and constant circling back to this idea of contradiction, as is the case with the reasoned becoming unreasoned -- paradoxical, concurrent existence which seems to make sense sociopolitically in the course of history, geopolitically in relation to the domination of nature and the external world, and dialectically in the realm of the abstract. He makes a strong case for why the progress of domination is actually the thing that is moving forward in history, and this is only made clearer as machines exert greater amounts of control over human and non-human entities (nature) and we become further inculcated into late-capitalist modes of reasoning, acting, and relating. This is what is truly meant by the domination of nature, wherein the drive towards subjugation is deeply rooted in attitudes intrinsically predicated on destructiveness. That being said, Adorno and Horkheimer's theories make sense in the context of late capitalism, especially given the rhetoric of the impending climate crisis, where our best efforts should arguably be geared towards "preventing catastrophe". Letting go of a notion of progress is perhaps one of the hardest things to do in critically considering Adorno's philosophy. After all, "[We] have nothing to lose but our chains!" (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*). Imbuing the proletariat with the hope of a revolution to-come that may never be, however, has done less for her liberation and instead has contributed to her strangulation. Dispelling the rhetoric of an oft-cited, massively influential "progress" within history can serve to uncloak it from the mythos it is shrouded in. Freeing "progress" from the dialectically prescribed processes of itself seems like an absurd concept at first glance -- how else can humanity move forward if the very nature of progress implies...well, the way forward? But, in seeing how history has amounted to the progress of its own destruction, this negativistic conception is rendered all the more plausible. This bears many implications for the carrying out of praxis -- what political steps should be taken in order to mitigate catastrophe? This is a topic

that requires further exploration that I hope to later address, but perhaps it may involve the stripping away of “positive” political actions. Instead of inflicting greater damage by spurring on whatever form of brutality capitalism has in store for us next, it may prove worthwhile to practice “stepping away” from the world of (liberal, and neoliberal) action and fostering a ruthless, combative engagement with critique -- the goals of critical theory underlined.



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