

On Reification and Extreme Violence.

Mimesis, Play and Power in Adorno.

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Abstract. In this paper, I will offer some examples of the effectiveness of Adorno's concept of mimesis for an analysis of extreme violence and for a defence of democratic institutions against possible regressions into authoritarian regimes. I will start by reading the concept of mimesis through the lens of the interlacement between the concepts of play and power. My aim is twofold: first, I wish to further the analysis of Adorno's concept of mimesis by showing that it can be interpreted as a form of play, which either empowers subjectivity or becomes a means of domination; second, I will use these speculations to highlight the relevance of Horkheimer and Adorno's explanation of anti-Semitic violence when seen through the lens of the concept mimesis. Before concluding, I will briefly highlight Adorno's ideas about what makes democracy vulnerable to potential regressions into extreme violence, and examine what can be done practically – from an Adornian perspective – to avoid regression: defending democratic institutions, and working towards a removal of those barriers that obstruct genuine mimetic experience and self-reflection.

Keywords. Adorno, power, mimesis, play, anti-Semitism, reification

1. Introduction.

In the last 15 to 20 years, Adorno's theory has received renewed attention from a variety of perspectives and undergone a thorough reevaluation. This is also true for the concept of mimesis, especially in the field of aesthetics.¹ In this paper, I will offer some examples of the effectiveness of Adorno's concept of mimesis for an analysis of extreme violence and for a defence of democratic institutions against possible regressions into authoritarian regimes. I will start by reading the concept of mimesis through the lens of the interlacement between the concepts of play and power (section 2). Here the ability to play may refer to two extremely different uses of power, namely the power to act violently within the context of an overall historical process of domination, and the power to act freely, experiencing reality interactively. I will next validate the more speculative analysis of the reified and violent side of power that I developed in section 2, by focusing on Adorno and Horkheimer's aphorisms on anti-Semitism as outlined in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (section 3). My aim is twofold: first, I wish to further the analysis of Adorno's concept of mimesis by showing that it can be interpreted as a form of play, which either empowers subjectivity or becomes a means of domination; second, I will use these speculations to highlight the relevance of Horkheimer and Adorno's explanation of anti-Semitic violence when seen through the lens of the concept mimesis.² From the analyses in sections 2 and 3 emerges the centrality, in Adorno's theory, of a concept of *mimetic experience* that has a double nature; it can thus be understood both as a form of mature, playful, interactive and self-reflected exchange between the subject and the object of knowledge, and as an empty "game", that is, as a reified experience of reality characterised by a distorted, fixed and empty interaction between the subject's inner and outer world. Before concluding, in section 4 I will briefly outline Adorno's thoughts on what makes democracy vulnerable to potential regressions into extreme violence, and examine what can be done practically – from an Adornian perspective – to avoid regression: defending democratic institutions

and working towards the removal of those barriers that obstruct genuine mimetic experience and self-reflection.

In my interpretation of Adorno and Horkheimer, I make use of the conceptual tools of classical psychoanalysis. This approach may sound anachronistic to many readers. Since the basic concepts of classical – i.e. Freudian – psychoanalysis date back to more than a century ago, it is not only understandable but also appropriate to highlight its insufficiencies and address these accordingly. However, while no other theory in the field of psychoanalysis has succeeded in “replacing” those concepts comprehensively and in a “sufficiently convincing way”, their “explanatory potential” remains unparalleled.³ This also applies to the subject matter of the present article. I am confident that our understanding of the reasons why democracies might be vulnerable to regressions into authoritarian regimes may be broadened by working at the intersection between the social and the psychic. In this regard, classical psychoanalysis is still a powerful and by no means outdated instrument of analysis. Not only may it prove useful for a social philosophy that does not want the individual’s concrete interactions – including the intrapsychic and unconscious ones – to disappear behind an overly objectified understanding of the social.⁴ In addition to an analysis of the political, economic, and institutional context (both national and international), it is also essential to understand the processes leading to the deterioration of democratic institutions and the development of (extreme) collective violence, as I will illustrate in this article.⁵

2. Play and power in Adorno’s concept of mimesis.

In Adorno’s concept of mimesis, play is linked to power in both its domineering and its enabling form. Playing designates both the individual capacity to have a truthful and meaningful experience of reality, and (the outcome of) the process that distorts this experience, in which power takes the form of an empty game. The playful aspects of mimesis can either lead to the development of a rich

and flourishing relation with reality, or become an expression of reification processes, through which violence is exerted on a reality that has lost its qualitative dimension. Let us, however, take a closer look at what mimesis means in Adorno's work.

As a preliminary, rough approximation, Adorno defines mimesis – from the Greek μίμησις, “imitation”⁶ – a twofold moment of affinity between the subject of interaction and its object, in which the latter discloses itself to the former. Emotional, affective and even physical closeness to the object can be accessed either through love – the libidinal cathexis of the object, through which the subject imitates the object of interaction – or out of fear, the threatened subject's instinctive reaction to the threatening object. It is through this fear that the former identifies with the surrounding nature in order to survive, be it the “external nature” of the primeval age or the “second nature” of today's standardised reality.⁷ In psychological terms, the twofold nature of mimesis is the equivalent of the dialectic between life and death drives.⁸ In both cases, the Ego is constituted (and threatened) by an essential “yielding attitude to things”; by the tendency to lose its boundaries and regress to a state of diminished individualisation; and by the tendency to return to the inorganic – a tendency that, according to the latest elaboration of Freudian thought, is “beyond the pleasure principle”.⁹

Horkheimer and Adorno explain the journey of Western civilisation as a dialectic of mimetic identification, in which the immediate, “organic adaptation to otherness” is replaced with a mediated identification with its concept. The self emerged – out of fear – from a magic phase in which “signs” were not perfectly distinguishable from the thing they designated: “At the magical stage dream and image were not regarded as mere signs of things but were linked to them by resemblance or name. The relationship was not one of intention but of kinship. Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object”.¹⁰

However, a disjunction between images and things – the sign becoming independent of what was previously closer to the thing it designates, namely its image – occurs when the “cry of terror” before the unknown in nature “becomes its name”. In other words, it is from the terror before the overwhelming power of things that their names originate. The cry “fixes the transcendence of the unknown in relation to the known, permanently linking horror to holiness. The doubling of nature into appearance and essence, effect and force, made possible by myth no less than by science, springs from human fear, the expression of which becomes its explanation”.¹¹

The *fearsome*, mimetic reaction is imposed on the subject through domination: initially, by the terrifying domination of nature, and subsequently, by the (inter)human domination that is required in order to liberate humans – through work – from the domination of nature. The emergence of a person’s self from fear reproduces the same fear at a higher level, through the empty identification between the unified Ego and a reality experienced through signs (concepts) that have lost any affinity with the things they were meant to designate. Thus, at every step, “enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology”, and substitutes the fearful identification with reality’s conceptual frame – which is still shaped by domination – for the terrifying identification with “external nature”.¹² However, fear is not the only way to establish affinities with external reality. The mimetic attitude also denotes a very different moment: one of libidinal investment of the object, which allows one to grasp what the object could have been without domination.

It is also thanks to this moment of positive affinity with the object that true knowledge originates, although it eventually takes the form of suffering: the fully developed, positive affinity with the object is exactly what cannot exist, or develop, under the yoke of the present reality.¹³ True knowledge is self-reflective, critical and non-reified thought, capable of grasping differences and nuances, which “receives its impulse from the matter” [*Seinen Impuls empfängt es von der Sache*].¹⁴

Being able to seize differences and nuances means being able to distinguish, “in the matter and its concept”,

even the infinitesimal, that which escapes the concept; discrimination [*Differenziertheit*] alone gets down to the infinitesimal. Its postulate of a capacity to experience the object—and discrimination is the experience of the object turned into a form of subjective reaction—provides a haven for the mimetic element of knowledge [*findet das Mimetische Moment der Erkenntnis Zuflucht*], for the element of elective affinity between the knower and the known.¹⁵

The ability [*Fähigkeit*] to discriminate, to see nuances and differences in the object of experience, that is, to seize in it the qualitative aspects of experience that reification tends to eliminate, is not only a subjective ability (i.e. that of the “knower”), for this ability “receives its impulse [*Impuls*] from the matter”. However, in order for true knowledge to receive an impulse from the matter, the matter must be invested. The subject has to “yield to the object” in order to be able to truly know it.¹⁶ Libidinal investment of the object is the premise for relevant knowledge and for any thought that is not blind repetition. Indeed, since “even its remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses [*Trieben*], thought destroys in the latter the condition of its own existence”.¹⁷ The mimetic yielding to the object, or its libidinal investment, creates the affinity that can give living content to mature thought – that is, thought that isn’t stuck in this first moment of affinity, but has attempted to rearticulate it through concepts. Living thought is thought that does not immediately reflect “reality”, and does not disparage the distance to it. “Relevant” thought is that which keeps the distance between itself and the mere “facts” – but only in order to see deeper into them.¹⁸

Thus, what is mimetic is not only the self’s yielding to the object, but also the kind of thought and knowledge that could emerge from this act of yielding, for it recreates the affinity to the object at a higher level (this happens through what Adorno, following Benjamin, calls *constellations* of concepts). However, in order to do so, it is “essential” that thought contains “an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting 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. *Thus every thought resembles play [Darin ähnelt jeder Gedanke dem Spiel]*, with which Hegel no less than Nietzsche compared the work of the mind [*Geist*].¹⁹ In other words, a “moment of play” in which the subject can freely invest things is “essential” to the non-reified experience of reality and the development of a mimetic thought (and knowledge).

For Adorno, however, an expressive and genuine form of this “moment of play” is only possible in infancy. What is mimetic in children’s play is the ability to let the self go, to react spontaneously to external stimuli, to love and invest things, to be touched by them without renouncing an element of subjective spontaneity and originality – that which gives the individual’s experience its specificity. This is because thought needs a “surplus of subjectivity” if it is not to be a mere repetition of “facts”.²⁰ In this context, “to play” designates the concrete play of children, their free interaction with the environment, but also the play of their psychic faculties, the capacity to invest internalised objects, and the capacity to anticipate and project, which will prove essential to thought.²¹

In our reified society, we gradually lose this genuine and naive approach to reality. Usually, we are only able to interact with it freely and see in it more than what appears at the surface insofar as we can maintain memories of the old libidinal investments in adult life. After all, adaptation to reality (i.e. reification) is not yet fully realised in infancy. Thus, the validity of our thoughts is genetically related to, and greatly depends on, the child’s playful interaction with a reality not yet faded out by domination.²²

In infancy, things still have an intrinsic value, regardless of the fact whether they lead to the achievement of other ends. In other words, the children’s “activity” is “purposeless”: free from the “mediated usefulness” of things. Therefore, children are “still aware, in their spontaneous perception, of the contradiction between phenomenon and fungibility that the resigned adult no

longer sees, and they shun it". Children think that things are actually purposeless, that "the little trucks travel nowhere and the tiny barrels on them are empty". They are wrong, according to Adorno. Yet, he maintains that "the unreality" of their "games" contains both the possibility for mimetic, critical thought, and the promise that, one day, "society will finally remove the social stigma" – that is, the stigma that domination imposes on us through the principle of exchange – on things.²³

Meanwhile, this mimetic attitude is, however, easily repressed. Being marked by the context of domination, it not only tends to lose the free, liberating and anticipatory relation with external reality that children's play expressed in such a spontaneous way;²⁴ it also becomes a means of domination. One of the most evident aspects of this domination is the "game" of empty signs, to which "positivism" has reduced thought, according to Adorno. Within the processes of reification, "true" mimesis thus becomes "false", as Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out in the aphorisms on anti-Semitism.²⁵ Through psychological mechanisms such as projection and displacement, the playful and positive regression of mimesis (i.e. the "yielding" to the object) dialectically turns into multiple forms of regressive oppression. From being the spontaneous activity of children, play turns into an empty game, that is, a reified experience.

Thus, what happened phylogenetically (i.e. in the history of domination) happens again ontogenetically (i.e. in the formation of every individual): the context of domination transforms "true" into "false" mimesis. In both cases, when Adorno speaks of true mimesis, he is referring to the core of a form of rationality that has never *fully* existed – and that could only be fully and positively achieved through a leap forward ("reconciliation"). Within present reality, true mimesis denotes regression into playful moments, of which we can only retrieve a few ontogenetic experiences from memory, provided that its spontaneity does not itself become an absolute entity, being fixed into a new form of reification.²⁶ True mimesis is, first and foremost, the coded and

deformed *trace* of what Adorno considered a non-domineering rationality: a rationality that, according to Adorno, had been freed from the almost complete domination that he saw in Western society.

In both its “true” and “false” meanings, mimesis (i.e. *mimetic experience*) is, then, a central aspect of Adorno’s concept of rationality. The reified mimesis of the object (the reified identification with it) is the core of instrumental rationality as the rich and playful interaction with reality is the core of a mimetic rationality – a rationality that can achieve a deeper, non-reified knowledge of the object. However, until present times, a mimetic rationality has not been able to truly develop if not negatively (i.e. as the experience of domination insofar as it becomes a critique thereof), for social reproduction has always been based on social domination and on the repression of drives [*Trieben*], and repression and domination distort mimetic experience by making it a “pathic” experience. Therefore, to say that a form of rationality that isn’t instrumental has never *fully* existed does not mean that it doesn’t exist at all. Not mimesis *per se* is rational, but mimetic thought insofar as it is the conceptual articulation – through language – of mimetic experience. If thinking by means of *definitions* of concepts (e.g. *A is B*) is the expression of reified thought, which in turn is the result of the development of the instrumental rationality needed to reproduce society through work, articulating a subject’s (“true”) mimetic experience through constellations of concepts reflects a different kind of rationality.²⁷ A rationality that seeks to better grasp that which concepts usually fail to see without further (self)reflection: the (effects of the) *Herrschaft*, on which the development of those concepts is based in the first place. If it is authentic, the development of a mimetic thought through constellations of concepts always results in putting on show the negativity of reality (i.e. the reality of domination). As long as there is superfluous domination, for Adorno “rational” means *negative* and *dialectical*. Negative because it seizes (even the nuances of) the non-identical; dialectical because, in so doing, it points to what reality would be without domination. The rational content of “true” mimetic experience is, then, the expression of the non-identical

insofar as it becomes a critique of domination. Only in this form – that is, as a negative dialectic going so far as to become the object of its own critique – can a non-instrumental rationality exist in Western society.

Like every other concept of Adorno's philosophy, that of mimesis is therefore dialectical; what could have been a positive mimetic experience is transformed into a negative mimetic experience, which entails the "stigma" of repression. To better explain the usefulness of the notion of repressed mimesis for my analysis of extreme violence, let me introduce some terminological distinctions. In what follows, I will use the terms "aggressor"/"persecutor" and "persecuted"/"victim". If we apply Adorno's theoretical framework, then both persecuted and persecutor have undergone the same process of domination. This is why I use the term "power" as well as that of domination; power indicates a specific intersubjective interaction, namely that of repression or oppression of the other, and the latter's reaction against it, within an overall context of domination.

Since it is dialectical, a mimetic interaction may indicate (the possibility of) the end of domination not just despite its being above all a negative experience, but precisely *because* it is so. The non-identical, the suffering, the deformed and the amorphous – that is, all that results from a process of domination and that can be experienced through mimesis – can negatively (i.e. by alluding to its absence) indicate the possibility of reconciliation, of a social organisation that allows people to coexist without fear.²⁸ As dominated subjects, both the persecutor and the persecuted – obviously in different forms – express the impulse to, and the desire for, happiness and freedom.²⁹

If we accept Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas, in the planned, rationalised and standardised extermination of millions of people, as in the violence perpetrated in massacres, we should *also* see – adopting a psychological perspective – the outcome of a *distorted and reified* form of play. The latter expresses the hate resulting from the loss of an enriching and empowering form of play, whose model is the play of infancy. The projection of a distorted inner "nature" substitutes the

interactive exchange between inner and outer “nature”, and fulfils the empty and exchangeable reality of reification. The playful and enriching interaction with the environment dries out, and external reality becomes increasingly occupied by the drives’ inner play. However, these points appear to take on a less speculative tone when reading the aphorisms on anti-Semitism presented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which will serve as an example of the phenomenology of reified power relations that we may draw from Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic.

3. Horkheimer and Adorno’s aphorisms on anti-Semitism.

The fifth and sixth aphorisms on anti-Semitism remind us that it is only by becoming aware of the mechanisms through which relations of domination develop that we can, indeed, retain the hope of beginning an emancipatory process. In this case, these mechanisms are analysed in terms of “idiosyncratic aversion” [*Idiosynkrasie*], and of the hatred behind anti-Semitism.

“Idiosyncrasy”, in anti-Semitism, does not attach “itself” to “nature” in the sense of social norms (second nature), but rather attaches itself “to the peculiar”, to “whatever is not quite assimilated, or infringes the commands in which the progress of centuries has been sedimented”. Subsequently, anything that isn’t quite assimilated and that is incompatible with progress “is felt as intrusive and arouses a compulsive aversion”.³⁰ This includes, for example, gestures that are expressed spontaneously and without self-reflection; affects, emotions, and even relations of power when they are neither rationalised nor mediated by stereotyped expressions.

In the present day, the “motifs which trigger such idiosyncrasy (...) recreate moments of biological prehistory: danger signs which made the hair stand on end and the heart stop”. This defensive attitude (towards fear) is a form of mimesis [*Mimikry*], and results from human being’s attempt to defend her/himself from the domineering power of *external* nature. In order to escape a sudden danger, the human being would make him/herself similar to the surrounding, unliving

nature. However, “the tribute life pays” in order to escape danger, the tribute it pays “for its continued existence is adaptation to death”. This is because, in this scenario, living beings try to assimilate themselves to unliving nature. However, reduction to the “external, spatial” relationship is – for Horkheimer and Adorno – the highest expression of alienation.

Thus, from the outset, mimesis makes it possible to save life by alienating it. Little by little, “civilization replaced” this “organic adaptation [*organischen Anschmiegung*] to otherness, mimetic behavior [*mimetischen Verhaltens*] proper, firstly, in the magical phase, with the organized manipulation of mimesis, and finally, in the historical phase, with rational praxis, work”.³¹ Both the “magic ritual” and organised work are just more complex ways to achieve the same result: to escape from danger and survive. First, through the “magic ritual”, subjects try to identify themselves with the powers (i.e. spirits, gods) they project onto nature so as to avoid its destructiveness. Next, organised work allows subjects to rationally reproduce the outer world in such a way that they can recognise themselves in it. Yet, they fail, for both these *mediated* forms of mimesis – the *unmediated* being the original, organic adaptation to sheer nature – lead subjects to be socially exploited, and to what Adorno calls “domination” (*Herrschaft*).

Throughout the process of civilisation, which leads from the magical phase to organised work, the unmediated, “uncontrolled mimesis” of the origin “is proscribed”. However, as a result of these developments, mimesis changed its form while producing the same effect. Be it unmediated identification with nature or mediated identification with the conceptual, reified object, any trace of life is eliminated and adaptation to life is accomplished through terror. “The mathematical formula”, which is the highest example of conceptual abstraction, “is consciously manipulated regression, just as the magic ritual was; it is the most sublimated form of mimicry. In technology the adaptation to lifelessness in the service of self-preservation is no longer accomplished, as in

magic, by bodily imitation of external nature, but by automating mental processes, turning them into blind sequences”.³² Being ever less autonomous, subjects are therefore easily manipulated.

In these two aphorisms on anti-Semitism, Horkheimer and Adorno retrace the entire course of the dialectic of the enlightenment, and they do so by focusing on the concept of mimesis. The development of Western civilisation rules out immediate and spontaneous mimesis, the former being incompatible with the latter, while reproducing the terrifying dimension of the unmediated “bodily adaptation to nature” of its origin at a higher level. This occurs, for example, in the process of reification, when the qualitative aspects of experience are lost, and the rationalised, programmed and routinised extermination of millions of people becomes possible in a manner that was inconceivable before. In this context, immediate and spontaneous mimesis only survives as a rem(a)inder of uncontrolled, undisciplined and prohibited nature. It is this rem(a)inder that becomes the focus of the hatred of those who – unconsciously desiring to regress towards these primordial reminders of nature – are not allowed to do so, since civilisation rules it out.³³

Anger emerges from this kind of mimesis “because it puts on show, in face of the new relationships of production, the old fear which one has had to forget in order to survive them. It is the compulsive moment in behavior, the rage of the tormentor and of the tormented, reappearing indistinguishably in the grimace, that triggers the specific rage of civilized people”.³⁴ However, if these remainders of repressed nature (mimesis) are just a trace of terrifying – inherited and incorporated – domination and of a human being’s reaction against it, why does not only anger emerge, but also the desire to regress to this mimetic moment? Horkheimer and Adorno claim that the same mimetic behaviour designates a very different – albeit related – dimension: a form of freedom and happiness, to which people have had to renounce. This dimension of happiness is only symbolically present: it is negatively encoded in that behaviour, although factually absent.

Insofar as a regression to mimetic behaviour is prohibited for, or inhibited in, “civilised people”, they offload onto others the anger for having had to renounce the form of freedom and happiness mimetic behaviour negatively represents. This double value of mimesis – terror, on the one hand, freedom or happiness, on the other – is also present in extreme violence. As an expression of terror, mimetic behaviour conveys the impulse of the victim of domination (in this case, the persecuted) to escape – to seek freedom. Anti-Semitic, “idiosyncratic aversion” is connected to this form of freedom, which the anti-Semite unconsciously perceives in his or her victims.

In other words, for Horkheimer and Adorno subjects’ repressed mimetic traits – be it the spontaneous gestures of attachment, emotion or affect that I mentioned above, or the more extreme “convulsive gestures of the tortured” that I will cite below – call back to mind a kind of freedom that is not, and never really was, possible. Nonetheless, the impulse to gain this freedom is present and cannot be eliminated, even in cases of extreme violence. Thus, anger awakens, which is directed against the impulse toward freedom that is anchored, as a form of reaction, to the deformation of domination:

Those evicted compulsively arouse the lust to evict them even here. The marks left on them by violence endlessly inflame violence. Anything which merely wants to vegetate must be rooted out. The chaotically regular flight reactions of the lower animals, the patterns of swarming crowds, the convulsive gestures of the tortured - all these express what wretched life can never quite control: the mimetic impulse. In the death throes of the creature, at the furthest extreme from freedom, freedom itself irresistibly shines forth as the thwarted destiny of matter. It is against this freedom that the idiosyncratic aversion, the purported motive of anti-Semitism, is ultimately directed.³⁵

“The convulsive gesture of the tortured” is clearly the highest form of violence and domination. However, the anti-Semite wants to eradicate even the last, bodily impulse to freedom (the last attempt to free oneself from torture), for it still represents the ultimate symbol of what she/he has had to renounce in the entire course of civilisation: freedom and happiness – a playful, authentic, fully realised form of mimesis.

Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno do not claim to offer any exhaustive explanation of anti-Semitism through these psychological remarks. On the contrary, they aim to reconstruct the anthropological-psychological basis that has been exploited and harnessed by “political anti-Semitism”. Whether this basis has any reference in external reality – that is, whether a social group exists that has actually hated, though unconsciously desired, mimetic traits – is not essential. In fact, these mimetic traits are the result of a psychological projection (on the part of the anti-Semite), where the “idiosyncratic aversion” becomes bearable because it is rationalised.³⁶ Far from positively overcoming it, though, the rationalisation of the primeval terror of nature’s overarching power actually increases domination (both of inner and outer “nature”): “Once the horror of the primeval age, sent packing by civilization, has been rehabilitated as a rational interest through projection onto the Jews, there is no holding back. It can be acted out in reality, and the evil which is acted out surpasses even the evil content of the projection”.³⁷

Through rationalisation of the projective aversion, the aggressor manages to let him/herself go, regressively, to the repressed mimetic traits she/he perceives in the victims, and which she/he longs for. It is exactly this unachieved desire for freedom and happiness that – according to Freud – is simultaneously a desire for self-annihilation, which is exploited by political anti-Semitism: by *allowing* mimetic behaviour. Collective rituals of totalitarian regimes – the “discipline, the uniforms (...) the death’s heads and masquerades, the barbaric drumming, the monotonous repetition of words and gestures”³⁸ – are aimed precisely at allowing mimetic behaviour. Subjects can bear mimetic behaviour, and accept to act it out, only if it is institutionally and collectively allowed, and only if it aims at eradicating the very same mimetic traits that it reproduces.

In rationalising and acting out what has resulted from the deformation of “inner nature”, fascism exploits the psychological scheme by which the murderer sees the persecutor in the victim. The problem here is the capacity to distinguish what – in the projection – comes from the subject who is

projecting, and what belongs to the object of his/her perception. “Impulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim”.³⁹ The pivotal role of projection here is also one of the reasons why, first of all, these reflections may be applied to racism, in general, and hatred of the other (minorities), more specifically, regardless of the extent to which anti-Semitism might have been essential for Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s thought, which indeed became very important from the 1940s onwards;⁴⁰ second, the victims are of course not to blame for the mimetic traits that the aggressor perceives in them. These mimetic traits are the result of a projection, and even if a social group acquires culture-specific traits for historical reasons, as Adorno and Horkheimer also argue, these are always the outcome of a process of domination.⁴¹ It is also essential to keep in mind that these considerations address the subjective – and indeed psychological – viewpoint that, for Adorno, is always related to the wider socio-economic and geopolitical context; anti-Semitism, racism, and hatred of the other do not originate mainly or exclusively at a subjective level. The tendency to develop the kind of projective behaviour at stake here is connected to the diminished ability to genuinely experience reality; this is both the result of the course of domination, and the basis that can be exploited by the concrete socio-political forms the latter takes on (which need to be differentiated, for the socio-political forms a society can take are not all the same).

In this context, when we talk of projection, we are actually referring to a *false* projection, which is – for Horkheimer and Adorno – “the pathetic character trait” in which genuine and authentic mimesis “is precipitated”. In other words, in a context of domination, mimesis cannot but develop through a distorted or false form of projection, while a genuine mimesis either never exists or only exists as a trace or reminiscence, which lives through the souvenir of the kind of children’s play we encountered in the previous section. Such authentic, mimetic behaviour could be obtained only through a radical change of the material and social conditions of social reproduction. A transformation of these conditions would need to make coexistence possible without fear: or, to put

it in positive terms, it would allow anybody to thrive, and to express one's inner, determined qualities without repression.

By contrast, fascism exploits the psychological repression that – for the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – is the outcome of a long process, in which liberation from the domination of “outer nature” has come at the cost of the deformation of “inner nature”. Throughout this process of domination, false projection has identified a form of repressed mimesis, in which reality is being reified. Reality's reification is the outcome of the (objectively engendered) inability to maintain a free and interactive exchange with reality – that is, an exchange in which, through processes of self-reflection, a just balance is maintained between perception of reality and projection onto it of subjective elements, in such a way that our knowledge of reality is objective, without losing qualitative substance.

Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno's hypotheses refer not only to a theory of mimetic behaviour and psychological projection, but also to a “physiological theory of perception”.⁴² True mimesis can, then, be defined as a genuine (i.e. non-reified) interaction between the perception of the outer world and the projection of subjective elements onto it. The unitary self, and the unity of external reality, are constituted through the mediation between the interior and the exterior, between the *perception* of the object and the *projection* onto it. The process of knowledge entails a living interaction between inner and outer “nature”. When we experience the outer world, we are, in fact, experiencing a “perceptual image” of it. However, its “perceptual image does indeed contain concept and judgements”, for it is second nature, the outcome of a human being's transformation of it. In the words of Horkheimer and Adorno, to genuinely know the object and “to reflect the thing as it is, the subject must give back to it more than it receives from it”. The subject itself is second nature. Hence, its “inner depth (...) consists in nothing other than the delicacy and richness of the outer perceptual world”. However, in order to make this world emerge and to know it, the subject

must start from “the traces” that the world leaves “behind in its senses” and recreate the outer world from its inner reality.⁴³ The subject can only do this if she/he is able to spontaneously play, as children did before a reified, functional world entered their inner nature.

Without this kind of play, without mediation between projection and perception, there is neither objective and qualitative knowledge, nor non-reified experience of reality and critical thinking. True knowledge is the outcome of the object’s libidinal cathexis – that allows perception of its qualities – and of its self-reflected reconstruction through the linguistic articulation of concepts; here, what has been perceived is reproduced with a surplus of subjectivity. The individual must enrich the object of knowledge with new qualitative perspectives, by means of a projection that we could call a positive, “conscious” projection (i.e. not false or distorted). Only a mimetic interaction with reality that allows for a playful, living, self-reflected (non-reified) exchange between perception and projection can lead to genuine mimetic knowledge, that is, to objective knowledge, which is qualitative and differentiated:

Only mediation, in which the insignificant sense datum raises thought to the fullest productivity of which it is capable, and in which, conversely, thought gives itself up without reservation to the overwhelming impression—only mediation can overcome the isolation which ails the whole of nature. Neither the certainty untroubled by thought, nor the preconceptual unity of perception and object, but only their self-reflective antithesis contains the possibility of reconciliation. The antithesis is perceived in the subject, which has the external world within its own consciousness and yet recognizes it as other. Reflection on that antithesis, therefore, the life of reason, takes place as conscious projection.⁴⁴

Subsequently, what is pathic in anti-Semitism and in other, similar positions “is not projective behavior as such but the exclusion of reflection from that behavior”.⁴⁵ Fighting the atrophy of reflection – or better, resisting the completion of its atrophy – is the task that Adorno entrusted critical theory with. It explains his insistence – even in a time when, as he believed, there was no room for collective emancipatory practices – on the importance of genuine knowledge and of

“education toward critical self-reflection”, in order to resist the social regression from democracy and the “recurrence” of mass violence and genocide.⁴⁶

4. Vulnerable democracies?

How does Adorno apply the reflections outlined above to a more concrete, socio-psychological analysis of current democracies? “The meaning of working through the past” might help answer this question.⁴⁷ In this text, Adorno expresses his concern about the dangers of a possible relapse into authoritarian regimes, even when democracy seemed well rooted in Western societies and accompanied by an incredible growth in comfort and wellbeing. By analysing how Germany was “working through the past” (in relation to its role in World War II and in the Holocaust), Adorno highlighted the socio-economic and psychological mechanisms that drove, in his view, the persistence of fascist tendencies not just *against*, but also *within* democracy.

Adorno begins by analysing the Germans’ sense of guilt for the genocide. He notes that people, instead of truly re-elaborating what happened, for example by taking seriously the past and removing – through criticism – the taboos that made it happen in the first place, often attempt to get rid of the past by erasing its memory. In fact, instead of experiencing present and past reality through genuine self-reflection, they seem to react neurotically when facing the burden of past events. Thus, they take “defensive postures” when they are “not attacked”, they feel “intense affects where they are hardly warranted by the situation”, or they show “an absence of affect in the face of the gravest matters, not seldom simply a repression of what is known or half-known”.⁴⁸

These well-known neurotic mechanisms of reaction to guilt are not, however, the most interesting part of Adorno’s analysis. Adorno here applies to his country the hypothesis that he elaborates at a far more abstract level in his main theoretical works, which focus on how to connect the psychological mechanisms that reify experience to “society in general”, that is, to the social,

economic and political conditions that may lead to violence and regression into authoritarian regimes. In other words, Adorno sheds light on the connection between the psychopathology of the individual, (the social conditions of) authoritarianism and the fate of democracy.

The overall framework within which Adorno develops his thought is the discrepancy – which manifests itself as a contradiction within individual consciousness – between the individual who understands her/himself as a political subject (as opposite to a mere “object” of society), participating in democratic processes and therefore actively deciding, and freely defining society, on the one hand; and the limits that the social, economic and political context objectively imposes on democratic self-determination, on the other.⁴⁹ The dangers of a regression into violence hide behind this contradiction.

In the previous section, I have underlined the fact that Adorno and Horkheimer are interested not just in understanding anti-Semitism, but mostly in the political exploitation of this phenomenon. Why, and in what conditions, are subjects (more) easily manipulated? To explain this, Adorno uses the concept of “authoritarian personality”. Authoritarian personalities cannot be reduced to a specific political ideology. On the contrary, what defines them is a certain weakness of the ego, which manifests itself as rigidity, conformism, lack of self-reflection, and the “overall” limited capacity to play in an authentic way and to genuinely experience reality, which I have analysed earlier on.⁵⁰ Therefore, authoritarian personalities are inclined to identify themselves with “real-existing power” *regardless of its nature and contents*. Dispossessed of the possibility to make a difference by participating – substantially, and not only formally – in democratic processes, they end up looking for compensation within groups or collectives that are able to substitute the recognition they lack, and which are exposed to political exploitation.⁵¹

From this perspective, a fragile democracy is one that struggles to promote substantial and real (i.e. not merely formal) autonomy. Under these conditions, a weak ego – less and less able to fulfil

its function of mediating the interaction between inner and outer reality, which is the ground for genuine, non-reified experience – undergoes a narcissistic regression. Regression happens because the subject, for objective reasons, no longer manages to fulfil the aims of autonomy and self-determination posed by its Superego. Since the Ego cannot positively satisfy the demands of its own ideal, the narcissistic libido may overflow onto the object (e.g. a charismatic, authoritarian leader). The object becomes the new ideal, thus making possible the previously unsatisfied, narcissistic gratification, though in a regressive way.⁵² Authoritarian groups exploit narcissism, or better, they exploit the wounded narcissism of subjects to whom society made many promises, in terms of autonomy, happiness and self-determination, but without being able to keep that promise. These groups are able to create a sense of community that illusively heals the subjects' wounded narcissism by making them feel empowered, recognised, important and not alone.

For Adorno, the fall of the fascist regime in Germany, despite post-war economic growth and increased prosperity, was not followed by a real and complete healing of wounded narcissism, nor did the country overcome the objective conditions determining this (wounded) narcissism. Fascist regimes exacerbate narcissism (identification with the collective). But the concept of (wounded) narcissism is also useful for democracies, both in Germany and beyond, for “the individual’s narcissistic instinctual drives, which are promised less and less satisfaction by a callous world”, will “persist undiminished as long as civilization denies them so much”, therefore leaving space for political exploitation.⁵³ Inasmuch as democracies are unable to foster real autonomy and self-realisation, whose accomplishment presupposes, first and foremost, *material* prosperity for all, there is always the risk that their failure to guarantee real autonomy and self-realisation is exploited politically; this usually happens when – especially in a situation of economic, social and political crisis, in which all points of references are lost – charismatic political actors succeed in exacerbating collective narcissism. At the same time, they channel collective anxieties towards their

own interests, namely by identifying an internal and/or external enemy that then catalyses paranoid projections.⁵⁴

Clearly, the social and psychological conditions of post-war democracies represent an improvement, and today “democracy with all it implies has a more profound hold on people than it did during the Weimar period”.⁵⁵ However, “precisely because famine continues to reign across entire continents when technically it could be eliminated”, even today, “no one can really be so delighted at his prosperity”. Adorno argues that the “hatred of comfort” of those who cannot achieve it, and the “discomfort at prosperity” of those who can afford it, are tied together, but one should not seek the causes of this discomfort in the “complex of guilt” alone. The discomfort at prosperity, and the “malaise” it engenders, also emerges from the awareness that “prosperity is due to an economic upswing”, while no one believes in “its unlimited duration”:

Even in the midst of prosperity, even during the temporary labor shortage, the majority of people probably feel secretly that they are potentially unemployed, recipients of charity, and hence really objects, not subjects, of society: this is the fully legitimate and reasonable cause of their discomfort. It is obvious that at any given moment this discomfort can be dammed up, channeled toward the past, and manipulated in order to provoke a renewal of the disaster.⁵⁶

Insofar as discomfort is not related to feelings of guilt, Adorno’s argument may well be applied, once again, beyond post-war Germany. This is all the more possible within a context where neoliberal policies have increased people’s sense of precariousness and widened social inequality, both in democracies and globally. The sense of anxiety about a precarious and uncertain existence, about the concrete possibility of depending on the mercy of events, about becoming unemployed again or – when all goes well – falling back on social benefits, thus becoming an “object, not subject, of society”, further increases in a historical period when post-war economic growth seems behind us. By weakening the self-reflected interaction between projection and perception of reality, and the rich and non-reified experience of reality that may form a defence against violence, the

exploitation of “the individual’s narcissistic instinctual drives” and the anxiety fostered by precariousness and uncertainty constitute the psychological background to which violence is more likely to develop.

For Adorno, it is mostly “the economic order, and to a great extent also the economic organization modelled upon it”, that still keeps the possibility of a regression open. It does so by increasing inequality and by pushing individuals to adapt to (and depend on) objective conditions on which they have little to no say. The opposition between autonomy and the “potential happiness that democracy promises”, and the necessity to renounce this autonomy because of the aforementioned politico-economic conditions, “creates the potential for totalitarianism”. Since we are not able to fully obtain what is promised by its concept, “people remain indifferent to democracy, if they do not in fact secretly detest it”.⁵⁷ Caught in this contradiction, people run the risk of experiencing the democratic political organisation as inadequate to “the societal and economic reality”: if individuals must adapt to social and economic conditions that hinder a substantial realisation of democracy, why shouldn’t they also adapt “the forms of collective life” and their political organisation? This is “all the more so since one expects from such adaptation” the efficiency of the “state as a gigantic business enterprise”.⁵⁸

From the above analysis it emerges that the risk of democracies falling back into violence remains high, as long as the economic and geopolitical conditions that generate inequality – both within democracies and globally – are still in place. At the same time, for Adorno, it is always possible to concretely fight off regressions without waiting for the radical transformation of society that was needed – in his view – to fully realise democracy. His theory allows us to identify what is indeed a narrow leeway between the overall context of domination, on the one hand, and the ways in which violence may be enacted (or resisted), on the other.

The absence of a theory of social action capable of showing how subjects can activate the self-reflected cooperative praxis needed to remove the *objective* (i.e. economic, and primarily material) causes of vulnerability, as well as the absence of a theory able to articulate “normative ‘universals’ that are not abstract”, is certainly problematic. More therefore needs to be done in this regard, if one wants “to do justice to the insights in Adorno’s social philosophy”.⁵⁹ However, absence does not mean that Adorno was unaware of the centrality of democratic institutions in the attempt to avoid regressions. From Adorno’s perspective, democratic institutions are “dams”, “erected against” regression into violence.⁶⁰ Let us not forget that the dialectical course of the West is *potentially* fascist. In other words, domination creates *the conditions* (i.e. repressed mimesis and wounded narcissism, anxiety, empty play and reified experience) that facilitate manipulation by authoritarian politics. However, the “actualization” of violence through effective political exploitation is not determined in advance.⁶¹ It is within this narrow leeway between persistent domination and the possibility to avoid relapse into violence, by reinforcing democratic institutions, that the “political” and “educational” Adorno finds his place.⁶² In recent years, secondary literature has started paying more attention to this side of Adorno.⁶³

5. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, I have developed the figure below, drawing on “The meaning of working through the past”. It contains the elements that constitute fertile ground for violent ideologies taking root in society and for political exploitation – not only of anti-Semitism but also, more generally, of racism and hatred of the other – the psychological ground of which I have examined in section 3. Although Adorno does not offer any easy solution to avoid regressions into violence, he does not leave us with any *absolute* immobility or *thorough* pessimism. Key, in this respect, are two themes, both connected to the idea of *Aufklärung*: first, identification and critical analysis of the mechanisms

through which politics exploits the social and psychological conditions of reified experience; second, education and “democratic pedagogy”, considered as the elements that – besides critical theory and art works – are meant to foster development of a non-reified experience of reality. By entailing the positive forms of mimetic play that nourish self-reflection and critical thinking, genuine experience of reality is the basis for the possibility of reinforcing democratic institutions and of actively resisting the development of authoritarian regimes. However, even if – within the overall process of domination – it can make a difference to reinforce these institutions, without fully developing the autonomy and self-realisation promised by democracy and the material prosperity for everybody that forms the basis to foster such development, democracy – from an Adornian perspective – will remain fragile.

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¹ Of all concepts developed by Adorno, that of mimesis is open to a variety of interpretations. I will approach it mainly through the lens of classical psychoanalysis. For recent examples of different viewpoints, and outside the sphere of art, see Hulatt, “The Place of Mimesis” for a presentation of mimesis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; and Noppen, “Adorno on Mimetic Rationality” for an analysis of mimesis as connected to – or ‘melted’ with – rationality, and of its relation to knowledge and the formation of the self. See also Fruechtel, *Mimesis*.

² I will focus on Adorno’s explanations of anti-Semitism only insofar as they are related to his concept of mimesis. For a recent, more systematic analysis of anti-Semitism, in Adorno and – more broadly – in the Frankfurt school, see Jakob, *Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives*; “Frankfurt School and Antisemitism”; and Rensman, *The Politics of Unreason*.

³ Green, *Propédeutique*, 7-8. My translation.

⁴ See Haber, *Freud et la théorie sociale*.

⁵ On this last point, let me also refer to the comprehensive work of Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*.

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the concept of mimesis, see Gebauer and Christoph, *Mimesis*.

⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 148-149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; and *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*.

¹⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45. My translation. The original version can be found in Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 51.

¹⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, aphorism 79, 122.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, aphorism 82, 126-128.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, aphorism 82, 126-127. (My Italics)

²⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 40.

²¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, aphorism 82, 126-128.

²² Honneth, *Reification*, 57, 62-63.

²³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, aphorism 146, 227-228.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, aphorism 82, 126-128.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, aphorism 150, 135-138; and Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 137-172.

²⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, aphorism 106, 166-167.

²⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 162.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 202-204; and *Aesthetic Theory*, 50.

²⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 141, 147-153.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

³² *Ibid.*, 148-149.

³³ For clarification, the “bodily adaptation to nature”, or the “mimetic behavior proper” of the origin of civilisation, is both unmediated (e.g. it is not mediated by the symbolism of the magic ritual) and immediate, in that it is the sudden “rigidity of the skin, muscles, and limbs” (p. 148) when facing a danger. However, the mimetic behaviour we see in anti-Semitism, which reminds us of this blind and uncontrolled behaviour at the outset, is indeed immediate, but not properly speaking unmediated, since it is mediated by the entire course of domination.

³⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 149-150.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁰ Jacobs, “Frankfurt School and Antisemitism”.

⁴¹ See Rensman, *The Politics of Unreason*, 312; Adorno “Education after Auschwitz”, 193; Freyenhagen, “Adorno and Horkheimer on anti-Semitism”; and Jacobs, “Frankfurt School and Antisemitism”, 189. For an opposite viewpoint, see Rabinbach, “Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?”, 62, among others.

⁴² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 155.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁶ Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz”, 193-194.

⁴⁷ Adorno, “Working through the past”, 89-103.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 94; and Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian personality*.

⁵¹ Adorno, “Working through the past”, 94.

⁵² Adorno, “Freudian theory”, 140-141; and Freud, *Group Psychology*.

⁵³ Adorno, “Working through the past”, 96.

⁵⁴ Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 10-51.

⁵⁵ Adorno, “Working through the past”, 99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98-99; and Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 141.

⁵⁸ Adorno, “Working through the past”, 99.

⁵⁹ Zuidervaart, “Ethical Turns”, 25, 38.

⁶⁰ Adorno, “Working through the past”, 99.

⁶¹ Rensman, *The Politics of Unreason*, 321-357.

⁶² See e.g. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz”.

⁶³ See e.g. Mariotti, “Adorno on the Radio”; and Volker, “Saying things that hurt”.

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