

Adorno: Philosophy of History

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The concept of history was developed in a great array of directions during the period of Modern German Philosophy. Ranging from macrostructural analyses of the evolution of civilizations to descriptions of the temporal social experience of the individual it was essentially a critical concept, one which would seek to expose the allegedly naïve idea of the fixed properties of culture and of the individuals who might live within them. Adorno belongs to this tradition of critical historical philosophy. His philosophy of history is strongly marked by various Hegelian, Marxian, Nietzschean and hermeneutical ideas. A preoccupation with the idea of history is evident from the very beginnings of Adorno's career. From his *Habilitationsschrift* (1931) right up to *Aesthetic Theory* (incomplete at the time of his death in 1969) the issue is never far from central. To deal comprehensively with the range of influences and the multiplicity of applications of the concept of history in Adorno's work would be co-extensive with a critical analysis of his *oeuvre*. What this chapter will restrict itself to is Adorno's engagements with what might be specifically regarded as 'theories of history.' The topics to be examined are Adorno's critique of (1) the idea of universal history and (2) of progress, (3) his dialectical reading of the idea of natural history, and (4) his assessment of role of the totality in the production of history.

1. Universal History

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The German Idealist philosophies of history were essentially philosophies of progress. Their theories rested heavily on the hypothesis of the existence of some collective phenomenon – the human species, civilization, or human spirit – which can be interpreted as undergoing improvement across time. This process of improvement can be explained through ‘universal history,’ a narrative which traverses and somehow unites all historical epochs. The language of maturity, of completion, of realization is central to this narrative.

The idealist theory of history might be quickly rejected on the basis of its naïve optimism and its metaphysical assumptions. Adorno recognizes the fundamental difficulties of the theory of universal history. Yet it is through critical engagement with this theory that Adorno’s distinctive articulation of the concepts of history and progress is achieved. As he programmatically announces: ‘If you wish to say anything at all about the theory of history in general, you must enter into a discussion of the construction of universal history’ (*HF*, 81).¹

It is important to be aware that Adorno’s conception of the challenge of universal history takes different forms in the course of his career. Aspects of the position set out in the 1930s were sometimes subsequently reshaped by a philosophically expressed sense of crisis caused by the historical experience of the Holocaust. Before the war Adorno’s approach to the concept of history might be construed as a radical hermeneutics, one which sets out to demonstrate the failure of the philosophical pretension to have achieved a totalistic grasp of the world. In a lecture of 1931 Adorno states: ‘Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the

¹ *HF* = Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Rodney Livingstone, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 81.

power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real.’² The position that begins to emerge from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* onwards (first edition in 1944) encompasses this view, but is not quite the same. It might be characterized as the effort to explore the destructive evolution of modernity with particular attention to the dynamics which reduce the possibilities of experience, a reduction which facilitated the perpetration of the Holocaust. Adorno and Horkheimer write: ‘we had set ourselves nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.’³ Positions developed before and after the war overlap at important points, however, leading to some tensions within Adorno’s theory of history which become particularly evident in his critique of the idea of universal history. The impact of this tension will become clear once Adorno’s fundamental commitments have been clarified.

At first sight Adorno’s position will seem straightforwardly declinist. Declinism supposes some satisfactory state of affairs which has come to be eroded by a clearly identifiable, irrevocable, and inevitable historical process. Adorno is ostensibly committed to such a view when, in *Negative Dialectics*, he writes: ‘No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the atom bomb’ (*ND*, 320).⁴ This is one of Adorno’s most quoted passages, but it requires cautious interpretation as by itself it appears to propose a one-dimensional trajectory of destruction in bald opposition to the narratives of progress embodied by the idealist notion of universal history.

² Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Benjamin Snow, ‘The Actuality of Philosophy,’ p. 24, in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000).

³ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, tr. John Cumming, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979), p. xi.

⁴ *ND*: Theodor W. Adorno, tr. E. B. Ashton, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973).

Although Adorno engages considerably with Kant's theory of history it is to Hegel's version of the notion of universal history that he gives greatest attention.⁵ The problems of Hegel's philosophy of history are well known: individual freedom is subordinated to the unfolding of *Geist* (spirit); the horrifying episodes of history are justified as contributions to the maturation of *Geist*; *Geist* is one of modern philosophy's outstandingly gratuitous metaphysical theses. Hegel's theory, troubling though it may be, is nevertheless a powerful effort to ground the belief that there is something distinctive and superior about the period of modernity, a period for which all previous history has been somehow preparatory. Adorno sees Hegel's position as 'seemingly absurd – masterfully absurd' (*HF*, 84). It is masterfully absurd in that it – like no other theory before or since – deals comprehensively with modernity's deepest assumption – the continuity of progress: universal history.

The very idea of universal history presupposes that time has a particular structure. Adorno with Horkheimer observes that the idea of universal history requires the foundation of a certain beginning – a certain point in the past – from which all subsequent events progressively follow. This is not simply a rational requirement of the theory, however. It is a thesis which enables authoritative claims about the shape of the present to be made: 'Through the establishment of a unique past, the cycle takes on the character of inevitability... makes the new appear as pre-determined.'⁶ The present is justified because it is inevitable, and its inevitability is explained through its emergence from a certain point in the past.

Adorno's reaction to this thesis is not simply to turn it on its head. He does not assert the discontinuity of historical facts nor the disconnectedness of historical events. As Simon Jarvis notes, Adorno 'is not satisfied with presentation of history as

⁵ See in particular *ND*, 300-360.

⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 27.

sheer discontinuity, as though there were no connection whatsoever between different “epochs.”⁷ The idea of history as essentially discontinuous, as an unstructured collection of disconnected events, is, in fact, the positivist view which Adorno dismisses on the grounds that this view would encourage us to endorse ‘pure facticity as the only thing to be known and therefore to be accepted’ (*ND*, 319-320). Again, Hegel’s ‘masterfully absurd’ system had brought the modernist notion of continuity to its fullest and most significant articulation. To reject it, as the positivist must, would be to reject without reflection a belief that has been part of modernity’s self-understanding.

Nevertheless, the idea of the continuity of history, as expressed by universal history, cannot be endorsed in that it cannot be articulated without doing violence to historical facts and thereby becoming a metaphysics detached from material reality. What Adorno proposes is to modify the thesis of continuity by placing it in dialectical tension with the notion of the discontinuity of history. Discontinuity is posited as a *feature* of history, not as the alternative theory of history. Discontinuity as the basic condition of history would preclude positivistically consciousness of the presence of patterns or forces of which historical actors are not always aware.

What the notion of ‘discontinuity’ is trying to capture is the idea that events and their actions are not intelligible simply as moments of time would be, that is as transition points in the space between past and future. Events possess a significance – a structure – that is not made intelligible by reading them as either as the explication or development of earlier events, or as embryonic versions of later ones: ‘History is not an equation, an analytic judgment. To think of it this way is to exclude from the

⁷ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 37.

very outset the possibility of anything qualitatively different.⁸ Adorno insists that there are – contrary to all the universal narratives – qualitative differences across history. It is in the 1932 essay on ‘natural history’ – an essay to which Adorno returns in the *Negative Dialectics* of 1966 – that Adorno sets out the framework within which his analysis is to take place: ‘history, as it lies before us, presents itself as thoroughly discontinuous, not only in that it contains disparate circumstances and facts, but also because it contains structural disparities.’⁹ These events are disruptive in that, we might say, they develop forms of life unique to themselves, not forms which are intelligible as incremental advances on their predecessors. This is the reality that prompts the hermeneutical task, or philosophy as interpretation.¹⁰ The example of democracy illuminates this difficulty. The Greeks are generally acknowledged as the progenitors of the institution of democracy. Yet their version is also recognized as being not only different from that of today but as containing elements quite anathema to our idea of democracy. In spite of that the two versions are lined up at various points in a continuum and the incommensurabilities that are evident are glossed over as something quite incidental. It is precisely this kind of thinking which the idea of universal history embodies. Adorno rejects it in the name of the disparities that cannot be dismissed as incidental. He writes with his early essay in mind: ‘The truth is that, while the traditional view inserts facts into the flow of time, they really possess a nucleus of time in themselves, they crystallize time in themselves. What we can legitimately call ideas is the nucleus of time within the individual crystallized phenomena, something that can only be decoded by interpretation. In accordance with

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Samuel and Shierry Weber, ‘Spengler after the Decline,’ p. 66, in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981).

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ‘The Idea of Natural History’, *Telos*, no. 60, (Summer 1984), p. 122.

¹⁰ This is the central contention of ‘The Actuality of Philosophy,’ in which the business of science is sharply distinguished from the practice of science.

this we might say that history is *discontinuous* in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted' (*HF*, 91).

We can see Adorno's substantiation of this idea of disruptive history in his discussion of aesthetic phenomena. Art, he argues, is a constitutively historical phenomenon, not the material manifestation of atemporal aesthetic norms. Endorsing the Hegelian precept he writes that the 'vision of the possible death of art accords with the fact that art is a product of history.'¹¹ This historical substance of art is embraced in authentic art: 'authentic works are those that surrender themselves to the historical substance of their age without reservation.'¹² In this way, however, they are disruptive phenomena in that they are 'crystallized phenomena,' nuclei of time. This is the point at issue in Adorno's claim that 'history is not external to the work.'¹³ The intrinsic historicity of the work, however, renders aesthetic experience problematic if the experience is not contemporaneous with the production of the artwork: 'Artworks may be all the more truly experienced the more their historical substance is that of the one who experiences it.'¹⁴

As mentioned, Adorno does not intend to replace the notion of universal history with that of discontinuity. He writes 'discontinuity and universal history must be conceived together' (*ND*, 319). What emerges from this synthetic thought is the idea of history 'perennially disrupted.' The continuity of the historical process is

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p. 3.

¹² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 182.

¹³ Quoted by Susan Buck-Morss in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977), p. 43.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 183. Interpretation in this way needs to be more than the hermeneutic treatment of historical experience. Adorno writes against Dilthey that he 'did not engage facticity with sufficient seriousness; he remained in the sphere of intellectual history and in the fashion of vague categories of styles of thought entirely failed to grasp material reality.' Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History,' p. 122.

explicable only as a series of disruptions. It is this that Adorno seems to mean when he proposes that '[h]istory is the unity of continuity and discontinuity' (*ND*, 320).¹⁵

We must ask, though, what the unifying dimension could be. It cannot, after all, be adequate to say that what unifies history is that it has no unity. What Adorno in fact suggests is that 'the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history' is 'the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men's inner nature' (*ND*, 320). In so far as this is Adorno's position it is not unproblematic for the obvious reason that a narrative of the continuing control of nature is not discontinuous at all: the periods of 'crystallized time' (which we saw in Adorno's hermeneutic mood) turn out to be commensurable in so far as they share the dimension of domination. Ultimately Adorno's articulation of a dialectical structure of history, in which continuity and discontinuity are straining at each other, seems to favour a narrative which – in terms of the specifics of history at which it points – has a clear trajectory. Adorno's radical hermeneutics collides with a critical theory driven by the question of barbarism. It is the latter that is pre-eminent but this pre-eminence deprives Adorno of the space in which to position a unity of continuity and discontinuity. Although Adorno is theoretically committed to the discontinuous dimensions – the 'crystallized phenomena' – he assumes in practice the intelligibility of historical events through the perspective of the destruction of nature, and that reopens the possibility that he is engaged in a declinist universal history.

A possible defence might be garnered from one of Adorno's thoughts in *Minima Moralia*. There he writes: 'If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the

¹⁵ Mauro Bozzetti suggests that the opposition of continuity and discontinuity entails that 'history must be thought simultaneously as progress and regress, viewed as humanity and barbarism.' Mauro Bozzetti, *Hegel und Adorno: Die Kritische Funktion des philosophischen Systems* (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 1996), p. 208.

vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic.’¹⁶ This allusive passage refers to the continuity of domination (‘the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat’) whilst also encompassing the sense of discontinuity (‘the waste products and blind spots,’ the non-identical elements that cannot be encompassed within the grand narrative¹⁷). Also significant perhaps is Adorno’s view of Spengler’s declinism. He dismisses its inevitabilist mechanisms of ‘plant-like growth and cultural decay’¹⁸ and criticizes Spengler’s commitment to an ineluctable history of domination: ‘His entire image of history is measured by the ideal of domination. His affinity for this ideal gives him profound insight whenever it is a question of the possibilities of domination and blinds him with hatred as soon as he is confronted by impulses which go beyond all previous history as the history of domination.’¹⁹ Within the history of domination – the continuous – there are moments which do not conform to the narrative, moments which in the end require the sort of historical interpretation informed by Adorno’s hermeneutical background. Nevertheless the very status of the discontinuous – as that which is non-identical with the narrative of universal history – subordinates its fundamental meaning to that of continuity.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Edmund Jephcott, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: NLB, 1974), § 98, p. 151.

¹⁷ Apropos: ‘The materialistic turnabout in dialectic cast the weightiest accent on insight into the discontinuity of what is not comfortingly held together by any unity of [the Hegelian notion of] spirit and concept’ (*ND*, 319).

¹⁸ Adorno, ‘Spengler after the Decline,’ p. 54.

¹⁹ Adorno, ‘Spengler after the Decline,’ p. 61.

2. Progress

The claims of progress are criticized in Adorno's philosophy by means of the thesis of discontinuity. The disruptive phases of history deny the possibility of modernity's narrative of its own continuing improvement. Importantly, though, critical theory must retain, in some form, the very idea of progress. Through its critique of society critical theory understands itself to be contributing to a process of amelioration in which, for instance, reification might end. As a process the possibility of this critically induced progress cannot be explained by modifying the modernist teleology, that is, by disputing (against, say, some neo-Hegelian) the rightness of the present and pushing the *telos*, or goal of history, on to some further point in an indefinite future. Such a modification would be, in essence, an elongation of the universal history narrative. A new framework in which the concept of progress can be articulated needs to be developed.

Adorno's idea of what needs to be considered in the development of this framework is strongly coloured by the influence of Walter Benjamin. It is Benjamin who pushes Adorno into a deeper appreciation of what is entailed in conventional presuppositions about the nature of history, presuppositions which lend themselves to the progress thesis. Benjamin's thirteenth thesis on the philosophy of history states: 'Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, has been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these predicates is controversial and open to

criticism.²⁰ What Benjamin here furnishes Adorno with is the basis for reflections on the location of progress or on the relationship of progress to time. Adorno sees the concept of progress as faced by a dilemma: (a) progress cannot stand outside time, as something to be achieved only when history is somehow overcome,²¹ yet (b) to articulate progress within history is to assume the progressive trajectory of universal history, a trajectory which sees progress as constantly transcending itself. As Adorno writes: ‘If progress is equated with redemption as transcendental intervention per se, then it forfeits, along with the temporal dimension, its intelligible meaning and evaporates into historical theology. But if progress is mediated into history, then the idolization of history threatens and along with it... the absurdity that it is progress itself that inhibits progress’ (*P*, 147).²² The very possibility of progress must be set within temporality, yet not within the narrative of universal history.²³ It requires a transformation of experience not a messianic transformation of time.

Adorno’s proposal for a way beyond this dilemma is what we might term a negativistic theory of progress. He states it in the specific concrete terms ‘of whether humanity is capable of preventing catastrophe’ (*P*, 144). He comments: ‘I believe that you should start by taking progress to mean this very simple thing: that it would be better if people had no cause to fear: if there were no impending catastrophe on the horizon... For progress today really does mean simply the prevention and avoidance of total catastrophe’ (*HF*, 143). This is the catastrophe brought about by allegedly

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, tr. Harry Zohn, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” pp. 262-263, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1973).

²¹ This is a very fundamental commitment which might be set against those readings of Adorno that align him with theological or messianic readings of history. As an instance of this see Rolf Wiggershaus, *Theodor W. Adorno* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987), pp. 31-32.

²² *P* = Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Henry W. Pickford, ‘Progress,’ in *Critical Model: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²³ Adorno’s criticism of Kierkegaard’s notion of the ‘leap of faith’ takes this same form, arguing that the leap represents an abandonment of the historical moment: ‘Precisely as the “leap,” however, the appearance of the first is abstractly set apart from historical continuity; it becomes a mere means for the inauguration of a new sphere.’ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 34.

progressive social integration achieved through the technologization of the lifeworld. For Adorno the results of this integration are exemplified in the administered murder of the millions during the Holocaust: ‘Genocide is the absolute integration’ (*ND*, 362). The question of the possibility of progress is set within history, yet it is not committed to a narrative of increasing improvement or progressions. It is negativistic in the sense that progress is intelligible only in so far as it is the prevention of catastrophe.

Adorno argues that a fundamental assumption needs to be abandoned if this alternative conception of progress is to be achieved. This is the assumption – as we saw above – identified by Benjamin: ‘Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself.’ This conventional assumption is, as Benjamin says, open to criticism, but it is Adorno who develops the criticism. He writes: ‘no progress is to be assumed that would imply that humanity in general already existed and therefore could progress. Rather progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place... the concept of universal history cannot be saved; it is plausible only so long as one can believe in the illusion of an already existing humanity, coherent in itself and moving upward as a unity’ (*P*, 145). What Adorno is contending is that the notion of progress has supposed that there is a point from which progress can proceed. But he argues that we are not yet in some historical continuum in which we can say that such progress is plausible. It is this thought that gives rise to the negativistic idea, in Adorno, that the process in which progress might take place has yet to begin (through avoidance of the threat generated by history). Progress is therefore not continuity, but a negation of the conditions of prior history: progress is ‘resistance to the perceptual danger of relapse’ (*P*, 160). It is on this basis that Adorno understands progress to contain the ‘aspect of redemption’ (*P*, 148), albeit in a non-theological sense for the reason we have seen above.

It is in this way that the dilemma of progress is addressed. Progress is neither a detemporalizing act, since it is intelligible precisely as a response to historical experience, but nor is it not simply part of the historical continuum in that it represents a disruption of that process. The way out of this dilemma requires that we break what Adorno terms the ‘magic spell’ of progress, the belief of modernity that every new institution, for instance, is an incremental improvement on its predecessor (*P*, 150). The catastrophe threatens for so long as we fail to realize that ‘the spell’ assures us that progress will prevail. As we saw Benjamin state, we must criticize the idea that progress is ‘irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course.’ Such a view is the spell, which Adorno dialectically rejects in the very name of progress: ‘it could be said that progress occurs where it ends’ (*P*, 150).

3. Natural History

Adorno’s idea of natural history is a critical concept. It specifically brings into question the dualistic division of realms of human experience into the natural and historical. Adorno sets out to dissolve this dualism by showing that what is identified as natural bears historical dimensions, whilst what seems to be historical has natural foundations.

Adorno describes his critical approach as follows: ‘I think that the attempt should be made to behold all nature, and whatever regards itself as nature, as history’ (*HF*, 124). What this involves is analysis of the concept of the natural, one which Adorno likens to ‘the concept of myth.’²⁴ Mythic experience is that of forces that both transcend human beings and cannot be altered by them. However, myths are, of course, the products of human culture. The notion of the dissolution of the mythic – of

²⁴ Adorno, ‘The Idea of Natural History,’ p. 111.

the natural into the historical – is one of the fundamental tasks of the ‘consciousness raising’ programme of Adorno’s critical theory. Typical of this programme is the following remark: ‘The mythic scientific respect of the peoples of the earth for the status quo, that they themselves unceasingly produce, itself finally becomes positive fact.’²⁵

This is no value free account of the how the social world evolves, of how the concept of nature can be shown to have been produced by our social practices.²⁶ The historical processes in which our concepts of nature has been produced are those in which we have come to appropriate it and for Adorno these appropriations are destructive. The history of this process of appropriation begins with the efforts of human beings to free themselves from nature, ‘that mere state of nature from which it had estranged itself with so huge an effort.’²⁷ This is, in fact, the primal history of subjectivity, the history of the emergence of subjectivity. (This primal history has been heavily criticized for, amongst other things, its tendency to eternalize a particular version of subjectivity and for its apparent over-reach.²⁸) However, this emergence is a ‘two sided process’ which also takes the path of the domination of nature.²⁹ Günter Rohrmoser puts it as follows: ‘Man cannot free himself from the natural state without overcoming nature and thereby mastering it.’³⁰ Adorno describes this as a ‘reductio ad

²⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 41.

²⁶ One of Adorno’s cue notes to himself for the lecture series *Freedom and History* states: ‘Laws of Nature not to be taken literally, not to be ontologized. In other words, the laws of nature capable of being abrogated’ (*HF*, 115).

²⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 31.

²⁸ See Jürgen Habermas, tr. Thomas McCarthy, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 380 and Hauke Brunkhorst, *Adorno and Critical Theory* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 73.

²⁹ ‘The substance of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s thesis is that the process of civilization is already marked from its origins, by a fatal dialectic, because the emancipation of men from scarcity, from subjugation to natural powers and to their own natural appetites, is achieved through a two sided process, which on one side is liberation and the triumph of autonomy, and on the other is inextricably tied to domination and repression.’ Stefano Petrucciani, *Introduzione a Adorno* (Rome: Editori Laterza, 2007), p. 53.

³⁰ Günter Rohrmoser, *Das Elend der kritischen Theorie* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Rombach, 1970) p. 14.

hominem,³¹ a process of manipulation in which nature is unconsciously defined by the needs of human beings. Adorno and Horkheimer write: ‘What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men.’³² What is not understood here, though, is the degree to which we have appropriated nature. There is no consciousness of the fact that our concept of nature as something other than us is a product of our historical efforts to emerge from it. Instead we persist with the ‘mythic’ image of nature as something simply there without history.

Adorno tries to show that just as nature has a history, history too has its relation to nature. This side of the dialectical conception of natural history criticizes the hypostatization of human history and human accomplishment. The Enlightenment philosophical claim – made most powerfully by Kant – of the achievement of reason misconstrues reason as something above nature. Adorno argues that it is, in fact, a piece of natural history. In this regard he discusses the idea of transcendental thought – the idea that there are certain atemporal conditions of experience – and rereads them as a means by which the natural business of self-preservation is conducted: ‘The definition of the transcendental as that which is necessary, a definition added to functionality and generality, expresses the principle of the self-preservation of the species. It provides a legal basis for abstraction, which we cannot do without, for abstraction is the medium of self-preserving reason’ (*ND*, 179). As the philosophical expression of a mode of self-preservation it must be traced back to a natural drive. In

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, ‘Introduction to the *Positivist Dispute*,’ p. 6, in Theodor W. Adorno et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

³² Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 4. As Alison Stone points out, ‘Adorno asserts that nature is historical, but in a distinctive way. The history that shapes natural things, for Adorno, is the history of human efforts to dominate them, to mould them to human purposes in a way that negates their spontaneous modes of being.’ Alison Stone, ‘Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature,’ *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 32 (2006), p. 242.

this way, as Deborah Cook writes, ‘the historical course of reason must be charted with reference to its relationship to the embodied subject and its drives.’³³

Adorno’s dissolution of the dualism of nature and history applies with particular political intent to what, following the usage of Lukács, he calls second nature, ‘this world of things created by man, yet lost to him, the world of convention.’³⁴ Adorno’s work contains numerous efforts at revealing the historical aspects in ‘the semblance of the natural’ (*HF*, 121). Most centrally the idea that capitalism represents a natural form of social organization is exposed as ideology. Indeed one might think of Adorno’s *Ideologiekritik* as the critical investigation and exposure of ‘second nature.’ The narratives of universal history are also to be criticized as narratives of ‘second nature.’ Following the same thought Adorno alleges that Hegel’s concept of ‘world-spirit’ ‘is the ideology of natural history’ (*ND*, 365) in that it represents the process of domination as a dimension of the inevitable unfolding of world history. The philosophical dynamic which would ontologize realms of experience – render them beyond the reach of alterability and human history – is also an instance of the creation of this second nature. In this regard Adorno instances the mathematical method of modern philosophy which, he claims, ‘transforms logic by magic into a second nature and lends it the aura of ideal being.’³⁵

In a number of discussions of the idea of natural history Adorno gives his position greater sharpness through opposition to Heidegger whose fundamental ontology provides an alternative account of the relationship between history and nature. According to Adorno, Heidegger’s idea of historical experience – which

³³ Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas and the Search for a Rational Society* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 91.

³⁴ Adorno, ‘The Idea of Natural History,’ p. 117.

³⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Willis Domingo, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 65. In this book Adorno offers a critique of Husserl’s ‘logical absolutism,’ in which he endeavours to show that far from being ‘absolute’ logic gains its validity through its function in the task of self-preservation and socialization.

Adorno describes as an ‘unhistorical concept of history’ (ND, 358) – fails to appreciate the entwinement of nature and history. This entwinement is a ‘painful antithesis’ (ND, 359) in so far as it is a story marked by the processes of domination. Adorno understands Heidegger’s idea of historicity – the idea of the historical experience of human beings – to be that history is a mode of human beings.³⁶ This, for Adorno, amounts to an ontologization of history, in that it is a ‘historicity abstracted from historic existence’ (ND, 358-9). In other words, it posits a capacity – a historical capacity – without realizing that historical experience is tied to the effort to emerge from the natural condition. In Heidegger’s notion of historicity what is emphasized is the ‘project’ of *Dasein*, thereby missing the antagonistic relationship between history and nature.

4. Totality

History takes a particular direction in the dynamics of what Adorno discusses under the idea of the social totality. He holds that the social totality determines the individual within it and increasingly brings all features of social life under these determinations. Because this relentless process of integration is incompatible with a critical consciousness it is threatening to lead us to catastrophe. At the same time, in a thinly hopeful possibility, only a collective subject would have the capacity to bring about resistance to the possibility of catastrophe.

Adorno’s idea of totality is a complex critical reconstruction of the Hegelian notion of *Geist*. In Hegel’s account of progress, as discussed above, the agency of history – and therefore the repository and agent of its progress and continuity – is *Geist*. In his materialist reconstruction of Hegel Adorno rereads the dynamic of *Geist*

³⁶ Adorno, ‘The Idea of Natural History,’ p. 114.

as the dynamic of the social totality: ‘The world spirit is; but it is not a spirit’ (*ND*, 304).³⁷ He offers a number of criticisms which try to show that the world spirit is, rather, a hypostasized historical-social process in which individual agency becomes subsumed in a self-reproducing totality. It is an understanding of this integrationist dynamic which forms a key part of Adorno’s philosophy of history.

Adorno’s thesis is that what makes society a totality – that is, a phenomenon over and above a collection of discreet facts about individuals and institutions – is that its cohesiveness is generated by a particular system of economic activity. This system, according to Adorno, comes ever more to determine all phenomena which appear within society. He writes: ‘What really makes society a social entity, what constitutes it both conceptually and in reality, is the relationship of exchange which binds together virtually all the people participating in this kind of society.’³⁸ This binding is not, as the naïve view might see it, the necessity of commerce, one which in its present form innocently involves fiscal exchange. Rather, the very activity of fiscal exchange determines our fundamental sense of our social reality. It gives expression to and consolidates a principle of modern rationality, the principle of equivalence. What equivalence means in this context is that any given phenomenon – an object, a product, a process – may be made relative to any other phenomenon by means of their supposed common translatability into fiscal value. As Adorno puts it: ‘Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities’ (*ND*, 7).

The rationality which is required for the effective operation of exchange is the prevailing social rationality. For Adorno the logic of exchange – a fundamental

³⁷ See Michael Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic and its Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of Adorno’s materialist transformation of Hegel.

³⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Edmund Jephcott, *Introduction to Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 31.

instrument of capitalism – informs the very processes of socialization.³⁹ Indeed Adorno claims that ‘the exchange process’ is ‘the underlying social fact through which socialization first comes about.’⁴⁰ Set against this background the idea that society is simply the sum total of the individuals who live within it is oblivious to the fact that the consciousnesses of individuals are shaped by forces in some way external to them, by ‘the totality which they form.’⁴¹ This totality is ultimately a coercive historical process in which individuality is integrated to the requirements of the totality. And Adorno identifies the prevalence of the exchange system as the ideational factor which stimulates this integration: ‘In the form of the exchange principle, the bourgeois *ratio* really approximated to the systems whatever it would make commensurable with itself, would identify with itself – and it did so with increasing, if potentially homicidal, success. Less and less was left outside’ (*ND*, 23, translation altered). This process of integration is what gives the history of the modern period – of the bourgeois age – its particular trajectory. The qualitatively different is brought ever closer through the increasing reach of the exchange system into all facets of life: ‘The exchange relationship largely endows the system with a mechanical character. It is objectively forced onto its elements, as implied by the concept of an organism – the model which resembles a celestial teleology through which each organ would receive its function in the whole and would derive its meaning from the latter. The context which perpetuates life simultaneously destroys it, and consequently already possesses in itself the lethal impulse towards which its dynamic is propelled.’⁴²

³⁹ Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 31.

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 31.

⁴¹ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Frederic Jameson, ‘Society,’ *Salmagundi*, vols. 10-11 (1969-1970), p. 145.

⁴² Adorno, ‘Introduction to the *Positivist Dispute*,’ pp. 37-8.

In dealing with Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View' Adorno argues that the notion of progress has been intelligible in modernity as the growing sense of totality: Kant's notion of progress is articulated as the increasing rational unity of humanity. Adorno claims, however, that the problem with this sense of totality as progress is that humanity is converted into a collective agent in pursuit of an ideal. This collectivization determines that history must pursue a particular path: 'But the dependence of progress on the totality comes back to bite progress' (*P*, 145). For Adorno, the integrationist dynamic of history, which understands progress as the development of the totality, is no progress at all: 'If humanity remains entrapped by the totality it itself fashions, then, as Kafka said, no progress has taken place at all, while mere totality nevertheless allows progress to be entertained in thought' (*P*, 145).

Adorno's way of describing the dynamic which is driven by the social totality can make it appear to be a metaphysical thesis after all, one which in the Hegelian manner posits a driving evolutionary process over and above human beings. However, the very enterprise of critical theory cannot allow the possibility of a historical process in which human beings are merely the material cause. Adorno acknowledges that human agency – albeit a distorted one in the current age – is operative in this process: 'Society is a total process in which human beings surrounded, guided, and formed by objectivity do, in turn, act back upon society,'⁴³ or 'Social totality does not lead a life of its own over and above that which it unites and of which it, in its turn, is composed. It produces and reproduces itself through its individual moments... System and individual entity are reciprocal and can only be apprehended in their

⁴³ Theodor W. Adorno, tr. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, 'On the Logic of the Social Sciences,' p. 119, in Adorno et al, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.

reciprocity.⁴⁴ The task of critical theory, of course, is to think through the conditions in which individuals might come to realize their capacity for agency, thereby reversing the destructive conditions of the totality, a phenomenon of second nature.

Adorno's critique of the social totality – his view that the totality encroaches and determines the course of life – might seem to amount to an argument in favour of the pre-eminence of the individual moment. However, the social totality – as we have just seen – also contains a commitment to the contributions that collective agents make to the reality in which they live. It is on this basis that Adorno can deny that he is a radical pluralist who would reject the totality in favour of free self-determining individuals. He notes: 'it would be simplistic if you were to assume that, in which I have called the historical process or the world spirit that gives shape to the totality and draws it into itself, it is the particular that is in the right... while the totality is in the wrong' (*HF*, 95). What Adorno proposes, somewhat tentatively and without systematic elaboration, is the possibility that collective action alone might be the agent of 'redemption.' The individual as part of a self-conscious totality – as opposed to the individualist who does not realize the foundational dimensions of her social determination – would be part of this agency: 'The forms of humanity's own global societal constitution threatens its life, if a self-conscious global subject does not develop and intervene' (*P*, 144).

What is at issue in the theory of progress is that progress – the step away from catastrophe – can only occur when a collective agency is achieved. In this way we see that the possibility of emancipation from the totality lies within the totality itself: the historical process of integration which provides a coercive totality might also provide

⁴⁴ Adorno, 'On the Logic of the Social Sciences,' p. 107.

the conditions for an agency adequate to the action required to resist the integrational historical process.

What Adorno posits here is consistent with his response to the dilemma of progress, the dilemma of the end of history or progress as the continuity of universal history. The achievement of ‘a self-conscious global subject’ might indeed be ‘the very establishment of humanity.’ Central to Adorno’s contribution to this achievement is a critique of the naturalistic pretensions of the totalizing process.