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Minima Pedagogica: Education, Thinking and Experience in Adorno

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This article attempts to think of thinking as the essence of critical education. While contemporary education tends to stress the conveying of knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the present-day information society, the present article turns to the work of Theodor W. Adorno to develop alternative thinking about education, thinking and the political significance of education for thinking.

Adorno touched upon educational questions throughout his writings, with growing interest in the last ten years of his life. Education, he argues following Kant, must enable students to think for themselves and to break free of the authority of teachers, parents and other adults. Nevertheless, in his discussions of education Adorno says little about the nature of thinking, and the secondary literature on his educational theory addresses this question only cursorily.

Important claims on the nature of thinking do appear elsewhere in Adorno's work. From his early writings up to Negative Dialectics, Adorno is preoccupied with thinking, sketching the outlines of critical-dialectical thought. Still, these reflections rarely touch upon educational questions, and the Adorno scholarship has yet to establish this link. Unlike studies which read Adorno's educational thought against the backdrop of the history of education and the German Bildung tradition, or in relation to art and aesthetics, the present article brings together Adorno's ideas on education and thinking in an attempt to contribute both to the Adorno scholarship and to the growing field of education for thinking.

INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to think of thinking as the essence of critical education. While contemporary education tends to stress the conveying of knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the present-day information society, the perspective offered here suggests that the core of educational practice should be the very activity of thinking. Scholarly work on education for thinking often emphasises critical thought and points to the contribution of such

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education to democratic citizenship (Kuhn, 2008; Lipman, 2003; McPeck, 1990; Rhoder and French, 2012; Siegel, 1988). However, this scholarship tends to view thinking in terms of formal logic or procedural rationality, reducing it to 'thinking skills', or techniques to be mastered and applied in the job market. It is therefore sociopolitically conservative. In what follows I turn to the work of Theodor W. Adorno to develop alternative thinking about education, thinking, and the political significance of education for thinking.

Adorno touched upon educational questions throughout his writings, with growing interest in the last ten years of his life (French and Thomas, 1999; Heins, 2012). He famously claimed that in the absence of a real possibility of changing 'objective' social conditions—capitalism and its attendant mechanisms of domination—emphasis must be laid on the 'subjective' conditions that produce violence and suffering, namely on personality structures and mindsets that may be ameliorated through education (Adorno, 2005d, p. 192). In 'Education for Maturity and Responsibility' (1999 [1969])—a radio talk recorded shortly before his untimely death—Adorno rests his educational approach on Kant's 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (2003) which equates enlightenment with maturity and independent thinking. Education, argues Adorno following Kant, must enable students to think for themselves and to break free of the authority of teachers, parents and other adults. Nevertheless, in his discussions of education Adorno says little about the *nature* of thinking, and the secondary literature on his educational theory addresses this question only cursorily (Gur-Ze'ev, 2010).

Important claims on the nature of thinking do appear elsewhere in Adorno's work. From his early writings up to *Negative Dialectics* (2003a [1966]), Adorno is preoccupied with thinking: he criticises prevalent ways of thinking, examines the relationships of thought to rationality and emotions, and sketches the outlines of critical-dialectical thought. Still, these reflections rarely touch upon educational questions, and the Adorno scholarship has yet to establish this link. Unlike studies which read Adorno's educational thought against the backdrop of the history of education and the German *Bildung* tradition (Pongratz, 2008; Thompson, 2006), or in relation to art and aesthetics (Kertz-Welzel, 2005; Papastephanou, 2006), the present article brings together Adorno's ideas on education and thinking in an attempt to contribute both to the Adorno scholarship and to the growing field of education for thinking.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The first section reflects on the importance of thinking for Adorno and his understanding of genuine thinking as a critical activity. The key for critical thinking, according to Adorno, is experience, namely openness on the part of the subject to the object's particularity. As Adorno views thinking as essentially confrontational and 'negative', the second section presents its relation to experience by contrasting it with another approach to education, thinking and experience—John Dewey's. Unlike the latter, for Adorno thinking of an object does not amount to subsuming it under general rules, but rather to experiencing it as 'non-identical', transcending all general categories. In the following

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two sections I argue that such thinking finds its proper place at school, and that its proper form is not public discussion but rather the writing of essays. I conclude by terming this type of education that is focused on thinking as action *minima pedagogica*.

THINKING AS ACTION

As the opening sentences of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2007 [1944]) make clear, the primary illness Adorno diagnoses in Western civilisation, in the Enlightenment in the historical sense, is domination (*Herrschaft*). Domination is not limited to the sphere of economics and relations of production, but penetrates all aspects of psychic and social life. As already understood by Marx, consciousness too is shaped by relations of domination, and plays an active part in reproducing them. But unlike orthodox Marxism, Adorno does not think that the relationship between domination and consciousness is limited to ideology in the simple sense of explicit and implicit beliefs (knowledge and prejudice, respectively). Following György Lukács (1972), he claims it influences the very way consciousness works, namely the forms and structures thinking assumes.

The heart of the matter is the concept of reason. Reason, which is originally and essentially a means of self-preservation (Adorno, 2005f, p. 272), has been of crucial importance in protecting human beings against nature and prolonging their lives, but has become, through the process of enlightenment, an instrument through which the rational subject dominates not only the objective world but also other subjects, as well as oneself (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2007). Instead of reflecting on the values and meanings of human existence—what Max Horkheimer (2004) called 'objective reason' —reason reduces itself to finding efficient means to given ends; given, that is, by existing society. Aimed only at future benefits, such reason ignores the unique qualities of every object and is reduced to what Adorno calls 'identification', namely recognition of what is similar in different things in order to subsume them under the same concept (2003a, p. 5). Identity thinking, which is tightly connected to the social structure dominated by the principle of exchange which quantifies and equalises all values, is therefore inherently blind to un-exchangeable particularity.

For Adorno, however, identification is not thinking at all: unlike Descartes (2008), who took everything that occurs in the mind to be a kind of thought, for Adorno mental processes which accept reality as given and proceed only along rigorous, predictable logical procedures, are not worthy of the title 'thinking': 'Those alone think who do not passively accept the already given' (Adorno, 2005f, p. 264). Hence positive science, which rests on unconditional acceptance of data and applying logical procedures of truth preservation, in fact turns thinking into an empty ritual, a mere sequence of actions, exempting those engaged in it from the trouble of thinking (2005b, p. 33).

Yet, although Adorno rejects thinking as taking place in an independent 'inner realm' (2005a, p. 15) detached from social reality, the possibility of

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thinking in a way that transcends the prevalent social logic is by no means eliminated by reality. Real, critical thinking, which recognises objects in their non-identical particularity, is always an open possibility. Such thinking is first and foremost negative, as it fractures 'the so-called train of thought that is unrefractedly expected from thinking' (2005c, p. 131), namely, rejects reality as it is and refuses to settle for preserving the 'truth' of its appearance. In this sense thinking is always also a form of challenging reality—a form of political resistance: 'Thinking is a doing, theory a form of praxis; already the ideology of the purity of thinking deceives about this. Thinking has a double character: it is immanently determined and rigorous, and yet an inalienably real mode of behavior in the midst of reality' (2005f, p. 261). Adorno, in other words, rejects the simplistic distinction between theory and praxis, between thought and action; thinking is for him not only a necessary condition for oppositional activity but also action in its own right: 'Whoever thinks, offers resistance' (2005f, p. 263).

The ultimate expression of critical, oppositional thought is of course philosophy. Not institutional philosophy, the two dominant trends of which—American positivism and European ontology—notwithstanding their fundamental differences, profoundly share the positioning of metaphysics as an enemy and the view of thought itself as 'a necessary evil' (2005a, pp. 8–9). Philosophy worthy of its name, which insists on actively thinking the non-identical, is 'the force of resistance inherent in each individual's own thought, a force that opposes the narrow-minded acquisition of factual knowledge, even in the so-called philosophical specialties' (2005b, p. 22). The rejection of mainstream institutional philosophy also means, therefore, that resistant thinking is by no means the exclusive business of professional philosophers, and its proper abode is not necessarily academia. Recognising no predetermined limits, philosophy may be practiced by the commonest people in the most ordinary places.

Can such thinking be practiced by children, however? And if so, can it find a place at school, the quintessential disciplinary site (Foucault, 1995) identified by Marxist tradition as an ideological state apparatus where obedience and conformism are inculcated (Althusser, 1971)? And can critical, autonomous thinking be at all taught? I suggest the answers that can be given to these questions through Adorno's thought are affirmative.

EDUCATION, THINKING AND EXPERIENCE

In his famous lecture 'Education after Auschwitz' (2005d [1966]), Adorno states that the only education that has any sense at all—that can follow the 'new categorical imperative' to prevent the recurrence of the horror embodied in the word Auschwitz—is education for autonomous thinking. Following Kant, he characterises such thinking as 'the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating' (2005d, p. 195). But contrary to appearance, autonomous thinking for Adorno is by no means introspective contemplation or what Hannah Arendt describes as temporary withdrawal from the world (1978, p. 47). Any attempt by the thinking subject to disengage from the object is not only impossible, but primarily a clear expression

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of bourgeois individualist ideology which rests on the assumption of an abstract, ahistorical subject. The real subject always exists in relation to the objective world, and self-reflective thought must 'surrender itself to the subject matter' (Adorno, 2005c, p. 129), and give precedence to the object before it dialectically returns to the subject. As Iain Macdonald (2011) explains, Adorno's concept of autonomous thinking differs from that of Kant in that it involves an intimate connection with things, live contact with their 'warmth'. For this reason, 'The key position of the subject in cognition is experience' (Adorno, 2005e, p. 254).

The relationship between thinking and experience, particularly in the educational context, has been put forward by Dewey, one of the founding fathers of the modern philosophy of education. Despite the obvious differences between the two philosophers, Dewey's views on education and thinking—which have laid the foundations for much of the contemporary discussion of the subject—share many concerns with Adorno and are therefore a proper background for addressing Adorno's views. In *Democracy and Education* (2004), Dewey presents the importance of thinking to education as a reaction to Plato's paradox of learning: As Socrates explains in Plato's 'Meno' (1997, p. 880), learning is impossible because if we know in advance what we are searching for, no learning can take place; and if we do not know what we are looking for we would not know that we have found it. According to Dewey, this paradox rests on the false assumption that there are only two possibilities—complete knowledge or complete ignorance—and views learning as an instantaneous transition from one to the other; while learning in fact requires a process of thinking which is a hypothetical journey in an unknown land, 'feeling one's way along provisionally' (Dewey, 2004, p. 161), as he puts it.

To find its way, according to Dewey, thought has to be attentive to its surroundings, to what lies outside: 'The material of thinking is not thoughts, but actions, facts, events, and the relations of things' (2004, p. 170). Thinking, therefore, is connected to experience both as sensation and as experimentation; it involves recognising the connection between the *active* element of experience (trying) and its *passive* element (undergoing), between what we do to things and what they do to us:

> Thinking [. . .] is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous. Their isolation, and consequently their purely arbitrary going together, is cancelled; a unified developing situation takes its place. The occurrence is now understood; it is explained; it is reasonable, as we say, that the thing should happen as it does (Dewey, 2004, p. 158).

In this way, thinking aims at finding new ways for coping with the problems encountered while experiencing the world. Education for thinking, therefore, cannot amount to one-way transference of 'thinking skills' from teacher to student, but must involve an encounter of the student with the world itself; an encounter in which she is encouraged to be attentive to

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connections between phenomena and look for creative ways of doing things with them, of using them to solve problems. As suggested by the title of Dewey's book, such education is democratic, but not in the direct, civic-political sense: It is democratic because it rejects the traditional hierarchy of knowledge and replaces it with independent student activity, in which the teacher is merely a partner: 'In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher' (p. 174). To be sure, the teacher is not superfluous in this process, as he has to create the conditions in which the student's surroundings appear to her as a challenging problem—not as a trivial hindrance or unsurpassable obstacle, but as a thought-provoking difficulty (pp. 167–171; 1997, pp. 51–60).

Yet Dewey's pragmatism, which values thinking according to its usefulness, leads in the final analysis to what Adorno sees as the logic of domination. Although Dewey does not reduce thinking to empty formal procedures and emphasises its creative aspects, the entire cognitive process is subordinated to practical outcomes and validated according to success and failure criteria. This opens the door to instrumental reason: to understanding the world in order to dominate it.

Hence, Dewey's pragmatism risks succumbing to the principle of identity. From Adorno's perspective, as Deweyan thinking consists of understanding the lawful connections between objects, it must perceive each object as a representative of a general category. It looks for similarities in an attempt to subsume them under conceptual categories, to be able to control them by formulating permanent connections. Hence, the experience presupposed by such thinking is also 'identical', in Adorno's terms—even though Dewey stresses the importance of the new and unexpected in experience, the aim of thinking is ultimately to eliminate this dimension, to assimilate the new in an 'experiential continuum' (1997, p. 33) where the future is in principle identical to the past and present. Even the experiencing subject, therefore, does not change significantly as a result of her experiences; she only 'grows' as she accumulates experiences (p. 36), becoming equipped with more experiential resources in the form of cognitive and conceptual means to deal with new experiences.[1]

For Adorno, on the other hand, identical experience, in which everything new becomes more of the same, reduced to utility and use value, is no experience at all. When contact with things is limited to operation alone, he writes, the result is 'the withering of experience' (2002, p. 40). Real experience involves encounters with the non-identical as such, with what transcends available concepts. To experience it, thinking must be engaged with 'the moment of the subject matter itself' (2005c, pp. 130–131) in a way that allows it to appear non-identical—a way that does not attempt to capture the object and exhaust it with pre-given concepts, but rather lets the object act upon the subject (Thompson, 2005, pp. 525–526). Thinking, therefore, plays a crucial role in allowing experience to take place: it does so by giving itself to the object and opening itself to its unique singularity, not by searching for its lawful causal relations with other objects: 'Thought acquires its depth from penetrating deeply into a matter, not from referring it back to something else' (Adorno, 2000, p. 99). Hence, real experience

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cannot be accumulated: Not only are past experiences inefficient means for dealing with new ones, they might even stand in their way, for thinking habits acquired through past experiences may blind one to the non-identical in the object and thereby thwart thinking.

SUBJECT, OBJECT AND SUBJECT MATTER

Most subject-object encounters cannot but obey the logic of identity and domination. In everyday life people must attain various goals, and the things around them are inevitably means to given ends. Giving precedence to the object over the subject's needs requires a certain suspension of the everyday world and its practical demands; thinking requires its time and space. School is the ultimate site which can provide such time and space—it takes children away from family and society and offers them a place where the demands of the outside world are suspended, rendered inoperative (Masschelein and Simons, 2013). Adorno's view of thinking and experience can therefore be understood as a call to turn schools from sites in which knowledge of the world is treated as possession and investment—what he called 'semi-education' (*Halbbildung*) (2003b)—into ones in which the world is an object of thinking.

For school education to provoke thinking it must not put the student—and certainly not the teacher—in the centre. Centre stage must be given to the object of experience, to subject-matter over the subject-student and the subject-teacher. That is to say, the subject-matter on the table at school is there not only as an object of knowledge to be transferred from teacher to student, but rather as a kind of subject in its own right—the object, so to speak, is invited to speak and act, while the subject (student) is required to listen and attend. To be sure, the material to be studied needs not be material in the simple, physical sense, and the sensory aspect of experiencing it may be minimal. The nature of the object is unimportant, since every subject-matter can provoke thinking—philosophical text or historical document, mathematical formulae or physical phenomena, diesel engine or woodwork. Every lesson on every subject is an opportunity for thinking, for critical, philosophical reflection on what it offers for study (2005b, p. 21) —all that is needed is the time and space to take the subject matter as an object of thought rather than knowledge. The teacher, of course, cannot teach students to think the way he teaches knowledge, but he can certainly provide them with the *conditions* for thinking, primarily time and space.

Moreover, for Adorno thinking of the subject matter cannot abide peacefully with knowledge, as a complementary or parallel process. Critical thinking is not reflection on the knowledge of the object, but on the object itself; it seeks the truth of the object, which contradicts accepted knowledge: 'knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of [accumulated] experience' (2002, p. 80). In the activity of thinking the subject who gives herself over to experience 'rends the veil it [knowledge] weaves about the object' (2005e, p. 254). Seeking the truth

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of the object is therefore an attempt—always only partly successful—to remove the cataract of social categories, to contact the object not through its possible uses, its place in the established historical narrative, or its value according to the mainstream culture industry.

This is why thinking that gives itself over to the object always also expands beyond the specific object and into the broader sociopolitical context: Although it does not look for lawful connections between its object and others, it by no means treats it as isolated from its surroundings. It rather operates in a way Adorno calls ‘expansive concentration’: ‘By gauging its subject matter, and it alone, thinking becomes aware of what within the matter extends beyond what was previously thought and thereby breaks open the fixed purview of the subject matter’ (2005c, p. 131). As Iain Macdonald puts it, such thinking is ‘the ability to reflect objectivity [. . .] in order to reveal the (dys)functional context of the status quo’ (2011, pp. 10–11). That is to say, in the gap between how the object ordinarily appears and its truth which flickers through the activity of thinking, the alienation and distortion of the entire social reality is disclosed and brought to consciousness: Every single object testifies that society views everything as interchangeable and does not allow it to appear as what it really is. Thus, every object of study can become subject matter through which the whole is revealed; to borrow a turn of phrase from Jacques Rancière (1991), ‘everything is in everything’.

This is why for Adorno critical thinking is no mere theoretical work, but ‘a praxis that lives within the contradictions of the moment in order to articulate them in its very form’ (Lewis, 2006, p. 4). This praxis is of course essentially negative. It does not offer a positive alternative, and consists of the refusal to accept the object as it usually appears (Stojanov, 2012, pp. 126–127). But even negativity is not simply given to thought, does not reveal itself as such to experience; the thinking subject must actively negate the object, thereby constituting it as a problem. Unlike Dewey, for whom the teacher is responsible for setting the stage in which the student experiences the problems and remains in control of the educational situation, here problematisation is part of the thinking activity and is under the thinking student’s full responsibility. This is, then, a much more radical form of democratic education: Democratic relationships of equality are founded on a relationship of non-domination with the object, and are reflected in student-teacher relationships, for the latter is responsible for creating the *negative* conditions for thinking, namely for providing the time and space it requires, but *not* for generating thought through artificial positive intervention.

> We can even say, in fact, that when the student thinks, it is not the teacher but rather the object which educates her: as the subject-student opens herself up to the subject-matter she cannot retain her identity after experiencing the non-identical. Her conceptual categories, the presuppositions guiding her everyday interaction with the world, are revealed to be insufficient and necessarily change through the act of thinking the non-identical (Thompson, 2006, p. 83).

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Moreover, it is only through genuine thinking which prioritises the object that the student really becomes a subject. Whoever accepts pre-existing knowledge, takes the object to be an empirical given in an existing web of concepts, or limits oneself to logical procedures, is not exactly a subject; he is merely an abstract, general and illusory subject, hence somewhat of an object, a product of the social process of reification. The activity of thinking which seeks the truth of the object makes the thinker a real subject—a concrete person, anchored in her sociopolitical surrounding without being completely absorbed into it. Education for thinking, therefore, politicises both object and subject, enabling them to temporarily suspend the logic of identification and domination; not, to be sure, to reach a safe haven, but rather to develop a point of view from which the danger inherent in this logic is even more apparent and present (Thompson, 2005, p. 528).

THE ESSAY AS A FORM OF THINKING

As we have seen, thinking involves not only passive openness to material, but also active work with it. This activity is much different from that described by Dewey, which is aimed at dominating the object and is valued according to a practical test of results. For Adorno the activity of thinking takes place in language, or more precisely in the passage to language, in translating the object into the linguistic dimension: 'Thinking begins in the labor upon the subject matter and its verbal formulation' (2005c, p. 133). This does not mean that there is pre-linguistic thought which needs to be given linguistic articulation, but rather that thought itself is a dynamic relation between concepts and objects, a spark resulting from the collision of these two incommensurable elements, the material and the linguistic.

However, encouraging the student to give the experience of the object linguistic form is not exactly an invitation to engage in dialogue or opine in a discussion. The linkage between thinking and open discussion is prevalent in Anglo-American scholarship on education for thinking, in which active participation in public deliberation is understood as necessary for giving form to thought, for elucidating and refining it (Lipman, 2003). For Adorno, on the other hand, the discursive practice is completely subordinated to instrumental reason and the logic of domination, namely to the attempt to win the argument at any price:

> [E]verywhere discussion is called for, certainly initially out of an anti-authoritarian impulse. But discussion, which by the way, like the public sphere, is an entirely bourgeois category, has been completely ruined by tactics [. . .] Discussion serves manipulation. Every argument, untroubled by the question of whether it is sound, is geared to a purpose [. . .] The opponent in a discussion becomes a functional component of the current plan: [. . .] If the opponent does not concede, then he will be disqualified and accused of lacking the qualities presupposed by the discussion (2005f, pp. 268–269).

Furthermore, the very presupposition of a possible 'a-priori agreement between minds able to communicate with each other', namely the

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exchangeability of opinions, implies the unconditional surrender of each interlocutor to standards set by the collective, and is thus founded on 'complete conformism' (2002, p. 70).

Thinking, therefore, requires a special kind of interaction not only with the object but also with other subjects. Rather than being an attempt to directly influence and control the interlocutors, such interaction would be mediated by the object, as each student offers his or her perspective on the subject matter. Thus each student would be exposed to the different, non-identical ways in which others use concepts, undermining the previous perception of the object and calling for a re-articulation of previous conceptions and dispositions.

Accordingly, for Adorno the most hospitable medium in which thinking may take place is not speech but rather writing. Writing here is not an external expression of a prior mental process or an auxiliary to such a process, but rather an inseparable aspect of thinking itself. The thinking student must become an active subject through writing on the object without dominating it, and without attempting to dominate others through it; she must write in a way that allows the object to remain subject-matter rather than a mute thing. Writing, therefore, must not impose a pre-existing form on the object, a logical-conceptual scheme designed to analyse and exhaust it, formalise its relations with other things, or use it as means for a certain end. It must be a form that always remains sensitive to content, to experience; a form that acknowledges the inherent impossibility of separating form and content. Adorno calls such form or writing style an 'essay'. Unlike the argumentative article or research report, the Adornian essay is not an attempt to formulate a valid logical argument, to prove a point in a way that squeezes the rich material into an empty logical vessel: 'In the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of this texture. Actually, the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it' (2000, p. 101). The essay is a formless form, a flexible form which changes according to its content instead of imposing itself on it. It goes wherever the inner logic of its subject matter takes it, well aware of the inherent failure of every attempt at direct contact with the object, opting instead for a plurality of indirect routes, of groping in an unknown terrain. This way it preserves the active side of experience, that of trying, as well as its passive side, namely receptivity.

The essay welcomes any content. Unlike traditional philosophical texts which are preoccupied with big questions and abstract contents, 'the essay [. . .] revolts above all against the doctrine—deeply rooted since Plato—that the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy' (2000, p. 98). There is no hierarchy among the objects of thought, and if we assume in advance that certain objects are more important than others—that we can determine which are worthy of thinking and writing and which are not—we will be giving in to fixity and lack of self-reflection, prone 'to neutralize the key phenomena of social injustice as mere exceptions' (2002, p. 125).

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Hence not only ordinary curricular subject matter, brought to the table by the teacher, can be food for thought; it can be anything the student encounters in her everyday life, no matter how seemingly trivial. The essay, moreover, welcomes any length. As it is carried away by its object, it may be quite lengthy in the attempt to break through the veil of given categories; but it is often very short: 'It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over' (2000, p. 104).

The best example of such fragmentary writing is of course *Minima Moralia*, the collection of aphorisms written by Adorno in 1944–1947, in which he develops a moral and sociopolitical critique of contemporary society through 'micro-analyses' of various objects of experience, from the most mundane to the most refined products of high culture. As Roger Foster makes clear, such writing, which lingers with the particular to the point where social conditions are disclosed through it, which exaggerates to reveal the truth, is 'not simply [. . .] a theory of resistance to wrong life, but rather [. . .] a performance of ethical resistance through its intrinsic aesthetic arrangement' (2011, p. 85). One does not have to be educated like Adorno to write an essay, however. No previous knowledge or experience are required, only willingness to study the objects, to be a student.

Note that Adorno explicitly posits the writing of essays against the kind of teaching usually practiced in school. He writes that '[t]he way in which the essay appropriates concepts is most easily comparable to the behavior of a man who is obliged, in a foreign country, to speak that country's language instead of patching it together from its elements, as he did in school' (2000, p. 101). Schoolteachers attempt to protect their students by teaching them the Cartesian wisdom that studying must proceed carefully from the most simple and elementary to the more complex, while the Adornian essay jumps right into the heart of the matter, ready to confront the object of experience in its full richness and complexity—to speak the language of the object rather than the one the subject already masters. In much the same way, Adorno invokes 'the words of the schoolmaster' as blaming the essay for not being exhaustive, for failing to fully grasp the object and systematically present all its relevant aspects (2000, p. 103).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the essay cannot find its place in school. Adorno's position may also be understood as a call for alternative teaching, very different from the one accepted today. I suggest that for Adorno, the essay is the scholastic form par excellence—the one most fit for school, as it privileges neither the teacher's knowledge nor the subject-student's needs, but rather subject-matter itself. The teacher's role may therefore be characterised as one of inviting the students to write essays and helping them do so. It is no doubt impossible to teach how to write essays the same way more formal and structured writing styles can be taught, but the teacher may certainly lend the struggling student a hand.

To be sure, the essay is not an automatic, expressive or associative style of writing centred on the writer's inner world. Rejecting the

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absolute authority of logical formality does not amount to total freedom of all rationality: 'the essay is not situated in simple opposition to discursive procedure. It is not unlogical; rather it obeys logical criteria in so far as the totality of its sentences must fit together coherently' (2000, p. 109). Although the essay enjoys aesthetic autonomy, it is distinct from art 'through its conceptual character and its claim to truth free of aesthetic semblance' (2000, p. 94). Its writing, therefore, needs to vacillate constantly between the rationale of pure logic and that of the object, and respect both without yielding to either. In writing an essay, even more than in other writing styles, the author must pay heed to the most precise nuances in describing the object (2002, p. 221), and make sure that in every paragraph 'the central motif stands out clearly enough' (2002, p. 85). This requires 'unlimited efforts' (2000, p. 105). The teacher, therefore, is often needed as an external support and even an authority which can demand the effort, insist on the rewriting of drafts and encourage thoughtful, attentive writing.

Adorno's criticism of common communicative and discursive practices, therefore, does not mean rejecting any form of interaction or collaboration in education. The central place given to writing in Adornian education for thinking—especially the writing of essays focused on objects rather than on the readers—may reinforce the false impression that such education is best achieved in isolation, in the intimacy of student and teacher, hence running against one of the essential features of school education, namely the plurality of students. I argue, however, that this is not the case—that plurality is essential to the Adornian essay and that school is its natural abode. Although communication with readers is not the ultimate aim of the essay form, as it is founded on dialogue with the object rather than other subjects, it need not be a kind of closet writing. Essays need to be read, and a certain form of interaction between writers and readers is certainly welcomed by the essay form. An essay written by one student may be read by others and compel them to react, think and write. A school where essays are written thus becomes a special kind of community: Not one of argumentation or discussion but one of writers and readers, a collective of thinkers. Communication in such a community is mediated, and requires time and effort (Heins, 2012, p. 78). It renounces in advance all attempts to persuade, to influence directly. It is what Adorno calls a 'message in a bottle' (Hellings, 2012), sent to the world without knowing in advance who will pick it up and what effects it will have. This is precisely why the essay is political—not in the 'activist' sense, which renounces thinking, but in the Adornian sense of recognising that thought itself is always already critical and political.

This brings us to the final point. The reflection on essayist writing as a form of thought and of thinking as a form of political resistance reveals an interesting aspect of Adorno's relation to childhood. Various references to contemporary youth as infantile and stupid (2002, p. 22), as well as the adoption of the Kantian concepts of maturity and responsibility (1999), create the impression that Adorno, like Kant, limits political subjectivity to grown-ups. However, the essay, to which 'luck and play are

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essential' (2000, p. 93), is explicitly linked to childhood: 'Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artificially, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done' (ibid.). There is a childlike quality in the essay's essential freedom, in the rejection of accepted forms to avoid assimilation into existing society. Children, writes Adorno in *Minima Moralia*, are aware 'of the contradiction between phenomenon and fungibility that the resigned adult no longer sees, and they shun it. Play is their defence' (2002, p. 228). The playful essay is therefore reluctant yet merry, lacking in positive vision yet critical, naïve yet political. The political subject who thinks and writes essays is childlike, and every child can be a political subject. After all, who knows better than children to simply say no?

CONCLUSION: *MIMIMA PEDAGOGICA*

I have shown how education, and education for thinking in particular, can be an active form of political resistance according to Adorno. This does not mean that such education promises wonders. This is not exactly 'educational activism', as Tyson E. Lewis suggests (2006), for according to Adorno activism implies simplistic separation of theory and praxis in which the latter is given precedence. Education for thinking that follows in Adorno's footsteps challenges many existing educational practices, but its political aspirations are rather modest. I suggest this education be called *minima pedagogica*—not in a sense that would imply that education is unimportant, of course, nor in the sense of non-interventionist, 'hands off' education, but in the sense Adorno gave his own writing in *Minima Moralia*: Philosophical activity that refuses to be *magna moralia*, namely a unified, fully elaborated grand theory aimed at guiding the perplexed. This would be a minor, minimal pedagogy of liberation—it can offer the student nothing but better understanding of the reality of domination, in which lies only a glimmer of hope for something different, the exact nature of which cannot be known.

The problems attendant on this educational project are obvious. Education for thinking as discussed here is in clear conflict with other purposes Adorno ascribes to education, such as bequeathing high culture (French and Thomas, 1999, p. 3), or the claim that students need to be 'shown' how false and distorted cultural products are (1999, p. 31). Moreover, Adorno's rejection of any action apart from thinking, his refusal of any concrete political action, even one which may bring temporary, partial relief from suffering, borders on practical resignation and acceptance of social reality for what it is. It seems, sometimes, that it would not be a bad idea to bring into Adorno's thinking something of the Deweyan pragmatic spirit—a desire to do something beyond thinking, reading and writing; to get out of the classroom, lecture hall or library, to expect results. In this article, however, I have tried to suspend such criticisms, to surrender as much as possible to the object that is Adorno's writings, to let it be a subject matter that speaks through my own writing. As the academic setting does not allow for a genuine Adornian essay, this is merely an honest attempt to

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listen to what Adorno says about education and thinking, and think them together.[2]

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NOTES

1. To be sure, this discussion does not exhaust Dewey's concept of experience. In other contexts, especially in relation to art and aesthetics, he presents a more complex conception of experience, which is not modeled after the scientific method subsuming particulars under general laws but rather lingers on the object in an attempt to make it a significant aspect of the subject's life (Dewey, 1980; Hohr, 2013).
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