

# Adorno's concept of dialectics – a paradigm for the present?<sup>1</sup>

*Frederik van Gelder*

„Er blieb allein; denn leben heißt in diesem Zeitalter Nicht-Sehen-Wollen.“<sup>2</sup>

Allow me, by way of introduction, and before I get into the substance of this paper, a few remarks about its title. A title chosen two months ago in a fit of youthful enthusiasm, and one which I have subsequently come to regret. For ‘Begriff’, which in English renders as the much more mundane ‘concept’, promises that specifically Middle-European, not to say German approach to a problem which combines the historical with the systematic in a way as foreign, still, to Anglo-Saxon ears, as it was fifty years ago<sup>3</sup>, so that what for a German-speaking listener sounds like the promise of an exhaustive, monograph-length treatment of a topic, sounds to an English-speaker more like the announcement, at best, for a discussion about

- 1 Congress: „Die Zukunft der Vernunft – Zur Aktualität Adornos“. Cluj/Klausenburg, Romania, 9-10 March 2004.
- 2 Franz Borkenau, on Pascal: „Er ist der Entdecker der negativen Dialektik. Er zeigt die Widersprüche im Sein und im Denken. ... Die Dialektik blüht ... nur bei jenen seltenen Denkern, die weder von pessimistischen Voraussetzungen aus die Frage nach dem Sinn des Lebens einfach abweisen, noch in optimistischer Verdeckung dem Sinn unmittelbare Verwirklichung zuschreiben. Mit einem Wort, sie blüht nur dort, wo das Problem des Lebenssinnes in seiner echten Bedeutung gefaßt wird, als die Notwendigkeit, ein Ziel zu suchen, ohne es – jedenfalls innerhalb des Kategoriensystems des gegebenen Lebens – finden zu können.“ *Der Übergang vom feudalen zum bürgerlichen Weltbild*, Darmstadt 1976 [Paris 1934], p. 525/6.
- 3 "...if most British philosophers are convinced that Continental metaphysics is arbitrary, pretentious and mind-destroying, Continental philosophers are no less confident that British empiricism is philistine, pedestrian and soul-destroying." From John Passmore's influential *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, still widely read. (Penguin 1972, p. 466.)

definitions and terminology. Not to mention the word ‘dialectics’ itself, which carries rather different connotations in this part of Europe than it does for those of us who have had no personal experience of State Socialism.

For all that, when one goes through the list of titles announced for today and tomorrow, when one bears in mind the many congresses, concerts, biographies, published correspondences – not to mention films, talkshows, radio-programs, monuments, public reminiscences – with which the centenary of Adorno’s birth has been commemorated this last year, when one works one’s way through the *Gesammelte Schriften* or the ‘Blaue Bände’ which the Adorno Archive in Frankfurt have been publishing with so much care and dedication these last years, then one has no choice but to try to find words to describe this universalism of thought and endeavour that we have before us, and one which the historians and biographers have so much trouble in pinning down. (‘Interdisciplinary’<sup>4</sup>, ‘Totalitätsblick’<sup>5</sup>, ‘total reason’<sup>6</sup>, ‘neo-Marxist’<sup>7</sup>, ‘utopian’<sup>8</sup> are some of the kinder of the predicates and characterisations one encounters in the literature.<sup>9</sup>)

How do we approach this universalism? (That it is necessary to do so seems to follow from the emphatic notion of the ‘dialectic of subject and object’ itself, on which the Adorno of the *Negative Dialectics* is as adamant as the Hegel of the *Wissenschaft der Logik* was one hundred and fifty years earlier. That it is nigh on impossible to defend this systematically nowadays follows from the state of academic philosophy and academic sociology today, which professes to see in such Left-Hegelianism either a totalitarian enemy of the ‘open society’ or the elitist aestheticism of tenured

---

4 Lambert Zuidervaart, in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/adorno/>

5 Joachim Perels: „Verteidigung der Erinnerung im Angesicht ihrer Zerstörung“, in: Michael Buckmiller, Dietrich Heimann, Joachim Perels (eds.): *Judentum und politische Existenz. Siebzehn Portraits deutsch-jüdischer Intellektueller*, Hannover 2000.

6 Hans Albert: „The Myth of Total Reason: Dialectical Claims in the Light of Undialectical Criticism“ in: Glyn Adey and David Frisby (trans.): *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, New York 1976.

7 Fredric Jameson: *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the persistence of the dialectic*. New York, 1990.

8 William R. Schroeder: „Afterword“ in: Simon Critchley, William Schroeder (eds.): *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, Blackwell, 1998.

9 "It is no more possible to summarize Adorno’s work than to describe the plot of an ‘anti-novel’ or the theme of an action painting." And that’s about the kindest thing Kolakowsky has to say about Adorno: Leszek Kolakowsky, „The Frankfurt School and ‘critical theory’“ and „Negative Dialectics“ in: *Main Currents of Marxism*, Oxford University Press 1978, vol. III, p. 357.

privilege.) That is: the task which I have set myself, and that is no different from the task that the organizers of this congress have set before us, is not so much to give an account of the central concepts of Adorno's philosophy – that would be beyond the scope of a single lecture – but to comment on a number of aspects thereof in the context of the theme of our congress.

With these caveats in mind allow me to probe, for a moment, aspects of this universalism of thought and action, and see where it leads us.

## *I. Universalism of thought and action*

I start with a remark about the historical background. Universalism, reason, personal freedom and autonomy: these are, on the one hand, the principles of the European Enlightenment, inscribed, to this day, in the foundations of the modern Nation-State and enshrined in our constitutions and bodies of law. It is also a universalism which especially the Jewish minorities in Europe seized upon and made their own with such unparalleled enthusiasm during the 'long century' (Hobsbawm) between 1815 and 1914, meaning the period, roughly, between Waterloo and the First World War. Detlev Claussen, in his careful reconstruction of the secularised Jewish familial atmosphere which held sway in homes such as those on the Schöne Aussicht and in the Seeheimer Straße in Frankfurt and its environs before 1914 – the addresses where Adorno grew up –, traces out the very special role played by education and the classics during this, the 'Golden Age of Jewish emancipation in Germany'<sup>10</sup>, and which he captures in the image of the musically gifted schoolboy Teddie Wiesengrund, poring over Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* every Saturday afternoon for years on end, under the guidance of his study-companion and tutor Siegfried Kracauer.<sup>11</sup>

---

10 "Der besondere Wert, der auf Kultur und Bildung gelegt wurde, zeichnete aber diese Familien vor den deutschen Durchschnittsfamilien aus. Verschmolzen wurden nicht ethnische Abstracta wie Deutschtum und Judentum, sondern Aufklärung und Klassik, Bildungshumanismus und Fortschritt." In: Detlev Claussen: *Theodor W. Adorno – Ein letztes Genie*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 55.

11 "Da für Adornos Denken die Kantische Vernunftkritik von kaum geringerer Relevanz als die Hegelsche Dialektik ist und die Bedeutung der Philosophie Kierkegaards wie Husserls ohne Frage übertrifft, kommt seinen Kant-Vorlesungen ... um so größeres Gewicht zu. In der letzten der Vorlesungen zur 'Kritik der reinen Vernunft' spricht Adorno von 'einem dialektischen Denken' – er meinte das eigene –, 'dessen Elemente ich Ihnen an Kant entwickelt habe'; deutlicher konnte Adorno nicht sagen, worum es ihm ging: nicht um immanente Auslegung des historischen Kant, er verhandelte vielmehr bei Gelegenheit Kants Fragestellungen der eigenen Philosophie. Die der Adornoschen Philosophie immanente Erkenntnislehre ist Metakritik der überkommenen

These principles just mentioned are, at the same time, the first casualties of the European catastrophe manifesting itself on 1 August 1914 – the first effect of which was the polarisation of the European intellectuals according to the question of where they stood on the respective war efforts – and the negation of these same ideals by the newly created ministries of propaganda of the now combatant nations. Intellectuals committed to the principles of the European Enlightenment at the very moment that the shadow of mass mobilisation and world war shift across the continent of Spinoza, Voltaire, Kant and Locke: we owe it to Detlev Claussen to have shown that this image deserves at least as much credence – when we’re trying to get to the origins of Critical Theory and Negative Dialectics – than the by now more established view, which places them either in the history of Western Marxism or in that of the Student Movement of the sixties.<sup>12</sup>

The first day of August 1914 also marked, as chance would have it, the official opening of the Johann Wolfgang-Goethe Universität in Frankfurt by the Prussian Minister of Culture, a festive occasion which, according to the available accounts, was not free of the patriotic enthusiasm accompanying the formal declaration of war that same day. In this coincidence there is a symbolism – one could call it: ‘science and reason at war’ – which is worth dwelling on for a moment. For the shrill pathos of what would later be termed the ‘ideas of 1914’ and the „August experience“, the subordination of this liberal university – at which Adorno would become a Privatdozent (assistant professor) twenty years later – to the war effort, the speed with which so many of the critical intellectuals converted from ‘Marx to Mars’<sup>13</sup>, the ‘outing’ of so many of their teachers as Prussian pa-

---

– und das heißt vorab: der Kantischen – Erkenntnistheorie." Rolf Tiedemann (Hrsg.): *Theodor W. Adorno: Kants 'Kritik der reinen Vernunft'*, Frankfurt am Main 1995, p. 422.

- 12 Wolfgang Kraushaar: (1998): *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung: von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail 1946-1995*. Frankfurt am Main: Rogner & Bernhard.
- 13 Barbara W. Tuchman: *August 1914*, p. 80. There is a large literature here which is never quoted in the context of the discussions about Critical Theory and what it is that it reacts against, i.e. what it is that it is a critique of: C.f. Jeffrey Verhey (2000): *The spirit of 1914. Militarism, myth, and mobilization in Germany*; Kurt Flash (2000): *Die geistige Mobilmachung. Die deutschen Intellektuellen und der Erste Weltkrieg*. Fritz Fischer (1965), in *Weltmacht oder Niedergang. Deutschland im ersten Weltkrieg*: „Und kein Professor verschloß sich dieser patriotischen Aufgabe.“ The patriotic duty namely, to see to it that the entire nation was mobilised for war. Georg Simmel’s Strassburg lecture of 7th November 1914, „Deutschlands innere Wandlung“, (*Gesamtausgabe*, Suhrkamp, vol. 16, p. 13), gives a taste of how that ‘völkische’ combination of neo-romantic ‘Innerlichkeit’ with the goals of imperialist expansion was formulated. It is this mental-

triot, the dashing of the revolutionary hopes four years later, in 1918, all of this combined to cause a deep sense of estrangement amongst that part of the student generation from which the Horkheimer group would later emerge. In the words of Detlev Claussen:

„Ebenso wie die Zustimmung der Sozialdemokratie zu den Kriegskrediten für eine Generation von Kriegsgegnern sie unmöglich machte, wurden die Autoritäten des deutschen Geisteslebens durch ihre Bekenntnisse von 1914 diskreditiert. Diese tiefe Enttäuschung geht in den meisten Institutions- und Ideengeschichten verloren; sie erklärt aber erst die lebenslängliche Reserve gegen den traditionellen Typ des Wissens in einer neuen Generation.“<sup>14</sup>

In this reading of the history of the ‘dialectical imagination’, what it is that is constitutive for the break with the past which the historians all agree on is nothing particularly intellectual at all: it is the shock of the First World War, which all of this group experienced as something irrevocable. A break which Horkheimer is to formalise shortly before the Second World War in his programmatic „Traditionelle und kritische Theorie“ of 1937, and Adorno had proclaimed from within Philosophy, on different premises, in his inaugural lecture six years earlier: „Die Aktualität der Philosophie.“<sup>15</sup>

---

ity, which our own generation has mercifully forgotten, which convinces at least a part of the student generation of 1914 that a break with the past is absolutely necessary: „Nicht also eigentlich unter der Kategorie eines Zieles steht uns der neue Mensch, sondern unter der einer tiefen Gewißheit, einer mit unserm jetzigen Sein selbst gesetzten Hoffnung. ... Ungezählte Äußerungen der geistigsten Menschen Deutschlands haben mir, höchst mannigfaltig geformt, immer das gleiche Gefühl offenbart: daß dieser Krieg irgendwie einen anderen Sinn hat als Kriege sonst haben, daß er eine, ich möchte sagen mysteriöse Innenseite besitzt, daß seine äußeren Ereignisse in einer schwer aussagbaren, aber darum nicht weniger sicheren Tiefe von Seele, Hoffnung, Schicksal wurzeln oder auf diese hingehen. Nur um die Deutung dieses Gefühles handelt es sich, wenn ich von dem neuen Menschen als von dem Ideal sprach, das die früheren Lebensziele allmählich zu umfassen und zu überbauen begonnen hatte, zu dessen klarerem Anblick und hoffnungsvollerer Nähe aber dieser Krieg die sonst vielleicht noch lange verschlossenen Tore aufgerissen hat.“ And so on. Modern warfare as the source of national pride and spiritual renewal: from our own perspective – two world wars later –, what gives Critical Theory its significance is its unequivocal break (at least at the level of ideas) with this most ominous legacy of the expansionist Nation-State in its European form. For an interesting discussion see Cornelia Wegeler: „... wir sagen ab der internationalen Gelehrtenrepublik“. *Altertumswissenschaft und Nationalsozialismus*, Vienna 1996, also Bernhard von Brocke (1985): „Wissenschaft und Militarismus. Der Aufruf der 93 ‘An die Kulturwelt!’ und der Zusammenbruch der internationalen Gelehrtenrepublik im Ersten Weltkrieg“ in: William M. Calder/Hellmut Flashar/ Theodor Lindken: *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahren*, Darmstadt 1985, p. 549-719.

14 Claussen, op. cit., p. 89.

15 Reprinted in Adorno: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 325.

Or as Walter Benjamin put it, seeking a formulation for the sensibilities of a generation returning mute and shell-shocked from the trenches of the Somme, Verdun and the Marne:

„Eine Generation, die noch mit der Pferdebahn zur Schule gefahren war, stand unter freiem Himmel in einer Landschaft, in der nichts unverändert geblieben war als die Wolken und unter ihnen, in einem Kraftfeld zerstörender Ströme und Explosionen, der winzige, gebrechliche Menschenkörper“.<sup>16</sup>

It is a peculiar aspect of the reception of the Horkheimer/Adorno group, – I note this as an aside – that we had to wait for the so-called ‘trauma’ literature after the *Second* World War to sensibilise us to the explicit use of psychoanalytic concepts by Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno after the *First*, – and then again during the immigration in the USA – in contexts where we would least expect them. One merely has to search the texts for the word ‘Reizschutz’ – that key concept of the new discipline founded by Freud to study the countless cases of ‘shattered nerves’ during and after the war. It turns up in Benjamin’s „Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire“,<sup>17</sup> where it provides insight into the inner mechanisms of 19th Century poetry and literature, in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, where it is invoked to explain the peculiar rigidity of antisemitism and other types of politically relevant mass prejudices,<sup>18</sup> and in the *Minima Moralia*, – in an aphorism with the

16 Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II.2, p. 439.

17 Vol. VIII of the *ZfS* 1939/40, reprinted in the *Gesammelte Schriften*: „Je größer der Anteil des Chockmoments an den einzelnen Eindrücken ist, je unablässiger das Bewußtsein im Interesse des Reizschutzes auf dem Plan sein muß, je größer der Erfolg ist, mit dem es operiert, desto weniger gehen sie in die Erfahrung ein; desto eher erfüllen sie den Begriff des Erlebnisses. Vielleicht kann man die eigentümliche Leistung der Chockabwehr zuletzt darin sehen: dem Vorfall auf Kosten der Integrität seines Inhalts eine exakte Zeitstelle im Bewußtsein anzuweisen. Das wäre eine Spitzenleistung der Reflexion. Sie würde den Vorfall zu einem Erlebnis machen. Fällt sie aus, so würde sich grundsätzlich der freudige oder (meist) unlustbetonte Schreck einstellen, der nach Freud den Ausfall der Chockabwehr sanktioniert. Diesen Befund hat Baudelaire in einem grellen Bild festgehalten. Er spricht von einem Duell, in dem der Künstler, ehe er besiegt wird, vor Schrecken aufschreit. Dieses Duell ist der Vorgang des Schaffens selbst. Baudelaire hat also die Chockerfahrung ins Herz seiner artistischen Arbeit hineingestellt. Diesem Selbstzeugnis kommt große Bedeutung zu. ... Dem Schrecken preisgegeben, ist es Baudelaire nicht fremd, selber Schrecken hervorzurufen.“ Benjamin, *GS*, I.2, p. 615 f.

18 "Die pathische Projektion ist eine verzweifelte Veranstaltung des Ichs, dessen Reizschutz Freud zufolge nach innen unendlich viel schwächer als nach außen ist: unter dem Druck der gestauten homosexuellen Aggression vergißt der seelische Mechanismus seine phylogenetisch späteste Errungenschaft, die Selbstwahrnehmung, und erfährt jene Aggression als den Feind in der Welt, um ihr besser gewachsen zu sein. Dieser Druck aber lastet auch auf dem gesunden Erkenntnisvorgang als Moment von dessen

title „Weit vom Schuß“, written probably in 1942, – where Adorno almost paraphrases the Benjamin quote above:

„Der Zweite Krieg aber ist der Erfahrung schon so völlig entzogen wie der Gang einer Maschine den Regungen des Körpers, der erst in Krankheitszuständen jenem sich anähnelte. Sowenig der Krieg Kontinuität, Geschichte, das ‘epische’ Element enthält, sondern gewissermaßen in jeder Phase von vorn anfängt, sowenig wird er ein stetiges und unbewußt aufbewahrtes Erinnerungsbild hinterlassen. Überall, mit jeder Explosion, hat er den Reizschutz durchbrochen, unter dem Erfahrung, die Dauer zwischen heilsamem Vergessen und heilsamem Erinnern sich bildet. Das Leben hat sich in eine zeitlose Folge von Schocks verwandelt, zwischen denen Löcher, paralysierte Zwischenräume klaffen. Nichts aber ist vielleicht verhängnisvoller für die Zukunft, als daß im wörtlichen Sinn bald keiner mehr wird daran denken können, denn jedes Trauma, jeder unbewältigte Schock der Zurückkehrenden ist ein Ferment kommender Destruktion.“<sup>19</sup>

But back to Detlev Claussen, and the question of how this is to be conceptualised; this very decided break with the past, which Critical Theory takes as its point of departure:

„Der Blick auf das lange bürgerliche Jahrhundert ist für diese Generation von Intellektuellen schon ein historischer geworden, aber die gesellschaftliche Situation einer in die Zerfallsformen des Bürgertums eingesperrten Monade erschien bedrückend aktuell. Das Alte gewährt keinen Halt, denn in ihm entschlüsselt sich für die Kritiker schon das Bild einer Katastrophe. Der gesellschaftsgeschichtliche Schnitt zwischen long und short century wirkt in Deutschland schärfer als in der angloamerikanischen Welt, und die Radikalität einer Generation von Intellektuellen, die sich nur noch auf die Qualität ihrer geistigen Arbeitskraft verlassen konnte, läßt sich aus dieser besonderen Situation verstehen.“ (Claussen, 121)

What then are the implications of such a reading?

For one, it casts a different light on the historical origins of the universalism of this generation of intellectuals, which for too many of our own generation is being cast aside as the ostensibly outmoded beliefs of – as the cur-

---

unreflektierter und zur Gewalt treibender Naivität. Wo immer die intellektuellen Energien absichtsvoll aufs Draußen konzentriert sind, also überall, wo es ums Verfolgen, Feststellen, Ergreifen zu tun ist, um jene Funktionen, die aus der primitiven Überwältigung des Getiers zu den wissenschaftlichen Methoden der Naturbeherrschung sich vergeistigt haben, wird in der Schematisierung leicht vom subjektiven Vorgang abgesehen und das System als die Sache selbst gesetzt." Adorno: *GS (Gesammelte Schriften)*, vol. 3, p. 218.

<sup>19</sup> Adorno: *GS*, vol. 4, p. 60.

rently modish cliché would have it – ‘dead, white, European men’.<sup>20</sup> In their insistence that society and the psyche make up a ‘totality’, that this totality is made up of parts that are related to one another in a conflictual whole which is accessible to the ‘work of reason’, in their insistence that this specific combination of Philosophy, Sociology and Psychoanalysis gives us insights not only into the real contradictions of the world in which we live, but also in the inner contradictions which every intellectual finds in his/her own psyche, in his/her own profession, there is also something else. Namely a refusal to accept the seemingly inexorable militarisation, commercialisation, atomisation of all walks of life which they first identified during the interbellum as the decisive moment in this crisis of modernity in which we find ourselves still.

For another, it casts a different light on the central concepts of the *Negative Dialectics*<sup>21</sup> itself, and especially on the difficulties their reception have encountered. If it has long been obvious that Adorno has been taken more seriously by historians, by musicians, literary critics, post-modernists, than by philosophers and sociologists, then the reason for this cannot be sought only in the usual reasons given: namely bad translations, a Zeitgeist averse to ‘pessimism’ and ‘negativism’, or the irrefutability of the arguments motivating the ‘linguistic turn’ in communication theory.<sup>22</sup>

One could point to a number of circumstantial reasons: in part the problematic reception of the *ND* (*Negative Dialectics*) had to do with the highly politicised Cold War atmosphere in which the confrontation between Popper and Adorno took place in the early sixties<sup>23</sup>, in part it had to do with Adorno’s insistence that the *ND* is not so much ‘Philosophy’ in the academic sense as a critique of Philosophy which is at the same time a critique

20 Or the purported antinomies of ‘patriarchal thought’. C.f. Jessica Benjamin: „Die Antinomien des patriarchalischen Denkens. Kritische Theorie und Psychoanalyse“, in: Wolfgang Bonß/Axel Honneth: *Sozialforschung als Kritik*, Frankfurt am Main 1982.

21 ‘Das dicke Kind’, as Adorno describes it in a letter to Horkheimer, to which he adds the hope that it should not be ‘mistaken for Philosophy’: „Hoffentlich empfindest Du es nicht als einen Rückfall in die Philosophie. Gemeint ist es vielmehr als der Versuch, aus der philosophischen Problematik selbst heraus deren traditionellen Begriff, gelinde gesagt, zu erweitern. ... Kontrovers sein könnte nur, ob man deshalb so sehr mit der sogenannten fachphilosophischen Sphäre sich einlassen soll; aber das entspricht nun einmal meiner Passion für immanente Kritik, die keine bloße Passion ist, und vielleicht auch in dem Buch selbst einigermaßen gerechtfertigt.“ Letter Adorno to Horkheimer, 15.12.1966, in Max Horkheimer: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, p. 633f.

22 C.f. Hermann Schweppenhäuser: „Über einige Muster der Kritik an Adorno“ in: *Hamburger Adorno-Symposium*, Lüneburg 1984.

23 Starting with the Popper/Adorno papers read at the Tübinger meeting of the German Society of Sociologists in 1961.



of the foundations of the Social Sciences and on top of that a critique of dogmatic Marxism. (Which at the time had the not unpredictable result that most philosophers, sociologists, psychoanalysts washed their hands of it in unaccustomed unanimity.<sup>24</sup>)

But the fact remained that the *ND* fitted neither into the philosophical nor the sociological landscape of the sixties, neither in the Anglo-Saxon countries nor in Europe. For in the *ND* there is a frame of mind at work which, if nothing else, is steadfast in its refusal to abide by the unquestioned (Cartesian) axiom at the heart of the entire postwar expansion of higher education and the University system in the Western world after 1945: I mean the unwritten axiom which holds that we understand reality only by compartmentalising it into separate fields of inquiry, corresponding to the different Departments and ‘Subjects’ taught at a modern university.

For those of us who had received their training in one of the social or natural sciences during the sixties, (and who had been taught that ‘value-judgements’ were private matters entirely divorced from the conclusive types of argumentation we were used to in our professional lives) this was an astonishing position to hold. An astonishment which stimulated a flurry of studies on ‘totality’, on ‘*verstehen*’, on the ‘Logic of the Social Sciences’, on the Positivist Dispute, and on the special types of theory-formation and professional practice in Psychoanalysis,<sup>25</sup> but not one which gave, in the end, real insight into the motivations behind this apparently intransigent insistence by Horkheimer and Adorno upon the necessity of a new kind of ‘logic’. A new kind of logic which was said to need to incorporate discursive, interpretive and narrative dimensions all at once, which we had seen at work in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in the *Minima Moralia*, but which few of us understood in its necessity. Martin Jay, who is perhaps the most influential of the Anglo-Saxon interpreters of what soon came to be called the ‘Frankfurt School’ could be cited as a case in point for such an, let us call it: a-historical interpretation. Jay was convinced that this peculiar ‘dialectical imagination’ had its foundations in a special type of ‘totality’-thinking which had its cultural roots in ‘Western Marxism’ and should best be approached with the kind of ‘ethnographic’ methodology

---

24 Rüdiger Bubner: „sophistic pseudo-rationality“; Michael Theunissen: „philosophischer Negativismus“ in: Ludwig von Friedeburg/Jürgen Habermas, (eds.): *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, Frankfurt am Main 1983.

25 Especially the work of Alfred Lorenzer, starting with his path-breaking *Spracherstörung und Rekonstruktion: Vorarbeiten zu einer Metatheorie der Psychoanalyse*. – Frankfurt 1970.

which Anthropologists applied in their study of exotic tribes – a conviction which he substantiated in the close on 600-page 1984 tome *Marxism and Totality*<sup>26</sup>. The extensive index thereof however, which reads like a Who's Who of two centuries of European intellectual movements and politics, has no entry for 'Auschwitz', or 'war' – neither 'First World War' nor 'Second World War'.<sup>27</sup> Adorno's work, which is discussed in the chapter „T.W. Adorno and the collapse of the Lukácsian Concept of Totality“, is characterised as a „cul-de-sac“ which has „demolished the foundations of Western Marxism's initial concept of totality“ (p. 274), and from within which, according to Jay, only Habermas is able to point us to the exit. That from such a premise – which was typical for most of the secondary literature on Adorno during the sixties and seventies<sup>28</sup> – an analysis of the central concepts of the *Negative Dialektik*, identity, non-identity, negativity, was not going to get very far is, with hindsight, perhaps not so surprising. One could surmise at any rate that Adorno's fate in the English-speaking world – to be regarded more as a Marxist aesthetician, musicologist and social theorist than as a philosopher in his own right – is not unconnected to this approach to his work, and it is something which only in the last few years has begun to change.<sup>29</sup>

But what has changed, above all, (and perhaps the literature is simply reflecting this) is that the sense of Anglo-American exceptionalism – bolstered up, and reflected in an analytic and pragmatic philosophy which will have no truck with Continental 'transcendentalism' and unprovable 'value-judgements' – is under pressure, especially amongst the intellectuals. The idea that democratic institutions, a free press, open markets, academic freedom, are in themselves sufficient to ward off the spectre of 1914, 1929, 1933 – something which the vast majority of intellectuals in the West subscribed to in the post-war period – is no longer so obvious. (Not even the use of the predicate 'post-war' is all that intuitive any more.) The attacks of 9-11, the crisis in the Middle East, the increasing evidence of serious environmental damage world-wide, new kinds of pandemics, the

---

26 University of California Press, 1984.

27 Since, in Adorno's work, this is so central that it cannot be ignored, Jay psychologises it, making it a private peccadillo of the empirical individual Adorno: „The implications of Auschwitz, in fact, became almost an obsession with him...“ in: *Adorno*, Fontana Modern Masters, 1984, p. 19 ff.

28 Exceptions: the work of Russell Jacoby and Christopher Lash, to mention only these.

29 C.f. however J.M. Bernstein: *Adorno – Disenchantment and Ethics*, New York 2001; Lambert Zuidervart: „Theodor W. Adorno“ in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (op. cit.); Thomas Huhn (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Cambridge 2004.

spread of ever more destructive types of weapons, the very mixed blessings of Globalisation, are making Adorno's ostensible 'pessimism' look a lot more realistic than the increasingly faded visions of his erstwhile critics.

With this I do not mean to suggest that the dialectic of identity and non-identity as this is expounded and analysed in the *Negative Dialektik* can be laid upon this 'world system' in the old Marxist-positive manner as if it were a grid or a cook-book recipe, to which we turn to learn about a 'Marxist method' or an 'algebra of revolution'. Not well-understood by those who see in Adorno „the Capital of the 21st century“<sup>30</sup> (as in: *Das Kapital*), or see in him a champion of post-modernism and feminism, is that the categories of subjective reflection which from Hegel through to Marx shifted increasingly to describe causal-analytic processes at the macro-level, have been radically purged of all these sociological-objective accretions which they have acquired in the last two hundred years. Whatever terminology one now chooses to describe what it is that happens in the process of self-reflection, it is no longer a terminology that can do double duty as *both* a description of the history of the species and the history of Mind and selfconsciousness. In Adorno's terminology: Subject and Object have parted company, have become 'non-identical', perhaps for good. The stage upon which, in the *Negative Dialektik*, the dialectic of identity and non-identity is enacted is that of the fallible, fragile, mortal, individual member of the species *Homo sapiens*, seeking to cope with the eternal imponderables of love, hope, fear and despair, through the flickering images of his/her own projections and conceptual strategies, and in a world in which it is threatened by its own inventions and institutions.<sup>31</sup> Its model is that of Hamlet and Beckett's *Godot*, of Kafka and Alban Berg, not that of the Absolute Spirit, the Proletariat, the identical Subject-Object of history, or some other collective identity. Rolf Tiedemann, whose carefully edited and expertly commented volumes of Adorno's lectures deserve more recognition than they have received to date, in a postscript to the important *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*<sup>32</sup>, characterises the whole enterprise of a negative dialectics as a description of „intellectual experience“ [geistige

30 "... the first theoretical document to set micropolitics in motion towards global geopolitics". (C.f. Dennis Redmond: (2002): <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>)

31 "Keine Universalgeschichte führt vom Wilden zur Humanität, sehr wohl eine von dem Steinschleuder zur Megabombe. Sie endet in der totalen Drohung der organisierten Menschheit gegen die organisierten Menschen, im Inbegriff von Diskontinuität." Adorno, *GS*, vol. 6, p. 314.

32 Rolf Tiedemann: „Nachbemerking des Herausgebers“ in: *T.W. Adorno – Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 337 ff.

Erfahrung], the first priority and chief goal of which consists in seeing through the false universals which „thinking conceptually“ inevitably brings in its wake. If this rebellion against the „domination of subjectivity“ is carried out in a terminology which is recognizably philosophical, it is also clear that the traditional terms used have been given a radically new meaning. Or to put it differently: if the reconstruction of the meaning of terms such as contradiction, critique, immediacy, mediation in Adorno’s work is still in its early stages<sup>33</sup>, it is an enterprise which is not well-described by the adjective philosophical and not something which can be confined to a description of their Left-Hegelian geneology.

What is it then, this ‘dialectic of identity and non-identity’, this ‘Last Philosophy’?<sup>34</sup> If it is neither a historicised eschatology of the Marxist kind nor a return to the platonising heaven of a ‘First’ Philosophy? Reconstructions of ‘Western’ types of subjectivity – from Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* to the Odysseus chapter of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* through to Habermas’ *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* – are all based on the premise that what we call truth is much less an attribute of objects and processes, much less a matter of methodology and formal logic, than it is based on the critical self-reflection of individual and collective illusions. In this respect the dialecticians have always been much closer to what would later be called psychoanalysis – to all philosophies critical of Cartesian Dualism – than they were to the rationalism, the empiricism, the tacit Nationalism of academic philosophy. Truth, a life in freedom and autonomy – the oldest of the utopias upon which the Western tradition rests – is based on sensibilities and faculties which are as contingent in their biographical origins as they once were in their revival, based on classical antecedents, during the European Enlightenment: if that be granted as a description of dialectics’ core insight, then it can also describe its ‘parti pris’,<sup>35</sup> namely to create conditions, right through to those of a societal and educational kind, capable of

---

33 *Hamburger Adorno-Symposion*, op. cit., therein: Rolf Tiedemann: „Begriff Bild Name. Über Adornos Utopie von Erkenntnis“; Hans-Ernst Schiller: „Selbstkritik der Vernunft. Zu einigen Motiven der Dialektik bei Adorno“. Also Jürgen Ritsert: „Das Nicht-Identische bei Adorno“ in: *Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie*, nr. 4, 1997, p. 48; Gerhard Schweppenhäuser: „Das Glück ‘jenseits des Pedestren’ und die Ehre der Fußgänger. Anmerkungen zu Adornos Wahrheitsbegriff“ in: *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie*, vol. 9, nr. 17, 2003, p. 27.

34 "Nicht die Erste Philosophie ist an der Zeit sondern eine letzte": *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, GS vol. 5, p. 46.

35 Habermas also speaks of a „Parteilichkeit für Vernunft“. C.f. his „Replik auf Einwände“, in his *Vorstudien und Ergänzung zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Suhrkamp 1984, p. 478.

fostering both the individual's autonomy and society's ability to contain disintegration and war.

Let me try now, by way of conclusion, to bring together some of the topics I have now touched upon in three theses:

- Studies of the kind done by Detlev Claussen have shown that an understanding of what 'dialectics' means in Adorno must dwell more specifically than has happened up to now upon the effects of the First World War and its consequences upon the generation of intellectuals of which Adorno was a member. The conviction that there must be a fundamental break with all 'traditional' theory and philosophy (which was shared by an entire generation of intellectuals) has a lot more to do with the European and then World crisis starting in 1914 than with the historicising and harmonising constructions of later generations.
- Conversely, the pursuit of a 'negative' dialectics – in contradistinction to both the idealist and materialist versions thereof – must take seriously, to use Adorno's terminology, the non-identity of Subject and Object in the present world. None of the currently popular political movements have an answer to the crises we can read about in the media every day. Whatever else is to be said of the objective side of the dialectic (the conflicting political and military forces unleashed upon the world), there's no indication at all that the crises of the first half of the 'short century' have been understood in their societal dynamics in such a way that the political will is there to see to it that a future repetition becomes impossible. Adorno's sobering *menetekel* at the end of the *ND* has lost none of its relevance: „Hitler hat den Menschen im Stande ihrer Unfreiheit einen neuen kategorischen Imperativ aufgezwungen: ihr Denken und Handeln so einzurichten, daß Auschwitz nicht sich wiederhole, nichts Ähnliches geschehe. Dieser Imperativ ist so widerspenstig gegen seine Begründung wie einst die Gegebenheit des Kantischen. Ihn diskursiv zu behandeln, wäre Frevel: an ihm läßt leibhaftig das Moment des Hinzutretenden am Sittlichen sich fühlen.“<sup>36</sup>
- The subjective side of the 'negative' dialectic – if one understands by this Philosophy's self-critical reconstruction of the history of reason and subjectivity in its instrumental and reflexive aspects – cannot be carried out from the perspective of a history of ideas. Not,

---

36 Adorno: *GS*, vol. 6, p. 358.

at any rate, if by this one understands an enterprise which is innocent of the current state of debate in Psychoanalysis, in Anthropology, in Aesthetics. ‘Non-identity’, ‘mimesis’, ‘negativity’, ‘domination of nature’, ‘self-reflection’ capture essential aspects of the psyche of this peculiar bipedal primate to which we happen to belong, and which stares at us from the bathroom mirror every morning. Essential aspects – Habermas and Apel speak here of ‘quasi-transcendental’ realities – which have sedimented themselves in the structure of language and in the logic of the institutions which have evolved over thousands, perhaps millions of years. A structure and logic which is allpervasive, without being understood: Helmut Dahmer speaks here of „the riddle of the Sphinx“, „Sphinxrätsel“, which the human race has to solve on pain of its own extinction.<sup>37</sup>

---

37 "Zweifellos hat auch in den besten Zeiten der Soziologie nur eine Minderheit unter den Soziologen die Auflösung der Sphinx-Rätsel der Sozialgeschichte (Krisen, Kriege, Vorurteile, Genozide) zu ihrer Sache gemacht und in den gesellschaftlichen Auseinandersetzungen politisch Partei genommen. Gegenwärtig aber sieht es so aus, als finde eine solche kritische, engagierte Minderheit im rationalisierten Ausbildungs- und Forschungsbetrieb weder eine Pflanzstätte, noch ein Refugium. Im gleichen Maße, wie die bestehende Gesellschaft mit ihren Paradiesen und Elendsquartieren in Ermangelung von realen, scheinbaren oder auch nur denkbaren Alternativen absolut gesetzt wird, büßt die Gesellschaftswissenschaft ihre methodologische Sonderstellung ein. Sie entstand aus dem Versuch, die unbegreifliche Entwicklung der Gesellschaft begreiflich zu machen und ihren naturwüchsigen Entwicklungsprozeß unter Kontrolle zu bringen. Ihre Aufgabe war die Lösung von gesellschaftlichen Sphinx-Rätseln, bei denen es bekanntlich um Tod und Leben geht. Die Fragen, die gegen Ende des 18. und zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts Intellektuelle dazu motivierten, eine besondere Wissenschaft von der Gesellschaft zu kreieren, lauteten: Warum konnten die französischen Jakobiner und, nach ihnen, der (zum Kaiser aufgestiegene) Revolutionsgeneral Napoleon nicht Freiheit und Gleichheit für alle durchsetzen; warum wächst mit steigendem gesellschaftlichen Reichtum auch die ‘Lazarus’-Schicht der Armen; warum befördert der Austausch von Äquivalenten nicht die Gleichheit, sondern die Asymmetrie von Macht und Ohnmacht; warum setzt sich das ökonomische Wachstum nur unterbrochen von Krisen durch? Warum ist die menschliche Geschichte noch immer eine Mordgeschichte?" Helmut Dahmer: *Soziologie am Ende eines barbarischen Jahrhunderts*. Vienna, 2001, p. 8.