

Adorno and the Difficulties of a Critical Reconstruction of the Historical Present

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Most honoured madam Mayor, dear Axel Honneth, dear Stefan Litwin, honoured guests, dear friends!

I feel extremely honoured with this award and would like to start off first of all by thanking the City of Frankfurt and the members of the prize committee for bestowing it on me. In a quite different sense I express my gratitude – if I may say so – to Adorno, in whose name this prize has been founded. Adorno's philosophy has been, for me, time and again, one of the most important sources of inspiration. At the same time, a great deal therein has been, for me, justly or unjustly, something of a stumbling block. I would like hence to address both of these themes: the inspiration and what it is that is so problematic. At the same time I shall try to show in which sense the radical impulse coming from Adorno's critique of society deserves not only to be critically questioned but also to be transformed and rescued for today's world.

1.

„Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique“ is the title of an important essay by Jürgen Habermas on Walter Benjamin. Consciousness-Raising and Rescuing Critique would be a good title for Adorno's work – though, for that matter, that already holds for Kant, whose notion of critique Adorno frequently invokes. „It would hardly be much of an exaggeration“, writes Adorno, alluding to Kant, „to equate the modern conception of reason with that of critique altogether.“ That's another way of saying that thought, the thinking process altogether, is, in its essence, critical, „resistance to that which is forced upon it“. That's not something that one must take as an empirical observation of course but as a postulate. For if there is

something in the way of a central philosophical motif in Adorno's work at all, it is the critique of identity-thinking, a form of thought which relates to things and to other human beings in a purely instrumental way.

The critique of identifying thought, or, as I shall also be calling it, of identitary reason, this critique, if one were to put it in a nutshell, has at its core a determined opposition to the kind of thinking that avoids dealing with the concrete particularity of things – of people, of works of art, of complex issues –, in other words: a kind of thinking that avoids dealing with their „non-identity“. It does this by sticking to the kind of terminology usable only for classifying, for sorting everything into conceptual pigeon-holes, for pruning down everything till it can be subordinated to conceptual, technical, or even real-world societal manipulation. This type of thinking, or non-thinking, has, according to Adorno, come to assume an ominously fateful significance in today's civilization, and it has come to do so because of the way in which a reductive „instrumental“ reason has become dominant in the forms of natural-scientific technical, administrative and economic forms of reasoning – types of reasoning which, according to Adorno, have increasingly come to determine the everyday world as well as people's self-conceptions and their interpersonal relationships.

Adorno's work can be seen as a single great attempt at breaking up these intellectual modes of identifying reason where they have come to sediment themselves in Philosophy, in the Social Sciences, in art theory – in short: in the intellectual configurations in which society is reflected [reflexionsformen]. Adorno speaks on occasion of the „distortive“ and „truncating“ properties of the concept. It is a formulation that points to both the cognitive and the moral-practical deficits of the „dominant currents of thought“, of identifying reason. A cognitive deficit is implied by the „distortive“ and „truncating“ usage of concepts in as much as this blocks genuine knowledge, for instance an adequate understanding of works of art or of societal or philosophical problematics. Over and above that, at the practical level, the use of general concepts in this way is deficient to the extent that it not only blocks knowledge, but at the same time perpetuates social injustice and individual injury. These two, the cognitive and the moral-practical deficit of identitarian reason, are, for Adorno, inextricably connected. When he hence, as an alternative to society as it exists today, seeks to conceptualise a society that has overcome the „identity compulsion“ [identitaetszwang], then what he envisages with this rescue of the non-identical is at the same time a different way of human beings relating to one another altogether: „The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness

would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own." And in the *Minima Moralia* one reads, on this same point, that one needs to „conceive the better state as one in which people could be different without fear“. The critique of identifying reason is not just Adorno's central philosophical theme, but even more than that the very form [vollzugsform] by which his own thinking proceeds; hence for it to become entirely transparent one needs to watch him at work in his concrete analyses, in his essays or in the aphorisms of the *Minima Moralia*. It is a form of thought which, in the very act of criticising false, empty or ideological generalities, exemplifies a different, a non-identitarian type of thinking; a type of thinking which turns to the particular, to the non-identical, and seeks out there a concrete universality. It is a vulnerable type of thinking, not one that clings to the guardrail of preconceived concepts and a cast-iron methodology; prodding predominant and conventional concepts, laying bare what it is about them that is inadequate and contradictory, while in the very process of thus setting them in motion leading on to conceptual constellations – constellations which serve to unlock the particular and the non-identical of both societal phenomena and works of art. In his philosophy of art this is an idea that led Adorno to a polemic against all forms of philosophical aesthetics which, in their conceptual generality, lost contact with concrete works of art, most especially those of their own time. In contrast to this he not only postulated a continuity of philosophical aesthetics and art critique, but practiced this in an exemplary way in his own artistic-aesthetic reflections. It is especially in his own work on art theory and art critique that he realized what he himself demanded of Philosophy: Philosophy, as one would wish it to be, „would not be something other than full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection“. When Adorno speaks of the „predominant patterns of thought“ [herrschende Denkformen] what he means by this, amongst other things, is that, within contemporary society, instrumental and identitarian reason have hardened into a system of domination – involving all levels of societal practice, and reaching all the way down into the constitution of the subject itself. This is a position which, even in his later work, remains unchanged from the one originally formulated in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during American exile with Max Horkheimer – the blackest book of the Frankfurt School. It is the first great document of the critique of identifying thought – of instrumental and 'identitarian' reason – in the history of Critical Theory. It is a book about the self-destruction of the Enlightenment, the history of which the authors trace back to the pre-history of subjectivity and mind's

domination over nature. A book that drags the dark side of the bourgeois world into the harsh light of day, making visible its connection to the destruction of civilization and the catastrophes of the 20th century. In the face of the Nazi barbarity that was reaching its zenith at the very time they were writing the book, and in the face of the perverted Marxism that had come to power in the Soviet Union, (in which, inter alia, the end of the revolutionary Workers' Movement had become obvious), the authors abandoned all hope of revolutionary change at the level of politics. Every radically transformative practice, so they believe, is already corroded by the same reifying form of thought that characterised existing society and therefore would be much more likely to consolidate than to prevent disaster. Fundamental societal change of a progressive kind was something the authors could, in the end, conceive of only in the form of a collective coming-to-awareness of society as a whole; as a remembrance of nature in the subject and in the spiritual sphere (*Geist*), and that means: in those agencies that – as they believe – have increasingly come into service for the mere domination of nature. The scepticism of Adorno's later years, with regard to the Student movement of the Sixties, (a movement which, when all is said and done, also invoked Adorno himself) is really anticipated in this book.

Critical Theory as an interdisciplinary project had originally been intended as something rather different; this is quite clear from Horkheimer's important 1937 essay „Critical and Traditional Theory“, in which Horkheimer's description of Critical Theory as a „construction of the historical present“ doubtlessly presupposes the possibility of a changed societal practice. The abandonment of this project in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is amongst other things a key to Adorno's later work, without which the specific influence of his thinking and his specific contribution to Critical Theory can hardly be understood. His later critique of identifying thought, of identitarian reason, is doubtlessly aimed at a transformation of thought, but it is no longer a project that knows itself to be in harmony with a broad societal movement, and his influence was hence perforce confined to the areas of intellectual, aesthetic, and artistic production – i.e. confined to those who were in a position to read or hear Adorno. That is not meant to minimise his influence – merely help us gain a better understanding of just where Adorno's philosophy, in the post-war German Federal Republic and far beyond its borders, had its greatest influence. For even as it was, his influence was immense. As philosopher, as art critic and as musician, which he was just as much, he had a profound influence on the self-understanding of entire generations of intellectuals, people in the humanities, and artists;

in effect he did nothing less than reconnect German Culture to the cultural modernism which the Nazis had blackballed. Three names only I would like to mention in this context that stand for an admirably productive pursuit of Adornian impulses in areas of contemporary art – in film, literature, theater and music: Alexander Kluge, Ivan Nagel and Heinz-Klaus Metzger.

If there is something that the philosophical schools of the Western World during the twentieth century have in common then it would be reflection on language as the locus of thought and reason. Adorno, too, was part of this but he gave it a twist that was all his own: it is above all in language that he sees the largely buried potential of a non-identitarian reason. The critique of identifying thinking means for him, in the first instance, critique of language; by the same token Philosophy's 'work of the concept' [Arbeit des Begriffs] is essentially a working away at language itself. In a witty pun on Christianity's prudery he polemicises against the „resentment of those ... who hold the body of language to be sinful“. The body of language: that is the materiality and historicity of language, that is the unending potential of its productive and innovative use, also its rhetorical use, which has been regarded as 'sinful' in Philosophy since Plato. And it is also the traps of language [fallstricke] in which Philosophers get caught up when they come to forget the historicity and the linguistic contextuality [sprachgebundenheit] of their apparently 'pure' concepts. That Adorno carries out reflection upon language as a working at language and as a critique of language is what distinguishes his thought from the predominant forms of contemporary Philosophy of Language, but just as much from the important hermeneutic Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In contrast to Gadamer's hermeneutics, which tends to conceive the cultural transmission of tradition as self-authorizing, hermeneutics in the sense of Adorno is much more explicitly critical. Critical first of all of the socially established mandarins responsible for this mediation of tradition itself – in accordance with Benjamin's dictum that „in every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it“. It was this critical hermeneutics which enabled Adorno after the war to pull the specifically German philosophical, literary and musical tradition, corrupted by the Nazis and their predecessors, back into the broad course of the Enlightenment – to reclaim it for the „project of Modernity“ (Habermas) —, thereby making it re-accessible for a post-war generation of morally troubled students. Adorno's reflection on the 'body' of language, and on the potential contained therein for non-identitarian thinking, is a moment of what he terms the „remembrance of Nature in the Subject“ –

in other words, a movement of thought in the direction of materialism. „Materialism“ meant here however not in the modern scientific sense of the term, but rather in an anti-idealist sense, with its emphasis on mind’s foundation in nature. This taken in a sense where ‘nature’ is seen above all as living nature, both the „somatic, unmeaningful stratum of living nature“ as well as the irreducibly somatic and material aspects of what is meant by terms such as „subject“, „mind“, or „thought“. This is not without its consequences, most especially for Adorno’s concept of freedom. With his non-scientistic naturalism Adorno circumvents as it were the (Kantian) antinomy of freedom and determinism, and hence also the currently fashionable attempts, from within neurophysiology, to question the reality of a free will by means of a causal-reductionistic strategy. What he posits – correctly, in my view – is that the problem of freedom becomes an interesting one only in those situations where unfreedom is something that is in principle accessible to experience as psychological or societally caused compulsion. Freedom and unfreedom are of importance for Adorno not so much from the point of view of nature in its scientific and objectified guise, but rather of nature as it presents itself to us through Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology – that is, nature as it manifests itself in the self-experience of human subjects. The contradiction of freedom and determinism, according to Adorno, becomes manifest „in the subjects’ way to experience themselves, as now free, now unfree“. And: „Freedom is conceivable in negation only, corresponding to the concrete form of a specific unfreedom.“ Adorno’s critique of identifying thought culminates in a critique of the notion of truth. What he rejects is a conception of truth that reduces the latter to propositional truth, i.e. to the truth of individual sentences. Within Philosophy especially, according to Adorno, it is not individual sentences but constellations of sentences and the movement of thought, that is the real locus of truth. But for Adorno there is even more to it than this: referring to the primacy of practical reason in Kant he reinterprets it as implying that the idea of truth ultimately contains the idea of a liberated society, i.e. of an emancipated humanity. The ideas of truth and universal freedom are for him inextricably interlinked in a single constellation. It is this that he aims at in his rescuing critique of Metaphysics, which – just as it is in Kant – is to be at the same time a rescuing critique of religion: „The innervation that metaphysics might win only by discarding itself aims at such other truth, and it is not the last among the motivations for the transition to materialism.“

2.

It is this motif which Adorno elaborates in the final chapter of his late work, his *Negative Dialectics*. At its core there is a train of thought which, following upon a materialist critique of the conception of purely spiritual being, culminates in a critique of the concept of God in both the Judaic and Christian religions; a critique going beyond the critique of religion of Marx and Freud – while most certainly based on it – to the extent that it questions the possible meaning of the idea of God just as much as it questions the possible meaning of a belief in God. The remembrance of nature in spirit forbids, according to Adorno, „... the assumption of a non-sensory egoity – which as existence, contrary to its own definition, is nonetheless to manifest itself in space and time. ... this is where the idea of truth takes us. ... one who believes in God hence cannot believe in God ... If once upon a time the ban on images extended to pronouncing the name, now the ban itself has in that form come to evoke suspicions of superstition.“

When spirit and „egoity“, selfhood, are inconceivable without some form of corporality in time and space, then the term „God“ ceases to correspond to anything meaningful. The ban on graven images, which Adorno invokes, was once meant to safeguard the name of God from all anthropomorphic ideas. But in the ban on images there is, all this notwithstanding, still the notion of a Being, of a „non-sensory egoity“, which in its omnipotence is able to express wrath, to punish, to forgive, to communicate with us, and in whom we can place our trust unreservedly – anthropomorphisms all. This is why the ban on images „in this guise“ still contains a rudiment of superstition. The meaning of talk about God has become as questionable as the idea of Heaven and Hell altogether. „This is the conclusion that the idea of truth compels us to accept.“ But immediately prior to that conclusion in the critique of religion there is a sentence in Adorno that marks a kind of turnabout: „... the possibility represented by the divine name is maintained, rather, by him who does not believe.“ The possibility Adorno is not prepared to abandon is that of a reconciled world, or, another formulation of his, that of salvation. A possibility, argues Adorno, that, even if it cannot be made plausible directly in the medium of argumentation, is grounded for all that in the experience of thought. „What demythologization would not affect without making it apologetically available is not an argument – the sphere of arguments is antinomical pure and simple – but the experience that thought, if it is not to be truncated must reach out to transcendence,

down to the idea of a world that would not only abolish extant suffering but revoke the suffering that is irrevocably past“.

On the threshold to atheism Adorno hesitates – and refuses to cross it entirely. His emphatic notion of a reconciled humanity differs from that of the theological idea of the resurrection of the dead for a life with God only in this one respect, namely that Adorno – materialistically-messianistically – intends a future state of the world and not something that fundamentally transcends this historical world. What Adorno’s notion of reconciliation, however, has in common with the theological one is the flavour of something fundamentally disjunctive from the historical world as we know it. Reconciliation means for Adorno, when measured by empirical reality, something that is radically transcendent, which on the one hand falls itself under the taboo on representation, but on the other hand, if it is not to be entirely void, must become the object of a hope that needs at the very least a negative explication. Negation here means negation of all that is negative in the current world situation, a negation which, in contrast to what Adorno, in contradistinction to Hegel, would otherwise allow for the negation of a negation, means the absolute positive. Negation not just of material misery, suffering, humiliation, unfreedom and misfortune in all its forms, but negation even of mortality and death. Adorno’s faith is an atheistic faith in God. It is a despairing faith, since for Adorno it is the last alternative to a despair that would become ineluctable, should death have the last word. „If death were that absolute which philosophy tried in vain to conjure positively, everything is nothing; all that we think, too, is thought into the void; none of it is truly thinkable.“ At the same time Adorno keeps stressing that here thought is confronted by its own limits; following Kant, he holds that when we get to the question of transcendence „the sphere of arguments is antinomical pure and simple“. What discursive argumentation is no longer able to throw light upon however, that, according to Adorno, becomes manifest in works of art. Hence the „incomparable metaphysical relevance“ which he imputes to the „rescue of semblance, the object of aesthetics“. Aesthetic semblance in the sense of Hegel – the work of art as the sensuous manifestation of the Idea – Adorno interprets more as a promissory glint, i.e. as mere appearance and an anticipatory glimpse of real reconciliation to come. „Art is semblance even at its highest peaks; but its semblance, the irresistible part of it, is given to it by what is not semblance. What art, notably the art decried as nihilistic, says in refraining from judgments is that everything is not just nothing. It if were, the whole of existence would be pale, colorless, indifferent. [...] In semblance is a promise of non-semblance.“ Adorno’s emphatic idea of reconciliation,

were one to take it literally, casts a shadow over his work by putting the historical world in a messianic perspective which threatens to level the difference between barbarism and that betterment of society that is humanly possible. In a strict sense no merely human practice could ever reduce the unbridgeable gap that separates the historical world from the condition of salvation. In the final aphorism of the *Minima Moralia* Adorno even declares this messianic perspective to be the condition for the possibility of knowledge altogether: „Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption.“ I have just spoken of shadow, rather than of light, although the matter is, on the face of it, not as clear-cut as it may seem. In the last sentence of the *Minima Moralia* one reads that, in view of the „demand“ made upon thought by the sentence just quoted „the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters“. And: „Even its own impossibility it (thought) must seek to comprehend for the sake of the possible“. There is something adumbrated here that Derrida called the necessity of a „messianic affirmation“ beyond messianism, a theme I shall return to below. But the ambiguity remains: if it is only a messianic perspective, a thinking of the unthinkable, that can open up a historical realm of possibility [moeglichkeitsraum] – a realm of possibility that Adorno is convinced is barred in the world as it exists – then this means that finitude and contingency, suffering, illness, strife, guilt and death as abolishable and rescindable aspects of the human condition must at the very least be conceivable, whereas, as it seems to me, humanly achievable notions such as freedom, solidarity, justice and happiness accrue their meaning and illuminating power only against the background of this „negativity“.

The context of Adorno’s deliberations make it clear however, that, when he speaks of despair as the only alternative to the hope of salvation, he means despair in the face of those that have been murdered in the gas chambers. It is their suffering which may not have the final word. But must we not concede the impossibility of consolation for such despair altogether, just as there was none for those who were in fact murdered? A despair which, as Adorno himself says, is bearable only, if at all, if it is countered by a „categorical imperative“ which holds that „the constellation of thought and action must be changed in such a way that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen again.“ Nothing similar? Not entirely dissimilar, even if certainly not comparable with Auschwitz, is after all much of what happens on a daily basis in the world today. For all victims of meaningless violence there is no possible solace. But that is exactly why the categorical imperative which Adorno invokes is so inescapable. If the hope of salvation were real, then this would surely once again be

reason to praise, to the „weary and overburdened“, to the „humiliated and insulted“ (Bloch), a purely spurious reconciliation with this „vale of tears“ – which contradicts everything that Adorno ever wrote.

Adorno’s attempt at rendering theology serviceable for materialism – a formulation of Benjamin – turns out to be a dubious enterprise, even if it has nothing in common with today’s popular attempts at a „revitalisation of religious consciousness“, at a „religious mobilisation of culture“; attempts which are once again intent on functionalising religion as social cement in a disoriented and socially disintegrating society. But perhaps one could put a different reading on Adorno’s approach. Ernst Bloch once said that only a Christian could be a good atheist – that’s the inversion of a sentence which precedes it in Bloch, namely: „Only an atheist can be a good Christian.“ And with this last sentence Bloch means that an atheism that 'sublates' the law of God, an atheism that both preserves and freely transcends the law of God, that such an atheism is already implied within Christianity as its own intrinsic tendency. There is a similar argument to be found in Slavoj Žižek: „Christ ... the thin line between before and after, old and new, real and symbolic, between God-father-object and the confraternity of the spirit. In this he represents both at once: the extreme point of the old (the culmination of the logic of sacrifice...) and its overcoming (the change of perspective) inherent in the new.“ Jesus’ lament on the cross „My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?“ would thus not be addressed at an almighty God, „whose ways for us mortals are incomprehensible, but rather a lament indicative of the impotence of God“. In the doctrine and in the fate of the Son of Man there would be thus anticipated, still unperceived by himself and his disciples – let alone by the later Church – the abdication of God in favour of a human „community of the spirit.“ Here the „death of God“ (Nietzsche) no longer appears as a reason for despair, but, in Žižek’s formulation, as a „message of joy“, a message presaging the possible end to humanity’s immaturity, setting human beings free to take sole responsibility for what they make of their lives and their living together.

On such premisses ‘rendering theology serviceable for materialism’ would come to mean something different from what it means in Adorno. I believe that even in a theological sense it would be more consistent, if we – without moving too far beyond Adorno –, took as our point of departure a „this-worldly“ interpretation of what the Pauline triad of faith, hope and love once meant. Faith and hope, that would be a confidence that retains its openness to the possibility of bringing about an improvement in the state of the world, albeit without divine warranty and even in the face of catastrophe, of man-made barbarism, of the experience of failure and the certainty

of death. And „love“ would be nothing other than the openness towards the concrete other, one’s „fellow man“, and – as Tugendhat formulated it in a recent lecture on Mysticism – an opening up towards, the knowing compassion with the distressed and the wretched. Faith, hope and love in this sense are something different from heightened moral awareness („a duty to love is an absurdity“ says Kant, talking about love of humanity [menschenliebe]); they rather share with what in the best theological tradition has been said about faith, hope and love, the character of non-fungibility [unverfügbarkeit], of what is discursively unenforceable, and yet of what perhaps is vitally important for human beings and human relationships altogether. No doubt the question that is here posed is how this legacy of the Christian tradition is to be sustained in a fully secularised world. Everything depends, so it seems to me, on whether the world will ever reach a stage at which religion in its explicitly religious forms will have become superfluous. I have no doubt that it would be easy enough to find, for that matter, in all world religions, traces of this kind of faith, hope and love. Needless to say – and this is not really in contradiction to Bloch – a Jew, a Muslim and a Buddhist could just as well be a „good atheist“. And who’s to say what – quite apart from the Judeo-Christian tradition – we still stand to learn from the other religions when approached from this perspective. If one seeks to understand Adorno’s critique of religion – together with his parallel project of making theology serviceable for materialism – in this way, then his rescuing critique of metaphysics appears in a new light. And indeed, an alternative critical rescuing of metaphysics can be made out in the internal structure [innenstruktur] of a large number of his texts.

Allow me at this point a digression. I mentioned above that Adorno interprets aesthetic semblance as a semblance of non-semblance, as an anticipation of reconciliation. If my metacritique of Adorno’s critique of metaphysics is correct, then this interpretation of aesthetic semblance is hardly tenable. And besides, in this form, it is not really central to Adorno’s aesthetics; its quintessential elements can be extricated without damage from the context of the philosophy of reconciliation in which they also feature. If one were to speak not of „reconciliation“ in the sense of salvation, but rather in the literal sense of loosening up – as when a facial expression softens up, or stiff joints become supple, or when the tongue loosens, or when fetters, torpidity of perception or thought loosen up – then Adorno’s intention seems to me indeed to capture something of the experience of art; perhaps one could speak of a glimpse of freedom. Let me give two examples which, although one certainly cannot simply generalise from them, as extreme ex-

amples do perhaps give an indication of what Adorno could have meant with „semblance of non-semblance“.

A couple of years ago I heard a performance of Mozart's Requiem in a Berlin church – framed and repeatedly interspersed by the Funeral Music of Queen Mary by Henry Purcell – a performance accompanied by texts spoken by Walter Jens. I have often heard that Requiem, but during this performance I realized for the first time just how subversive Mozart's music relates to the clerical-theocratic, the authoritarian and apocalyptically-threatening dimensions of the liturgical requiem text. Over and over Mozart transforms the dies-irae-horror into collective song overcoming pure terror, in which something of a profanely possible reconciliation and solidarity, an atheistic faith, comes into view. Mozart is not in the least trying to gloss over the reality of death, but what one could say is that the music gives the Pauline motif Death, where is thy sting/Hell where is thy triumph the only humanly possible, the only credible twist. This impression was strengthened by the repeated intermission of the Requiem by Purcell's funeral music: mourning the dead comes to replace terror for the living. Something loosens up here: petrified fear of death and apocalyptic fright, religiously decreed dread of God's wrath dissolve into a vision of human autonomy and solidarity. Ivan Nagel has spoken of something similar with regard to the singer-ensembles in Mozart's buffa operas. „One cannot tell“, writes Nagel, „whether their worlds are utopias, or whether ... almost uniquely in modern art ... they are quite immersed in the present, exempt from utopian longing. Which is to say, their happiness does not wait for the arrival of the happy ending. It is alive in the gift of all the characters to express themselves utterly, as a shiningly complete presence in the relationship each creates with every other, whether friend or foe. Happiness in Mozart's buffa means ultimately only that someone's wishes and hopes are fulfilled ... First and foremost, happiness means that all dwell closely together in love and strife (and thus learn how rightly to wish and hope ...)“. Here also an „illusion of the non-illusory“, except that here the non-illusory means not a kind of salvation but rather a manifestation of humanly achievable happiness.

My second example is a video-installation of Candice Breitz with the title „Legend“ (a portrait of Bob Marley), which I saw recently at the Berlin Academy of the Arts; a tribute to the Jamaican reggae artist Bob Marley and his CD „Legend“. The thirty-channel video-installation features the individually framed faces and torsos of thirty fans of Bob Marley's music, (coloured, all but one), as they hear – via barely visible headphones – and sing the individual songs of the CD „Legend“. Marley's voice and the in-

strumentation are all but inaudible for the audience, which hears as it were a purely ‘a cappella’ version of these songs. The impression created is that of a choir in which each singer becomes individually foregrounded through the framing of his or her expression and movement. During the vocal passages, listening to the voice of Bob Marley, they karaoke with great fervency; during the instrumental passages on the other hand the „choir“ dissolves instead into a wonderfully anarchic, acoustic and gestural accompaniment to the music – which only the singers, but not the audience, can hear in their headphones – replacing the choral singing [chorisches zusammensingen]. Songs like „No Woman No Cry“, „Get Up Stand Up“ or „Exodus“ gain a collective power of expression reminiscent of spirituals, in which the memory of black oppression and the subversive tradition of black music find a quite new expression which at the same time voices happiness – the happiness of being able to „express without reservation“ in these songs. To this the individualisation of the singers – through the technique of the video-installation – contributes a great deal, likewise the anarchic „interludes“ in which the choir breaks up into the individual singers, abandoning themselves, entirely unregimented, humming, laughing and gesticulating to the music only they – but not the viewer – can hear. The songs themselves are consoling and rebellious all at once, while the switch between coordinated singing and the anarchic dissolution of the entire choir into individual, distinctive personalities comes across on the beholder as a vision of freedom, utopian and entirely present all at once, like Mozart’s singer ensembles in the interpretation of Ivan Nagel.

With this I mean to say: a critique of Adorno is easy enough if we’re dealing with his strong theses regarding the critical rescue of metaphysics and religion, through to his metaphysical interpretation of aesthetic semblance. But it is almost always possible, in such theses, once one gets close to the concrete phenomena from which they’ve been garnered, to find therein moments of conceptual reflection that are based in genuinely authentic experiences. These in turn bear the traces of that other rescue of metaphysics in Adorno’s texts that I referred to above, a rescue attempt that does not get caught up in the paradoxical constellation of a messianic materialism. Here we are dealing really with the rescue of a critical and transcending ferment which is embedded in language-based and linguistically mediated human practices. The critical recovery of metaphysics means its rescue as the epitome of possible critique. Rescue here means that the ideas of truth, of freedom, of justice, also that of democracy, should all be seen as transcending whatever is empirically given: as redeemable by nothing in the empirical world, they signify at the same time a critical ferment vis-á-vis everything

that has ever, historically, presented itself as their fulfillment. Being radically transcendent concepts – hence the temptation to interpret them in terms of a philosophy of redemption – they are at the same time immanently operative within society. I think Derrida is right when he claims that they are to be understood neither messianically nor as regulative ideas (with the associated connotation of allowing for an infinite approximation of an ideal), but rather: as ideas which critically transcend everything that exists, which in every historical constellation need to be spelled out anew, concretised and re-inforced in their validity, against false implementations and ideological misinterpretations. Traces of such an alternate, critical recovery of metaphysics are to be found throughout Adorno's writings – not just there where he intervenes, in his post-war work, in the German situation after the cessation of the Nazi barbarities. „Interventions“ is indeed the title of one of his collections of essays, and interventions they are when Adorno speaks out on questions of education after Auschwitz, on democratic education, on problems such as the continuing influence of authoritarian types of behaviour, on phenomena of cultural and religious regression, or on the necessity of a critical re-appropriation of the cultural tradition – interventions meant, not least, as a contribution to the dissolution of the restorative blockages within the democratic self-image of the German Federal Republic.

3.

I have already mentioned Derrida's formulation of a „messianic affirmation“ beyond messianism. But what I have just said about Adorno's critical rescue of metaphysics doesn't really fit into that schema either. The radical impulse of his critique of society, his critique of identitarian reason aiming at a qualitatively different society, seems to have been entirely lost from view. Which means, in the end, to be back again with a truncated Adorno. It is hence worth recalling here that for Adorno, who never stopped invoking Marx, the critique of the capitalist economy, explicitly or implicitly, formed one of the centres of his critique of society. In this he upheld not only the radical impulse of the older Critical Theory, but also the critical analyses contained in the Culture Industry chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which not coincidentally had as its central concern the most advanced forms of American capitalism. But at the same time Adorno also stuck to the image of modernity sketched in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, inasmuch as every potential for a radically different practice was, under present circumstances, felt to be unrealizable. Precisely here is to be

located the source of the peculiar radicality of his thought, aiming as it does not at an immediate change in practice but instead at a reversal of the dominant forms of thought: this was meant to prepare the ground so that a future practice could perhaps one day become possible. „Paradoxically, it is the desperate fact that the practice that would make a difference is barred which grants to thought a breathing spell it would be practically criminal not to utilize. Today, ironically, it profits thought that its concept must not be absolutized: as conduct, it remains a bit of practice, however hidden this practice may be from itself.“ A form of thought in other words, for which the practice which it intends is still hidden, aims for all that at a practice at some future date. And the object of such a practice, according to Adorno – and to this he sticks right through to his late works – becomes clear in the central meaning which accrues to the critique of the principle of „exchange“ or „equivalence“, of commodity fetishism, of the Culture Industry, and, following Lukàcs, of „reification“. It is in the exchange principle that Adorno sees all the different strands of identitarian reason coming together; the critique of the capitalist economy remains, in a subterranean way, still the theme of the *Negative Dialectics*. With that, at the same time, the societal perspective of a future practice has been named, that thought intends but which is still hidden to it: it is the prospect of the material forces of production made serviceable for a freed society beyond the capitalist one – and, for Adorno, even more so, beyond the totalitarian socialist one. When Adorno speaks of an emancipated society he means this globally: he means an emancipated humanity. Here for the first time the this-worldly core of his messianism becomes apparent: a more radical interpretation, one could say, inspired by Marx, of Kant’s idea of a world citizenship.

Adorno’s critique of the capitalist economy remains – this is how he himself saw it – radical and helpless both at once. One reason for this is doubtlessly, as Habermas has shown, that Adorno’s critique of identitarian reason remains, in the end, entangled in a monological Subject-Object-paradigm of philosophical reflection, leading him to lose sight of the specific resources provided by a communicative – as opposed to a purely instrumental – reason, most especially within the modern world. Adorno in this way, much as Marx had before him, underestimated the emancipatory potential which, concurrent in its emergence with the origins of the capitalist economy, is inherent in the modern, at its core already universalistically understood forms of democracy. Habermas is no doubt correct against both Marx and Adorno to insist on a notion of democratic politics – which in Marx fails to find its rightful place because of his „eschatological“ philosophy of history and in Adorno fails to find its place because of his

monological construction of the critique of identitarian reason. Adorno's messianism – as well as his mistrust of the possibilities for a genuine change of societal practice – are a pointer to the homelessness of the political in his theory. Once the problems of capitalism are viewed from within the horizon of a democratic politics, one has not only named the area where possible countervailing forces against the destructive consequences of the capitalist economy are to be localised; one has also redefined the problem that they pose. If there should hence be reasons for holding fast to the more radical impulse of the Marxian and the Adornian critique of capitalism, then this would need to be done in a form which does not fall behind Habermas' democratic „politicisation“ of the problem. For in reality – let me put it this way – what we are speaking of is no less than a re-politicisation of the economy, in other words, the democratic domestication of the same.

Allow me at this point to touch, briefly, on current discussions and current problems. I take my leave of Adorno, but only to probe further the this-worldly secret of his messianism, in the hope of closing in on him again from a different direction, this time as it were from behind. Nowadays the critique of the capitalist economy is, in the forum of public discourse, widely held to be obsolete: from the perspective of the ruling neoliberal ideology, celebrating itself, postmodernistically, as the end of ideology, it is regarded as „ideological“. This neoliberal ideology has spread nowadays even to subcultures and spheres of the „cultural Left“ itself – among the German Greens for instance, for whom ecological, multiculturalistic and anti-racist projects, or the struggle of gays and queers for recognition, have been and still are central. But even where this is not the case there is a tendency amongst the cultural Left to hold up their critical projects as an adequate surrogate for that which was once meant by a politics of the Left. In contrast to this I believe – and here I find myself in accord with authors as disparate as Rorty, Derrida, Bourdieu, Žižek and Habermas – that the struggle for the substance of the liberal democracies must be fought out at two separate levels. The one is, one could say, the level of the struggle for recognition, in which what is at issue is equal rights and opportunities for stigmatised minorities and their ways of life. The other is a struggle for the democratic domestication of capitalism, which, as a struggle for the recovery of a democratic politics – including the realm of international institutions – is at the same time a struggle for the inclusion of those that have, de facto, been excluded by the capitalist culture and is hence also a struggle for social justice (unemployed, homeless, refugees, the army of the poor in the developing countries, etc.). These two levels of

the struggle for a better democracy are doubtlessly interconnected in a multiplicity of ways, and most especially in the international sphere. But they are not to be reduced one to the other, since democratic politics demands something in addition to the implementation of relations of recognition. It presupposes namely in addition, to put it in a rather abstract way, the establishment of institutions and public spheres, which alone can enable the free and equal members of a political community to gain control over their collective affairs. We are dealing here as it were with a problem of societal (re)construction, of which we cannot assume, it seems to me, that it has been solved once and for all and at a global level by the existing forms of liberal democracy – and the same holds, a fortiori, for the international institutions that we have today.

One could be of the opinion of course that in today's world there are more important matters to attend to than the problems of capitalism – international terrorism for instance, or the spread of fundamentalist (not just Islamic) or nationalistic tendencies, or eruptions of violence all over the world, the ethnic wars that are breaking out in so many places, and so on. But there is much to be said for the view that many of these new threats and conflicts that have come to dominate public awareness are not to be understood or explained independently of the problems of globalised capitalism. On this I must confine myself perforce to a few general remarks that can do no more than sketch broadly an alternative perspective to that of the neo-liberal dispositif, with its utopia of a liberation through the forces of the market. In doing so I shall not say anything about the productive and modernising consequences of an unleashed capitalist economy, which Marx had already pointed to, but to remind instead of the current social and cultural costs this brings in its wake, and the destructive consequences it has for the possibilities and scope for a democratic politics.

With Pierre Bourdieu my premise is that globalisation in its current configuration is not in the least to be understood as a „natural“ process, but rather as one that is obviously politically driven. A process which – through the deregulation of world trade, of the labour- and financial markets worldwide – has led to the rise of what Bourdieu has called a „reserve army rendered docile through precarity“, and which is being driven in the final analysis by the politically, economically and militarily leading power of the United States, together with international institutions such as the World Bank, the WTO, and the IMF. A process which not only threatens to dismantle the Welfare State – with an increasing redistribution of wealth from poor to rich as one of its consequences – but which leads to a radical cut-back of the political functions of the state altogether, amongst other things

through the progressive privatisation and marketisation of its public functions. The social consequences of this are visible everywhere. To mention but one example of the erosion of democratic institutions: the international GATS treaty, which has led to higher education being turned into one more commodity amongst other commodities, and which was enacted more or less behind the backs of the national parliaments and the democratically constituted public spheres. The decline of the political sphere in the mass democracies of the West is something Hannah Arendt had already deplored forty years ago in her book *On Revolution*. But only today does the disempowerment of democratic politics in favour of an economic, administrative and security-driven logic of action – and does the depoliticisation of the public sphere under the influence of the mostly capitalistically controlled mass media – seem to be reaching a magnitude which represents an immediate threat to the substance of the liberal democracies, including their cultural and social aspects. Within the neoliberal dispositif the political, social and cultural costs of globalisation remain of course entirely invisible, since the only costs it knows are those that are part and parcel of a profitability calculation.

I have not yet spoken of the social havoc, of the expropriation of the ways of life and necessities for survival, of the exploitation, pauperisation and humiliation which capitalist globalisation means – spurred on with political, legal and if need be also military measures – for the poorer nations of the world, or at any rate for the bulk of their underprivileged populations; as it were a continuation of the European colonial history by other means and with other actors. That the Western universalism of reason and human rights is, nowadays, discredited in some areas of the world has doubtlessly to do with the way, in the end, that this universalism is increasingly seen only as a universalism that is interpreted and bullied through by the forces of globalisation, as a mutilated universalism in the service of particular interests. There is every indication that the rise of political Islamism also, including the rise of international Islamist terrorism, would be unintelligible without this background. Bourdieu had already spoken, several years before the New York terror attacks of September 11 – the latter being the very day that we celebrate Adorno's birthday – of a „revolt against reason as such“ amongst Arab, South American and African nations, „something that cannot be seen in isolation from the abuse of power that is taking place in the name of (economic, scientific, etc.) reason.“ And as far as terrorism is concerned, Žižek poses the following question: „Are the ‘international terrorist organisations’ not after all the obscene doppelgänger of the large multinational corporations, the ultimate rhizomatic machine, omnipresent

but lacking a clearly definable territorial base? Do they not represent the form in which nationalistic and/or religious ‘fundamentalism’ has adapted itself to global capitalism?”

Under present conditions one must naturally question whether the liberal democracies that we have today – which, for that matter, on a world scale, are in the minority – as isolated ones still harbor within them, to the extent that they have ever done so, the potential for a genuinely democratic domestication of the economy. As long as, at the level of the Nation State, democratic politics and the economy could still interrelate in a more or less successful way, that could seem plausible – it is here that the triumph of the reformist wing of the old German Social Democracy originated as well as the impetus for the establishment of the European Welfare States. But faced with the current forms of today’s globalised capitalism it would appear rather that the national and political institutions of the Western Democracies – including, to date, those of the European Union – have become more or less hostage to, or else accomplices and enforcement agencies of capitalist globalisation. From the European perspective a great deal nowadays no doubt depends on whether, as a first step, the tendency towards the erosion of the political functions of the European nations is reversible through a democratic restructuring of the European Union. A democracy however that really would be capable of meeting the globalised economy head on, still needs to be invented at the international level. This is, of course, the exact opposite of what George Bush has in mind with a worldwide export of democracy in the „War on Terror“. At the present time we cannot possibly know what forms such a democracy could take in the different cultural contexts – at the local and international level and through the equitable inclusion of all involved/affected parties – or how it could assert itself not only against the hegemonic forces of capitalist globalisation itself but also against those of its counterforces that are purely destructive and regressive. The invention of new forms of organisation and of democratic self-determination, the struggle for a globally effective democracy – Derrida speaks of a „New International“, and Bourdieu of a new internationalism of social movements and intellectuals, including artists, authors and scientists – this invention and this struggle for a globally effective democracy and a non-ethnocentric universalism, and perhaps, as Bourdieu has put it, for an „economy of happiness“, that has only just started, in many places, in a multiplicity of discourses, initiatives and types of organisations transcending national frontiers; this whole field of constructive critique and a potentially changing practice that has opened up nowadays, all of this contains within it, it seems to me, a concretisation of that radically

transcending perspective which Adorno, in accord with the older Critical Theory, in his critique of the exchange principle as a critique of existing society, once insisted upon. That would be a worthy disenchantment of his messianism – validating its legitimate inner-worldly core, without prematurely disavowing the radical impetus of his critique of society.

[transl. Frederik van Gelder]