

Immediacy and its vicissitudes

– on the occasion of a new translation of Adorno’s
*Minima Moralia*¹

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T.W. Adorno – musicologist, philosopher, social theorist – has been called a ‘last genius’², the inspiration of the Student Movement of the Sixties, a role model for the ‘critical intellectuals’ of post-war Europe and the US, an intellectual in dark times³, and much else besides. Thomas Mann, writing from California in 1952, pens him these lines after finally being able to put down the *Minima Moralia*: “I’ve been holding onto this book for days, almost magnetically ... it is, every day anew, a compelling read ... the most concentrated material imaginable. It is said that a moon of Sirius, white in colour, is so dense that a cubic inch of it would for us weigh tons. This gives it a hugely powerful gravitational field, comparable to that which envelops your book.”⁴ Peter Sloterdijk praises it as “the most important moral-critical work of German Philosophy after the second World War”; Michel Foucault would concede ruefully that „three-quarters of my work I would not have needed to write if I had discovered Adorno in time.”⁵

Written between 1944 and 1947, the first part originally intended for Max Horkheimer’s fiftieth birthday (in February 1945), eventually published by

1 Vrije Universiteit 12 November 2013.

2 Detlev Claussen (2008): Theodor W. Adorno – *One Last Genius*. Harvard UP.

3 Zygmunt Bauman: “Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno – An Intellectual in Dark Times.” in: Moshe Zuckermann (2004): *Theodor W. Adorno – Philosoph des beschädigten Lebens*.

4 Stefan Müller-Doohm (2003) *Adorno – Eine Biographie*, p. 519. [all translations by the author, except where indicated.]

5 Backcover blurb of the Dutch translation.

Suhrkamp Verlag in 1951, translated into English only twenty years later, the new Dutch translation underscores the book's steady rise to the level of a modern classic.⁶

Societies deal with catastrophies – at the cultural level – through a combination of amnesia, historicisation and the institutionalisation of mourning, and the contemporary cult of the ‘survivor’ is a part of that. Adorno was anything but a survivor – he spent the war years in safety in the US – but some of that aura has rubbed off on an author who, when one googles him, is associated with terms that sound like the chapter headings for a book on world affairs since 1945: ‘Auschwitz’, ‘culture industry’⁷. From Verona, the city of Dante’s exile, it is said that when the citizens chanced upon Dante on the street they would draw back in fright, saying to one another: “eccovi l’uomo ch’è stato all’ Inferno”, that’s the one who’s come back from Hell.⁸ Some of that fright – now become awe – concerning the events of eighty years ago have rubbed off on the memory of Adorno, with the result that a book which at the time of writing was the very antithesis of an ‘edifying read’, has, through the passage of time, acquired something of that classicism which the book itself once set out to demolish.

But that’s to start off with that ‘bird’s-eye’ perspective on history ‘as a whole’ part of his legacy that has been such a stumbling-block for not just his English-speaking critics.

6 *Minima Moralia – Reflecties uit het beschadigde leven*. transl. Hans Driessen. It follows on an earlier Dutch translation by M. Mok, 1971, predating for that matter the 1974 English translation by Jephcott. Horkheimer and Adorno’s determined opposition to all variants of existentialism and Lebensphilosophie has not deterred the publisher of the Dutch translation from praising it as ‘levenskunst’ and ‘levensfilosofie’, a book that does not leave its reader, we are informed, “without hope”. (Not exactly something that squares with how Thomas Mann once saw it: “Gäbe es nur je ein positives Wort bei Ihnen, Verehrter, das eine auch nur ungefähre Vision der wahren, der zu postulierenden Gesellschaft gewährte! Die Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben ließen es daran, nur daran, auch schon fehlen ...” [Thomas Mann to Adorno, cited in Claussen op.cit., p. 168.]) It fits with this rather airy attitude to the content of the book that the ‘dedication’ of the original, which does much to provide the context without which today’s reader is going to make heavy weather of it, has been relegated to the back.

7 The latter term, for that matter, seldom recognized any more as a neologism coined by Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

8 William G. Niederland (1966): “Ein Blick in die Tiefen der ‘unbewältigten’ Vergangenheit und Gegenwart” in: *Psyche*, nr. 6, p. 466-476.

Adorno's German students after the war called his collection of aphorisms a "philosophical diary"⁹, and this was also the title that the Adorno Archive originally intended for the posthumous publication of part of the sequel to the MM (which was still incomplete at Adorno's death), and in the event was published under the title „Graeculus“ ('little Greek') only in 2001¹⁰. But it's clear enough that they were more or less by-products, 'obiter dicta', of the dizzying number of projects he was immersed in already in the U.S.¹¹, rather than a planned publication from the start. A starker contrast, at any rate, between the 'Reflections from Damaged Life' and the Analytic Philosophy that he had become acquainted with during his Oxford years is difficult to imagine. Adorno himself was to the first to concede this:

It is precisely undeviating self-reflection – the practice of which Nietzsche called psychology, that is, insistence on the truth about oneself, that shows again and again, even in the first conscious experiences of childhood, that the impulses reflected upon are not quite 'genuine'. They always contain an element of imitation, play, wanting to be different. The desire, through submergence in one's own individuality, instead of social insight into it, to touch something utterly solid, ultimate being, leads to precisely the false infinity which since Kierkegaard the concept of authenticity has been supposed to exorcise.¹²

On the face of it, approached from the analytic perspective, "false infinity" does not sound too remote from the conception of objective knowledge as this was being taught at the time of Russell and Popper in England, by the

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- 9 „Am meisten imponierten bei diesen Versuchen, sich gegenseitig vom Renommee des Ordinarius zu überzeugen, jene Kenner, die auf das gerade in der zweiten Auflage erschienene Buch *Minima Moralia* aufmerksam machten: das sei etwas ganz Exquisites, eine Aphorismensammlung, die sehr persönliche Textfragmente Adornos enthalte, eine Art philosophisches Tagebuch. Dieses müsse man unbedingt lesen, um in die komplizierte Gedankenwelt dieses Autors eindringen zu können.“ (Müller-Doohm (2007) (ed.): *Adorno-Portraits – Erinnerungen von Zeitgenossen*. p. 102.)
- 10 "Graeculus I" and „Graeculus II“, in the *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VII* and *VIII* respectively, 2001 and 2003.
- 11 With Horkheimer on the dialectics project, with Thomas Mann on *Doktor Faustus*, with the American Jewish Committee on the Antisemitism project, with the Berkeley Study group on what would later become the *Authoritarian Personality*, with the Research Project on Social Discrimination at the University of California, with Hanns Eisler on Film Music. Not to mention contacts with his colleagues at the OSS – Marcuse, Neumann –, or with the psychoanalysts, later with the Hacker Foundation.
- 12 *Minima Moralia* (MM), New Left Books 1974, transl. Jephcott. Aphorism 99 "Gold As-say". All page references to this edition.

Philosophy of Science movement in America.¹³ Analytic philosophy too spurns the subjective and the personal as the realm of ‘mere opinion’, a realm too individual and ideosyncratic for it to be of much use as a ‘foundation’ for the real world. But this ‘analytic’ theme, in the above quote, is immediately juxtaposed to ideas that are incommensurable with even the broadest conception of science current at the time: psychoanalysis, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer. Ideas that have never stopped counting, from the vantage point of the natural sciences, as speculative and abstract. Add to that the sceptical distantiating from the notion of individual reflection as much of a foundation for truth *altogether* – for as long, that is, as ‘individual’, ‘logic’, ‘experience’ remain concepts not themselves problematised – and it’s clear that „false immediacy“, „authenticity“ are being criticised from entirely un- or post-Cartesian premisses. But does the *social* insight into „one’s own individuality“ here lead in the direction of a critique of the much too atomistic notion of individual psychology of the time, in the direction of interdisciplinary studies (with consequences for the logic of the social sciences), or should one rather think here of *Hegel*, whose “method” – it says in the dedication – “schooled that of the *Minima Moralia*”?¹⁴ This latter train of thought leads away from the empirical social science altogether, towards philosophy – or at any rate philosophy in what is still called, rather unhelpfully, the ‘Continental’ mode. Seen from this perspective, these aphorisms – the literary form notwithstanding – “reward being studied together, as if they make up a whole”, in the manner of a philosophical text. „As if“ – the note of hesitancy here is worth recording. Words taken from a congratulatory note in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1963, on the occasion of Adorno’s sixtieth birthday – by one Jürgen Habermas.¹⁵

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- 13 Gary L. Hardcastle and Alan W. Richardson (eds.) 2000: *Logical Empiricism in North America*. Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. XVIII.
- 14 "Dedication", p. 16. In Hent de Vries’ useful opposition: interdisciplinary materialism, or models of agency and judgement incompatible even with *that*? (De Vries, op. cit, p. 174.)
- 15 „His main work [these words are written three years before publication of the *Negative Dialektik*- fvg] is a collection of aphorisms. They reward being studied together, as if they make up a whole“. (reprinted Habermas *Philosophisch-politische Profile*, p. 178: „Adorno bemerkt einmal, daß systematisches Denken immer etwas von dem behalte, was Pariser Künstler ‘le genre chef d’oeuvre’ nannten; sein Widerstand gegen Systemzwang und Hierarchie des Gedanken spiegelt sich in einem Affekt gegeben das Hauptwerk. Diesem Affekt hat Adorno ein würdiges Denkmal gesetzt mit den *Minima Moralia*; denn es ehrt ihn, was die, die ihn mißverstehen, für eine Kränkung halten

It's a pointer that a passage such as this can be interpreted in very different ways – as the reflections of an author at the center of an intense intellectual ferment, in the US, during the last years of the war, or as the basis for a post-modern *aesthetics*, as a text that properly belongs to the uncompleted dialectic project, (preliminary formulations towards what a few years later would see the light of day as the *Negative Dialektik*) but also: the specific situation of the Jewish intellectuals between a European past and an American, future, post-Israeli Judaism on the other. 'Reflection' is a variegated term – with meanings not all of which (and that's understating it) can be accommodated within the Anglo-American empiricism the Horkheimer group was doing its best to conform to at the time.

To unravel some of these meanings it is necessary to take more of the historical context into account. The aphorism in question – „Gold assay“ (nr. 99), belongs to that part of Adorno's career in which the Horkheimer Circle was fully engaged in the research project that would establish their fame in the U.S.: the antisemitism studies for the American Jewish Committee, the AJC.¹⁶

By the summer of 1943 the Horkheimer group located

... a team of collaborators ... who collectively came to be known as the Public Opinion Study Group. With the psychological portion of the project organized through the aid of U.S. social psychologists, the anti-Semitism project moved forward on a series of interconnected, thematic fronts. Horkheimer and Adorno, in collaboration with Sanford's Public Opinion Study Group, pursued the psychoanalytic description of the anti-Semitic character and empirically derived their findings from questionnaires and interviews; Adorno, with help from Lowenthal, analyzed the documented speeches of anti-Semitic agitators in the United States; Horkheimer, together with other members of the Los Angeles team, devised an experimental methodology for a film study; and at the same time, Pollock's New York research team summarized the Institute's interpreta-

könnten: Sein Hauptwerk ist eine Sammlung von Aphorismen. Sie darf getrost, als sei sie eine Summe, studiert werden.“)

16 Culminating in the *Studies in Prejudice* (Which can still be consulted on the AJC website: http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/AED1.CV.pdf [accessed 17 Oct. 2013]), the *Authoritarian Personality*, and Franz Neumann's *Behemoth*. Many of the names associated with the project would become well-known in US academia after the war, and some far beyond. Herbert Marcuse, Bruno Bettelheim, Raul Hilberg, Leo Lowenthal, to mention only these. Erich Fromm had already parted ways with the Horkheimer Circle by then.

tions of totalitarian anti-Semitism by revisiting past work on the origins and implications of German Nazism.¹⁷

Adorno, on whose shoulders rested much of the responsibility for the success of the West Coast part of the project, was on the horns of a dilemma that is often sketched – as far as the methodological side is concerned – as the opposition between Anglo-US empiricism and Continental ‘grand theory’, between evidence-based research on the one hand and Weberian-type, Neo-Kantian or Left-Hegelian inspired theories of modernity ‘altogether’ on the other. In the work itself, two conceptions of antisemitism and prejudice emerged that not only stood in tension to one another, but caused considerable behind-the-scenes conflict between the AJC and its scientific director.¹⁸ Formulated from the research side of things, the controversy can be summed up like this: is antisemitism something *subjective* in the conventional meaning of the word, a proper field for Psychology as a scientific discipline, amenable to ameliorative social policies (education, an anti-authoritarian and liberal upbringing oriented towards freedom and self-actualisation, the inculcation of a democratic and liberal spirit combined with anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action programs) or is antisemitism a ‘moment’ of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, – something *objective* – explicable only ‘macro’-historically, as an aspect of the self-destructive totality of what would then be called either modernity or late capitalism? Was antisemitism merely one – if ominous – example of

17 Thomas Wheatland (2009): *The Frankfurt School in Exile*, p. 245.

18 It was a conflict that had a direct impact on the project itself. „Instead of yielding the textbook on anti-Semitism that all parties had expected, the administrative feuding contributed greatly to the final format – a series of five monographs produced by a handful of research teams that, at times, arrived at disparate conclusions. In addition to this administrative transformation, major revisions regarding the content and shape of the project were also requested. Most notable among these was the suggestion that Nazi anti-Semitism and American anti-Semitism were not necessarily identical. This struck at the heart of the Institute’s concept of totalitarian anti-Semitism, which had formed the basis for its theoretical assumptions. The AJC’s rejection of this principle jeopardized the work of the Institute’s New York office and forced the Horkheimer Circle to engage in more focused analyses of American Jew hatred. The AJC, showing a preference for the social-psychological investigations of the L.A. group, eagerly sought more information regarding the causes and dynamics energizing anti-Semitism in the United States. The resulting reshuffling of priorities led to substantial additions to the project, such as the investigations regarding American veterans and working-class laborers.“ (Wheatland, p. 247.) (Wheatland presents it as an opposition between *empirical* and *totalitarian* antisemitism, though it’s clear that what he has in mind is the unfinished dialectic project, which is ‘totalitarian’ only in the sense of ‘encyclopedic’, or in the sense of what later would be termed „interdisciplinary materialism“.)

the fundamentalisms still to come? If scientific method ('instrumental reason', *Positivism*) constitutes the *ideology* (or the mythology) of our time, in what sense can it *also* function as a basis for an empirical study of antisemitism? Is antisemitism a kind of social pathology that requires legislation and state intervention – keeping prejudice against minorities sufficiently at bay for democratic institutions to kick in at all (a premiss on which a great deal of Allied post-war 're-education' in Europe and elsewhere was based¹⁹), or is it the market mechanism ('exchange') *itself* that has become so deeply sedimented in the modern psyche – in *everyone's* emotional makeup – that the average voter is no longer capable of even *imagining* a world other than in terms of money and the most narrow of self-interests? (Endangering Democracy not from the 'prejudice', but from the 'reification' and apathy side.)

Adorno in other words, at the time of that „Gold assay“ aphorism, is in the thick of an intellectual ferment in the US of some importance for what was to follow, taking place at a time when the defeat of Nazism seemed certain – but also when news of the Holocaust against the Jews was becoming common knowledge²⁰. A time when academic and scholarly research into the causes of the breakdown of democracy in Weimar was not without influence on the policy makers.²¹ With the benefit of hindsight, one can say that Adorno was onto something that became the central shibboleth of the Cold War ahead: was it *Antisemitism* or was it *Capitalism* that had caused the European and then world disaster?

Back to the 'Gold assay' aphorism. „... the postulate of incorruptable truth“, „glorification of the factual“, the „fictitious claim that was is biologically one must logically precede the social whole“. Whatever the basis for Adorno's critique of the „pure self“ that had become an „abstraction“, it was a position on what in Analytic Philosophy was called the concept/object relationship that had little in common with the complex movement go-

19 c.f. Daniel Pick (2012): *The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind*. (c.f. my review of the book here: <https://www.nexus-instituut.nl/en/reviews/145-the-pursuit-of-the-nazi-mind>)

20 “Die Spur der ersten Nachrichten von dem, was in Auschwitz geschah, zieht sich durch das gesamte Buch. Nachträglich ist es geradezu erstaunlich, wie lange es dauerte, bis dies wahrgenommen wurde.” (Claussen, op.cit, p. 169.)

21 And not least via the offices of the German specialists at the OSS: c.f. Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, Otto Kirchheimer (2013): *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany: The Frankfurt School Contribution to the War Effort*.

ing on in *that* field at about the same time: the movement from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to the Speech Act Theory of Austin and Searle, what would later come to be known as the 'linguistic turn'.²² Speech Act Theory had the weakness that – Habermas would later stake his reputation on this – while drawing our attention to the constitutive role of language in all acts of perception and cognition (breaking apart that 'identity' of logic and sense perception postulated by Logical Positivism), it gives no account of a corresponding influence going in the *other* direction: the way symbol systems and their 'subjects' function in accordance with rules that remain unintelligible for as long as one ignores *psychology* and *anthropology* – what Habermas termed „universal pragmatics“, and in more recent parlance has come to be called the study of 'deep pragmatism'.²³ That is, in Adorno the constitutive role of language is not only affirmed, but immediately associated with a very un-Wittgensteinian notion: that the 'I' doing the reflecting cannot be treated in isolation from the society in which this is taking place, from the pragmatics and 'performative' aspects of language use, in isolation from the historical 'situatedness' of speakers, from the bourgeois world altogether.²⁴ The *illusion* of autonomous subjectivity is tied, in Adorno's view of things, at the level of *philosophical* discourse to 'Idealism' and 'instrumental reason', at the level of the mass media to a 'culture of narcissism', to the cult of *authenticity* and 'Hollywood':

22 The problem is not that, (following Adorno on this), in describing objects and processes, we remain oblivious to the constitutive role of language, or to the irreducibility of the gap between concepts and objects. Neither the 'I' of the cogito nor the 'we' for whom this 'I' speaks in scientific or scholarly discourse is unproblematic any longer. It touches on a question that cannot be pursued here, but is perhaps the most important within Western Philosophy since 1945: the consequences of the concession ('concession' from the point of view of Analytic Philosophy) that *experience is theory-laden*. H. de Vries on this: „Dahm demonstrates that, although before attacking the Vienna Circle in 1937 Horkheimer positioned himself in close proximity to the logical-empiricist or neopositivist criterion of taking sensible 'experience' and controllability to be touchstones for the establishment and justification of knowledge and meaningfulness (of propositional content, concepts, and terms), he nonetheless defined experience in much broader terms than they did. He thereby also anticipated some of the later insights concerning the theory-laden character of experience.“ (H. de Vries, op. cit. p. 185.)

23 c.f. Interview with Hent de Vries: „Minimal Difference with Maximal Import: 'Deep Pragmatism' and Global Religion“ (2011): *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 11, no. 3, p. 1-19.

24 And for that matter, the body, gender. Feminism had good reason, at the time, to invoke the MM. („Weniges ist so symptomatisch für den Zerfall der Arbeiterbewegung, wie daß sie davon [Frauenemanzipation – fvg] keine Notiz nimmt.“ 57.)

The untruth is located in the substratum of genuineless itself, the individual. If it is in the *principium individuationis*, as the antipodes Hegel and Schopenhauer both recognized, that the secret of the world's course is concealed, then the conception of an ultimate and absolute substantiality of the self falls victim to an illusion that protects the established order even while its essence decays. (MM 153)

This leads to analytic distinctions that are not explicit in Wittgenstein, namely the distinction between identity in the *logical* sense ($1=1$), identity in the *psychological* sense (the unity of an individual biography), and identity in the 'species as whole', in the philosophy of *History* sense: the identity of the human race with its own potential for a world at peace with itself and nature. Seen from this vantage point, the Schopenhauer quote in „Gold assay“ leads directly to the core concerns of the *Negative Dialektik* three years later: the complex 'dialectic', at all levels, of identity and *non-identity*.

In the history of modern philosophy, the word „identity“ has had several meanings. It designated the unity of personal consciousness: that an „I“ remains the same in all its experiences. This is what is meant by the Kantian „I think, which is to accompany all of my reflections.“ Then, again, identity was what is in principle the same in all rational beings – thought as logical universality – and then, the identity of every object with itself, the simple $A=A$. Finally, epistemologically, the notion that subject and object are 'one', however the mediation between the two are to be conceptualised.²⁵

That is, however else one is to interpret these aphorisms, whatever intellectual lineages one prefers to focus on with regard to the philosophy of the last couple of hundred years, there is a powerful theme here that resonates with much scholarly and literary output after the war: reification and alienation, the 'doubling' (Horkheimer and Adorno's term) of the world by science, technology and the market; the impossibility of all 'traditional' (family-, community-based) constructions of identity under the triple onslaught of global mass media, global markets, planetary threats, social disintegration.²⁶

He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses. To speak immediately of the immediate is to behave

25 (*Negative Dialektik* p. 145.)

26 c.f. now Alain Finkielkraut (2013): *L'Identité malheureuse*.

much as those novelists who drape their marionettes in imitated bygone passions like cheap jewellery, and make people who are no more than component parts of machinery act as if they still had the capacity to act as subjects, as if something depended on their actions.²⁷

Listened to in this register, the rejection of immediacy in the *Minima Moralia*, (of the *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, to use a central terms from the *Negative Dialektik*, i.e. the rejection of the ‘copy’ theory of truth) adumbrates today’s focus on the relationship of mass media and formalised, ‘fundamentalised’ religiosity – as well as the wierdly fragmented and ‘insane’ nature of so much of the internet.²⁸ Though whoever thinks that this critique of immediacy is assimilable to Kierkegaardian or Sartrean Existentialism – to, as it were, conventional (conservative) conceptions of the loss of individual autonomy – would do well to look at Adorno’s „Trying to understand ‘Endgame’“ on this.²⁹

The irrationality of bourgeois society on the wane resists being understood: those were the good old days when a critique of political economy could be written which took this society by its own *ratio*. For in the meantime it has thrown this ratio on the junk-heap and virtually replaced it with direct control. The interpretive word, therefore, cannot recuperate Beckett, while his dramaturgy – precisely by virtue of its limitation to exploded facticity – twitches beyond it, pointing toward interpretation in its essence as riddle. One could almost designate as the criterion of relevant philosophy today whether it is up to that task.

French existentialism had tackled history. In Beckett, history devours existentialism. In *Endgame*, a historical moment is revealed, the experience which was cited in the title of the culture industry’s rubbish book *Corpsed*. After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one’s own battered state.³⁰

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- 27 MM 15. c.f. also: „Die Fassade der gegenwärtigen Wirklichkeit dient so bruchlos der Ablendung des Wesentlichen, als wäre die ganze Kultur zu einem permanenten black-out geworden. Vom Wesentlichen vermag darum nur der etwas auszusagen, der die lückenlose Oberfläche nicht anerkennt, sondern noch ihre Lückenlosigkeit aus dem erklärt, was unter ihr verborgen liegt. Das Bestehende kann einzig der begreifen, dem es um ein Mögliches und Besseres zu tun ist.“ (Adorno *GS* 20B, p. 601.)
- 28 Hent de Vries (2005): *Minimal Theologies – Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno & Levinas*. But also: the study of psychoanalysis and postmodernism: Stephen Frosh (1991): *Identity crisis : modernity, psychoanalysis, and the self*.
- 29 Theodor W. Adorno (1961): „Trying to Understand Endgame“ in: *New German Critique*, 2, p. 119-150.
- 30 Op. cit. p. 122. (c.f. also my „Adorno’s Hamlet“: http://www.amsterdam-adorno.net/twa_hamlet.html)

Quite a different train of thought is possible, starting with that same critique of immediacy in „Gold assay“, this time leading not to the commercialisation and and trivialisation of today’s public sphere (and modern Art and literature’s reaction to this), but to Heidegger and the question of the cultural and intellectual roots of Nazism and the Holocaust. Adorno’s name is after all associated not only with the *culture industry* chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but just as much with his excoriating critique, at the height of post-war Germany’s efforts at normalisation, of Heidegger and the *Jargon of Authenticity*. (A normalisation process, one might add, in which Adorno played no small part.³¹)

It is above all Martin Jay who has probed this topic in his usual thoroughness³², and just as is the case with the mass media theme touched on above, this one too sets up some pretty deep resonances in the modern mind, this time concerning the role of the intellectuals in the rise of National Socialism – the old charge of the „treason of the intellectuals“.³³

Jay, whose powerfully synthetic notion of historiography is a lot closer to philosophy in the ‘continental’ mode than it is to the Analytic one,³⁴ who almost single-handedly established Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School as a field of study in the Sociology and History departments during

31 Clemens Albrecht et. al. (1999): *Die intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik – Eine Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule*. Also: Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer (eds.) (1986): *Die Frankfurter Schule und die Folgen*.

32 Martin Jay (2006): „Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno’s Critique of Genuineness“, in: *New German Critique*, 97, vol. 33, no. 1.

33 Adorno will have read Benjamin’s 1928 Julian Benda review (Walter Benjamin *GS*, III, p. 102), the last words of which – one notes the date – could have inspired the MM one world war later: „... eine europäische Kultur, von welcher nicht viel mehr heut abzusehen oder wirklich ist als ihre namenlose Gefährdung.“ Not inconceivable that the *Jargon* was written with Benjamin’s Benda comments in mind – Kracauer would later reproach his one-time protégé with arguments reminiscent of Benjamin’s critique of Benda. c.f. Martin Jay (2005): „Adorno und Kracauer: Anmerkungen zu einer schwierigen Freundschaft“ in: *Veränderte Weltbilder Hannoversche Schriften* 6 (ed. Detlev Claussen, Oskar Negt, and Michael Werz).

34 Martin Jay (2010): „History, experience, and politics – an interview with Martin Jay [by Thijs Lijster]“ in: *Krisis – Journal for contemporary philosophy*, nr. 1.

the Sixties and Seventies, approaches that ‘Gold assay’ aphorism not from the perspective of ‘imminent critique’ and the question of its *truth content*, but from a ‘history of ideas’ perspective that focusses on intellectual lineages to the exclusion of much else – his mistrust of phenomenology in the Analytic mode is not far from Adorno’s own.³⁵ It means though that he approaches ‘Gold assay’ not against the backdrop of Adorno’s rejection of Husserl, Kierkegaard and Sartrean Existentialism, but rather from the very positive connotations that ‘authenticity’ had taken on in US intellectual circles during the Sixties – in part, paradoxically enough, as a result of the reception of those selfsame philosophers. In the popularity of ‘authenticity’ – following Lionel Trilling, Marshall Berman and others³⁶ – Jay sees „... the reigning value of a society bereft of divine sanction and dissatisfied with the false comforts of modern life...“³⁷, a kind of emotional ‘fall-back’ position necessitated by secularisation and the exigencies of the market – comparable to what Max Weber had described in Europe before WWI, but without the latter’s doleful anticipation of where this ‘iron cage’ was going to lead.

What hence puzzles Jay is why what in the American context was being interpreted as a Sartrean ‘struggle against inauthenticity’,³⁸ should, in Adorno, not only be reckoned „on the side of the conformists“ (p. 17), but – this must have grated mightily on US sensibilities – be inserted into the discussion on the cultural and intellectual origins of *Nazism*.

Just as, at the *empirical* level, the AJC once balked at accepting German with American antisemitism under a single heading, Jay now does something not dissimilar at the level of ideas: authenticity, the ideology of ‘genuineness’ and the metaphysics of ‘identity’ – which in ‘Gold assay’ is associated unequivocally with the „converted and unconverted philosophers of Fascism“³⁹ – is treated entirely *geneologically*, according to the method of

35 "Seit frühester Jugend, wohl seit der Kindheit, an der Erfahrung des Gegensatzes zu meinen englischen Vettern, wußte ich, daß alles, wofür ich stehe, sich, einem hoffnungslosen Kampf mit dem befindet was mir als das Geistfeindliche schlechthin vor Augen stand, dem Geist des angelsächsisch-naturwissenschaftlichen Positivismus." („Graeculus II“, op. cit, p. 14.)

36 Lionel Trilling (1972): *Sincerity and Authenticity*; Marshall Berman (1970): *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*. Authenticity as a ‘staying true to oneself’, the opposite of false consciousness, the ‘just-do-it’ mentality. perhaps also influenced by Fromm’s 1942 *Escape from Freedom*.

37 Jay, op.cit, p. 16.

38 Citing Geoffrey Hartman here: *Scars of the Spirit: The struggle against Inauthenticity*.

39 „They lead to the denunciation of anything that is not of sufficiently sterling worth, sound to the core, that is, the Jews: did not Richard Wagner already play off genuine

network analysis and intellectual influences – which not unsurprisingly leads back to *Benjamin*. By concentrating on Adorno's 'origins' in Benjamin⁴⁰ – Adorno's own aversion to the term notwithstanding – the truth content of 'Gold assay' (today's 'Identity'-naturalism and biopolitics) can be replaced with a documentation of the intellectual allegiances of its author.

Jay does this in some detail, but almost as a concession to his own reservations (he's much too knowledgeable on the Frankfurt School not to know that fudging the difference between 'Geltung' and 'Genesis' counts as a serious confusion) he supplements his procedure with some decidedly odd „etymological observations“, culminating in a terminological distinction between „genuine and false authenticity, and genuine and false inauthenticity“ for which it is very difficult to imagine any basis in *experience* at all. This odd distinction, according to Jay, Adorno gets from Heidegger, but „I hope to show ... that Adorno himself relied on a tinction.“ (18). Why the assimilation of psychoanalytic theory and practice by the Horkheimer group at this time⁴¹ does not direct Jay's attention in the direction of a term like 'projection' or Habermas's 'systematically distorted communication' is a puzzle.

The more one steps oneself in Jay's argumentation, the more striking his reluctance to free himself from the *aestheticising* tenor of the early stages of the English-language Frankfurt School reception becomes⁴² – notwith-

German metal against foreign dross and thus misuse criticism of the culture market as an apology for barbarism?“ MM 152.

40 The term turns up in the title of the first specifically philosophical analysis of Adorno: Susan Buck-Morss (1977): *The origin of negative dialectics* : Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute.

41 Adorno's unhappy stint as theorist-in-residence at the *Hacker Foundation* – immediately prior to his tenure appointment in Frankfurt – falls in the period in which the MM is written, and may have inspired some of the more ascerbic comments on psychoanalysis.

42 Martin Jay (1984): „Atonal Philosophy“ in (ibid.) *Adorno*, (Fontana Modern Masters), p. 58. By a shift of pronouns, by turning the universal import of the subtitle of the *Minima Moralia*, „Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben“, into a particular, „A Damaged Life“, (singular) there is, in Jay's influential biography, the tendency to reduce philosophy to intellectual biography, a 'reductio ad hominem' that many after him would follow. Lowenthal's „Die biographische Mode“ has been forgotten. The Jephcott rendition „Reflections from Damaged Life“, for all its stylistic awkwardness, does not elide the difference between reflection in the individual and collective sense of the word. The Dutch translation follows the English one on this: 'het' leven, it's a book about life in general, about what it means – after two world wars – to be still alive in the 20th Century. The idea that the *Negative Dialektik* has something to do with *music* has created much mischief.

standing his own pioneering work in documenting the different stages involved in the Frankfurt School's distantiating from Lukács's 'totalising' view of history.⁴³ The result is that the criteria by which some themes and authors receive attention, and others fall by the wayside, remains unstated and abstract.

Jay never fully assimilates what to Lukács was indeed anathema: Freudian psychoanalysis, so that its centrality for Adorno's thinking is never given the attention it deserves. (With the exception Jacoby and a few other lone voices⁴⁴ there seems no English equivalent anywhere to the extensive German-language Critical Theory/psychoanalysis literature, stretching from Lorenzer to Dahmer, Reiche, Türcke, and others.⁴⁵

It is this aestheticisation of psychoanalysis that makes it possible to elide – in Jay's view of things – narcissism in the *psychoanalytic* sense, with the *Ästhetische Theorie*'s defense of Art as a last refuge from the commercialisation and 'instrumental reason'. But then he goes off on a very strange tangent:

The aphorism, "Gold Assay," invokes the practice of distinguishing rare from base metals, the genuine from the fool's alternative. Like believers in the intrinsic value of gold, devotees of authenticity think that they can isolate a standard of value before the onset of the exchange principle, which reduces everything to a fungible counter in a circulation without end. But despite his own fundamental hostility to the triumph of exchange, which was the economic equivalent of identity thinking, Adorno is at pains in *Minima Moralia* to distance himself as well

43 If one looks through old copies of *Telos* or the *New Left Review*, or *New German Critique*, the emphasis on aesthetics and literature at the expense of epistemology and philosophy expresses itself in the dates: (Adorno: „Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love“, NLB on Lukács and Benjamin. The first Critical Theory topic in the *New Left Review* (NLR) seems to be Lukács on Thomas Mann, with a reference to Lukács's „On Walter Benjamin“ (NLR I/17, Winter 1962); the first Adorno translation „Sociology and Psychology“, five years later. In *Telos* also it is Lukács who heads the field, with „On the Responsibility of the Intellectuals“ in the Spring of 1969, followed by a Marcuse article („Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism“) in the issue after that. The first discussion of specifically methodological questions (i.e. logic of the social sciences) seems to be the 1970 review and translation by Russell Jacoby of Adorno's *Aufsätze zur Gesellschaftstheorie und Methodologie*. (*Telos*, Fall 1970.) The first Fredric Jameson book was on *Sartre and Style*, (1961) then came *Marxism and Form*, both books on literature. (Hullot-Kentor continues this tradition with his emphasis upon the *Ästhetische Theorie*, at the expense of the *Negative Dialektik*.)

44 Russell Jacoby (1999): *The end of utopia: politics and culture in an age of apathy*.

45 Alfred Lorenzer, Helmut Dahmer, Reimut Reiche, Christoph Türcke.

from the order of valuation implied by the ontological search for an immutable standard like gold.⁴⁶

For someone of Jay's unrivalled authority in these matters, who places so much emphasis on Adorno's indebtedness to Benjamin, his disinterest in the layers of irony and metaphor in the title of 'Gold assay' is as puzzling as his invocation of the very 'base/superstructure' logic which the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* became famous for *rejecting*.⁴⁷ („It should be noted that the international gold standard for currencies was itself terminated only during the Depression, the last straw being the United States' decision to abandon it in 1933.“) One can see why Habermas devoted so much effort to emphasising the differences between *discourse* types. Between Psychoanalysis as a clinical discipline embedded in medical practice – the treatment of individual neurosis – and the *Art* world's travails with commercialisation and mass media trivialisation there is a *category* difference that we ignore at the price of a regression back into idealism. (There's a *real-world* distinction between medicine and Art that resists *every* 'unified science' approach, whether this be from the Functionalist or Left-Hegelian directions – Habermas has spent much of his career demonstrating why this should be binding for the social sciences today.)

Back to that antisemitism study at the back of Adorno's mind at the time of writing MM. Does treating antisemitism as an *empirical* problem – for *Psychology* – bring with it 'psychologisation' in the pejorative sense of monocausal reductionism?⁴⁸ Adorno was acutely aware of the dangers and it was discussed at length at the time:

When we drafted our first plan of study of anti-Semitism, we had in mind a comprehensive work covering all the aspects of the problem, showing the develop-

46 Jay, *op. cit.*, P. 20.

47 Which Thomas Mann commented on with a certain sardonic humor in a letter to Adorno: „Einmal citieren Sie Lukács sehr zustimmend, und überhaupt sieht manches bei Ihnen nach geläutertem Kommunismus aus. Aber wie sieht der aus? Die russische Despotie ist im Irrtum. Aber ist Kommunismus ohne Despotie denkbar?“ (In: Claussen, *op. cit.*, p. 168.)

48 c.f. <http://www.amsterdam-adorno.net/PA-pol-twa.html>

ment and the functions of anti-Semitism in various countries and periods of history, describing its interconnection with other social phenomena, analyzing the economic and cultural forces behind it. However, when we started our work in the spring of 1943, we became aware that the hour was too late for such a general historical and international survey. We decided to devote our efforts immediately to the drafting of methods which might lead to a better grasp of the social and psychological mechanisms underlying anti-Semitism.⁴⁹

The tension that the Horkheimer circle here thematises – between antisemitism as something for an empirically oriented *Psychology* (in the widest sense, including psychoanalytically-inspired procedures to get at emotional dispositions and political inclinations not accessible to conventionally conducted opinion polling) and the historically or philosophically inspired considerations of the „Elements of antisemitism“⁵⁰ has been an object of study and of controversy in its own right ever since. There is, after all, an undeniable

discrepancy between the attempt to discover the roots of antisemitism in an anthropological and philosophical account of the archaic roots of the origins of civilization in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and the interdisciplinary sociological and psychological theory that dominates *The Authoritarian Personality*, and the Institute's *Studies in Prejudice* ...⁵¹

A discrepancy that goes beyond (here is to be located the real advance marked by Wheatland's study) anything that can be uncovered by the methods of intellectual biography or Begriffsgeschichte. If causation and experience are the two concepts without which modernity would be inconceivable, then that part of the social sciences which concerns itself with this – tracing out historical *origins* of 'causation' and 'experience' – needs at some point to leave behind what Lowenthal called the 'biographic mode'.

Rabinbach argues, plausibly, that the *psychologism* of the Institute's empirical studies (and there's some irony in this, considering that this became the basis of their fame) was necessitated by the wartime situation and the „immediate demand for a thesis simple enough to be understood and appreciated by those who are trying to fight the giant fire with means which are

49 Anson Rabinbach (2002): „'Why were the Jews sacrificed?' The Place of Antisemitism in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [Adorno reader]“ in: *Adorno – A Critical Reader* (ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin), p. 134.

50 From the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

51 Rabinbach, *ibid.*, „Why...“ p. 134.

by definition inadequate⁵². No other *practical* course of action was conceivable at the time.

But the fact remains: there *was* a larger project⁵³ and if this larger project was never completed, it is still true that most of it is accessible in the archives. It does mean though that a number of suggestive fictions need to be left behind.⁵⁴

Rabinbach goes a fair way in that direction – and on part of that way he’s accompanied by Wheatland. He starts off by considering a wellknown letter from Horkheimer to Adorno:

How would it be [he wrote in October 1941] if we allowed our book to crystallize around anti-Semitism? That would mean the concretizing and limiting which we have been searching for. It would also permit us to activate a large part of the co-workers of the institute. Whereas, if we were to write something like a critique of the present measured by the category of the individual, I can already imagine the nightmare that Marcuse would then demonstrate that since the early bourgeois era the category of the individual contained progressive and reactionary tendencies. Also, anti-Semitism today really marks the focal point of injustice, and our physiognomy must turn to the world where it shows its most horrible

52 *ibid.*

53 Wiggershaus was the first of the historians to place the emphasis squarely on the ‘dialectic project’. c.f. Rolf Wiggershaus (1995): *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*.

54 „Most scholarly accounts emphasize the consistent marginality of the Circle and the importance of isolation for the group’s subversive and controversial discoveries about late capitalism and the emerging new world of total administration. The Institute for Social Research, according to such accounts, was a collection of lonely critics and radicals bucking the dominant paradigms of their age. Seeing themselves as dissenters and naysayers, they sought neither fame nor notoriety. The gravity and danger of their discoveries were so severe, we are told, that they rejected the traditional role of the social scientist. As the world sank into human barbarism, the only meaningful response was to launch a flotilla of messages in bottles that might someday be discovered by a more aware public. Such an audience, we are told, took shape with the rise of the New Left and the student movement in the 1960s.

The popular image of a „Frankfurt School“ sketched above was produced by the members of the Horkheimer Circle, the historians to whom they told their story, New Left intellectuals, who saw themselves as the inheritors of Critical Theory, and the radical and critical sociologists that added the Institute for Social Research to their pantheon of predecessors. This mythic „Frankfurt School“ is not, however, merely a fabrication or exaggeration. The image of the „Frankfurt School“ arose because elements of its thought and history support such a likeness. The main purposes of the present and subsequent chapters are to represent more clearly than in previous accounts the Horkheimer Circle’s relationship to American sociology — trying to move beyond the mythology and to see how this complex coterie of thinkers could simultaneously contribute to the emergence of American postwar social science while becoming some of its most vocal critics.” Wheatland, *op.cit.*, p. 203.

face. Finally, the question of anti-Semitism is the one that best fits into the effective complex that we are writing about, without our having revealed anything about it.

before going on to considering and then rejecting what one could call the ‘penitent Marxist’ account of the history of Critical Theory. On this telling of it, Horkheimer’s „The Jews and Europe“ of 1939 reduces antisemitism

to an epiphenomenon of a larger historical process: because of the putative extinction of the sphere of circulation in the transition from liberal society to the authoritarian totalitarian state (not merely the fascist version) the Jews had been rendered superfluous; as representative of individualism and exchange their very existence threatened the new mechanisms of administrative power.⁵⁵

It is this „extremely shortsighted“ „European Marxist“ view of things (Rabinbach’s terms) „which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* explicitly rectified in its refusal to attribute a primacy of economics in the genesis of antisemitism“, although it still hovers in the background „in the assertion that the ultimate purpose of bourgeois antisemitism is to disguise domination in production“. Nevertheless, by November 1944, Horkheimer „acknowledged“ to the editor of *The Jewish Forum* that

wittingly or unwittingly, the Jews have become the martyrs of civilization. To protect them is no longer an issue involving any particular group interest. To protect the Jews has come to be a symbol of everything mankind stands for. Anti-Semitic persecution is the stigma of the present world whose injustice enters all its weight upon the Jews. Thus, the Jews have been made what the Nazis always pretended that they were, the focal point of world history. Their survival is inseparable from the survival of culture itself.

Rabinbach then puts his finger on the whole problem with this ‘penitent Marxist’ reading of the history of the Frankfurt School:

But if this is indeed the case, we might ask, does this not affect the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a whole? Was Adorno’s later recollection that the „Elements“ was merely a bridge to *The Authoritarian Personality* a misremembering of its status at the time? Does the „Elements“ contain, as Wiggershaus suggests, the „hidden center“ of the book?

He sees the problem, but localizes it not in the ‘68’ narrative of penitent Marxists reneging on the cause, but in putative tensions within the Horkheimer Circle itself:

55 Rabinbach op. cit. 135.

No doubt a decision to shift the focus of critical theory from the traditional Marxist questions of monopoly capitalism or class conflict to the fate of the Jews would have produced skepticism among some of the Institute's more orthodox Marxist contributors like Franz Neumann, for example, who wrote Adorno in 1940 that 'I can imagine, and I have done this in my book, that one can represent National Socialism without attributing to the Jewish problem a central role.'⁵⁶

But then he turns to something else, the quite new conception of Judaism to be found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the Jews as the „first moderns“, the first culture to have put magic and myth behind it, the first culture to have placed *demythologisation* at the very heart of its cultural identity:

Like Freud, Horkheimer and Adorno identified the Bild[er]verbot, the taboo on pictoriality in Jewish monotheism, as the event that inaugurates modernity. By proscribing the direct personification of the Gods, ritual substitution and sacrifice is converted into law. For Freud the monotheistic prohibition on images transformed Judaism into a religion of instinctual renunciation „for it signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of *Geistigkeit* over sensuality. The Jews, Horkheimer and Adorno continued, crossed the threshold from mythology to rationality by converting the image into a series of duties in the form of ritual: The Jews “transformed taboos into civilizing maxims when others still clung to magic.” (DE: fmur186).

Following *Moses and Monotheism*, they argued that Christianity failed to sustain the purity that Judaism had achieved, that it descended into polytheism and mother-god worship: „the Jews seemed to have succeeded where Christianity failed: they defused magic by its own power – turned against itself as ritual service of God. They have retained the aspect of expiation but have avoided the reversion to mythology which symbolism implies“ (DE: 186). However, even in the „disenchanted world of Judaism,“ Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, the power of mimesis was still expressed in the „bond between name and being“ that is recognized in „the ban on pronouncing the name of God“ (DE: 23). The next passage succinctly states their central argument:

‘The disenchanted world of Judaism is reconciled with magical thought through its negation in the idea of God. The Jewish religion does not tolerate any word that offers solace to despair in the face of mortality. It associates hope only with the prohibition against calling what is false God, against invoking the finite as the infinite, lies as truth. The guarantee of redemption lies in the rejection of any belief that would subscribe to this; it is knowledge obtained in the denunciation of madness ... The legitimacy [Recht] of the image is salvaged in the faithful carrying out of this prohibition.’⁵⁷

56 p. 136.

57 op. cit. 141

This is obviously a large theme can only be touched on here, but it does suggest a reading of the MM quite different from either the analytic or the existentialist one considered up until now. It is a reading suggested by Hent de Vries.⁵⁸ Take for instance this sentence from the ‘Gold assay’:

The self should not be spoken of as the ontological ground, but at the most theologically, in the name of its likeness to God. He who holds fast the self and does away with theological concepts helps to justify the diabolical positive, naked interest.⁵⁹

Or the oftquoted finale, the last aphorism of the book:

Finale. – The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters. (MM 247.)

Neither Jay nor Wiggershaus placed much emphasis on the Jewish side of things, nor how central this aspect was to the the Horkheimer group at the time. It is above all Wheatland who has drawn attention to the group’s growing self-identification with European Jewry.⁶⁰ The following is an

58 Hent de Vries (2005): *Minimal Theologies – Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno & Levinas*.

59 MM 154.

60 Wheatland, op. cit. p. 252.

aphorism not from the MM but from „Graceculus“, what was to have been the sequel to the MM:

Noone seems to have given much thought to what the murder of the Jews meant for everyone else. But in the 15 years since the end of the war its effect on the spiritual situation has become evident. That everything that exists does so through spirit and is justifiable only from this direction was implicit in everything in Judaism even where it was't aware of this. Even the last schmock was it through perversion of spirit. A jewish joke lets the father answer his son, who asks how come we know that a millipede has a thousand legs, with the words: a goy counted them. It is exactly this that has now usurped spirit. It's just as much at work in empirical social research as 'glorified nose counting' [English original – fvg] as it is in the kind of art which confuses the literal manipulation of some natural material or other – something merely prepredicatively [vorgeistig] existant – with aesthetic objectification. When what I'm doing has any kind of historical justification then this, that I'm trying to do what the Jews can no longer do, because they're no longer there, and because the survivors are forced into conformity. The worst horror consists in this, that the murder of the Jews lies in the general trend of world history, which destroys that for which spirit once stood, even where this was unintentional.⁶¹

I end this paper with a comment from the „Dedication“, from my old copy of the 1974 Jephcott English translation, the passage next to one of those marginal exclamation marks that people make in books. An exclamation mark made by someone once dear to me. It includes a quote from Hegel:

If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty 'to consider the evanescent itself as essential'. They insist, in opposition to Hegel's practice and yet in accordance with his thought on negativity: 'The life of the mind only attains its truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation. The mind is not this power as a positive which turns away from the negative, as when we say of something that it is null, or false, so much for that and now for something else; it is this power only when looking the negative in the face, dwelling upon it.'⁶²

61 Adorno „Graeculus (II) – Notizen zu Philosophie und Gesellschaft 1943-1969" in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VIII*, 2003, p. 21/22.

62 MM 16.

Adorno's Minima Moralia

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INSCHRIJVEN

Honderd jaar geleden begon de Eerste Wereldoorlog met alle dramatische gevolgen van dien: Stalinisme in Rusland, een economische crisis, de ineenstorting van de Weimar Republiek en de opkomst van het nazisme. Tegen die achtergrond schrijft Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), inmiddels gevlucht naar Amerika, een serie essays onder de titel *Minima Moralia (MM)*, *Reflecties uit een beschadigd leven*. Mede door twee andere boeken van zijn hand, *Authoritarian Personality* en *Dialektiek van de verlichting*, kan Adorno als één van de belangrijkste denkers van de laatste honderd jaar worden beschouwd. *Minima Moralia* werd onlangs opnieuw in het Nederlands uitgegeven. Een goede reden om dit boek samen te bespreken en te kijken naar de impact van de historische gebeurtenissen op het denken van jonge intellectuelen uit het begin van de 20e eeuw.

Minima Moralia staat filosofisch gezien midden in het krachtenveld van de twee belangrijkste stromingen van de 20e eeuw. Tussen, enerzijds, ervaring in de zin van de *natuurwetenschappen*, waar alleen het feitelijke, het 'bewijsbaar-objectieve' opgeld doet, en anderzijds ervaring in de *psychoanalytische* zin, die de aandacht op het psychisch-emotionele aspect van de moderne leed-ervaring richt. Adorno verenigt deze spanning op een fascinerende, schokkende en soms persoonlijke manier. Alleen via verlichting kan de weg gevonden worden naar Europese 'normalisatie'. Wat verlichting daarin betekent binnen het spanningsveld van objectiviteit en subjectiviteit, is de rode draad in dit boek.

Om ten volle profijt te hebben van deze cursus, raden wij sterk aan het boek *Minima Moralia* voorafgaand aan de cursus te lezen. Ondanks Adorno's reputatie is het boek goed leesbaar.