

HOW TO LOOK AT NEOLIBERALISM. REVISITING ADORNO'S SOCIAL PHYSIOGNOMY

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Abstract

Against the widespread view that Adorno remains stuck in an antiquated way of approaching ideology as expression of social totality, the present article tries to recuperate Adorno's dialectical legacy in the context of contemporary neoliberalism. One central point made by Adorno - though usually missed by interpreters - is that ideology operates according to the Hegelian "negation of negation". We believe that this basic insight can be applied not only to liberal capitalism (19th century) and monopoly capitalism (20th century), but also to neoliberalism, thus shedding a new light even on contemporary phenomena like fake news or the proliferation of dystopian political scenarios as in the case of Trump or Brexit campaigns.

Keywords: ideology, critique of ideology, negation of negation, neoliberalism

"Intolerance of ambiguity"

From one of the main sources of inspiration for 1968 German student protests, Adorno, the critical philosopher, quickly turned into a "reactionary", an "elitist" who obstinately resisted the enthusiasm for a radical political revolution.¹ Ironically enough, there was a similar reaction

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¹ Though he was sensitive to certain issues raised by the students, Adorno refused to join them because of the visceral attitude demanding immediate action against capitalism without realizing that such an approach was perfectly compatible with the abstract, mediated character of the system they so harshly criticized. As we know, there are also two highly embarrassing moments in this story: the first one in which Adorno called the police

towards Adorno coming this time from intellectuals themselves denouncing, on the contrary, the tiresome Hegelian and Marxist legacy spread all over his texts.

So, what is the source of this strange consensus? Why is so hard to accommodate Adorno with these political and intellectual movements? As a matter of interpretive principle, when consensuses such as these come into being, there is always a repressive moment stemming from an "intolerance of ambiguity". Hasn't been Adorno's position often perceived as irritatingly ambivalent, not Marxist enough (for the students) and not anti-Marxist enough (for the intellectuals)? This strange alliance between Marxist and non-Marxists in marginalizing Adorno comes, however, with an ironical twist by confirming instead Adorno's own account of how ideology works as a mechanism designed to evacuate ambiguity while reproducing it in the very consensus between two seemingly incompatible positions. Instead of operating locally, this strange consensus itself should prove, in a sense, that ideology works *globally*, that behind rhetorical differences, what we find is often an insidious homogeneity induced by an ideology expressing "social totality". And what an irritating word, "totality", with its bombastic undertone in line with the Hegelian and Marxist belief of mastering the complexity of the whole of society.² Though he champions "nonidentity", Adorno insists, in the same time, to squeeze in an antiquated concept that bears all the nasty meanings of a "metanarrative" (Lyotard).

to free the Institute for Social Research from the rebellious students; and the second one in which three women students interrupted one of Adorno's courses by showing their breasts and scattering flower petals over his head. For a wide view on the evolution of the concept of "totality" in Western Marxism, see, Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press. Concerning Adorno, Jay pp. 274-275.

² For a broad view on the evolution of the concept of "totality" in Western Marxism, see, Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. Jay criticizes Adorno's approach which lacks any (positive) reference to an intersubjectively constituted social totality. No wonder that, for Jay, Habermas seems better suited for proposing an adequate view on the topic. See *Ibidem*, pp. 274-275.

Instead of connecting nonidentity to “communicative action”, “language-games”, “discourse” etc.³ (the philosophical fetishes produced by the “linguistic turn”), Adorno seems to live in the past by stubbornly clinging to the idea of a social totality expressed in an ideology permeating almost all cultural productions. Ambiguity, once again.

Unsurprisingly, this has been the source of another consensus: the most recurrent criticism coming from post-structuralists (Lyotard or Rorty)⁴ and critical theorists alike (Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, Seyla Benhabib)⁵ has been that Adorno's critique of social totality leaves no room for particular forms of progress or resistance. Everything is engulfed in an undifferentiated mass of social manipulation. Adorno's position seems clearly self-defeating: this almost irresistible advance of ideology in contemporary society denies the very essence of a critical theorist's job description, emancipatory criticism itself. How can you criticize society when ideology seemingly permeates almost every social aspect? What gives you the possibility to envision a better future while living inside an almost impenetrable totality? Adorno's emphatically pessimistic statements haven't been helpful either for they seem to confirm the existence of a nihilistic undertone running through his texts: “we are pretty much doomed, all we can do is at least to be aware of it!”

The present paper tries to challenge this widely shared perception. Though to be fair, this kind of criticism leveled down against Adorno is not entirely misplaced being, to some extent, rooted in his own ambivalent understanding of “monopoly capitalism” emerging in 20th century both as an quasi-irresistible spread of social domination *and* as an antagonistic

³ Fredric Jameson believes that Adorno is marginalized during the 1970's by structuralism and poststructuralism because of the Marxist legacy in which totality has a central role to play. See Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic*, London and New York: Verso, 1990, p. 9, pp. 14-15.

⁴ See Jean-François Lyotard, “Adorno as the Devil”, *Telos*, 19, Spring, 1974. Or: Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 56-57.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*, Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1987, pp. 112-114, pp. 118-119, pp. 126-130. Albrecht Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne. Vernunftkritik nach Adorno*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985, pp. 28-29, pp. 41-42, p. 76. Seyla Benhabib, “The Critique of Instrumental Reason”, in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, London and New York: Verso, 1994. pp. 85-87.

reality riven by contradictions that can still generate social change.⁶ As expected, the critics have, once again, evacuated ambivalence by retaining only the former part and repressing the latter. From this narrow perspective, Adorno seems largely unhelpful in providing some explanation for the “neoliberal” turn of capitalism. How can be a “turn”, after all, considering that neoliberalism should be viewed simply as an extension of monopoly capitalism, its latest expression? But this interpretation wholly misses the *spirit* of Adorno's own *dialectical* approach. As an observation, most interpreters, benevolent and critical alike, tend to tackle Adorno's texts by usually ignoring or downplaying the dialectical reversals of a specific social totality choosing instead an analytic approach that focuses on Adorno's “basic” philosophical structure (gravitating around concepts such as “identity-thinking”, “instrumental rationality”, “culture industry”, “fetishism”, “mimesis”, “nonidentity”, “utopia” etc.) which, if necessary, is backed with concrete, historical examples. But this is something that Adorno always wanted to avoid because it would mean regressing to a traditional approach in which theory seemed to be divorced from historical evolution. Abstract concepts make sense only by relating them to the dialectics of a specific social totality without entirely reducing them to such a totality.

So, our intention is to activate the *spirit* of Adorno's dialectical legacy in order to tackle the way contemporary neoliberalism operates and, thus, reject the usual criticism that the project of “negative dialectics” is a theoretical dead end with cynicism or mystical quietism⁷ looming over it. We can break the spell of ideological totality not by going back to some local “narratives” (Lyotard) or to a Kantian “ideal speech situation” (Habermas), but only through the dialectical method of turning totality against itself.⁸ In other words, the cracks within any social totality, in spite

⁶ See Adrian Wilding, “Pied Pipers and Polymaths: Adorno's Critique of Praxisism”, in John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros and Sergio Tischler (eds.), *Negativity and Revolution. Adorno and Political Activism*, London: Pluto Press, 2009, pp. 33-35.

⁷ Wellmer, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Introduction”, in Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Albert, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Habermas, Harald Pilot, Karl R. Popper (eds.), *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London and Edinburgh: Heinemann, 1976: “Totality is not an affirmative but rather a critical category. Dialectical critique seeks to salvage or help to establish what

of sometimes a massive ideological effort to hide them away, allows a critical theorist to explain dialectical change towards another type of society (usually a more controlled one), but also to point towards the possibility of a real future emancipation. Since no social totality has been free from contradictions or antagonisms and no ideological mechanism can entirely mask them, otherwise dialectics itself would become meaningless,⁹ the space for critical gestures might become narrower, but not totally covered by ideological mystifications. So, let's not despair, things don't necessarily have to turn ugly, though they usually do.

Critique of ideology as social physiognomy

One of Adorno's main theoretical tasks is to reinvigorate the Marxist legacy of critique of ideology by implicitly denouncing the widespread vulgar interpretations that mechanically identify economy as the cause for any social distortion. Instead of *immediately* turning to economic base as to some sort of Holy Grail, Adorno and Horkheimer point to another, more philosophical problem lying at the heart of critique of ideology: the tendency of universal concepts to homogenize or engulf particular objects developed to its fullest in the capitalist compulsion of reducing objects to abstract commodities. The ideological trick used by "identity-thinking" is as simple as it is effective: since the "nonidentity" between concepts and reality remains constitutive, all ideology can do is to assert their identity by masking or *negating* their difference. But isn't this formulation a clear reiteration of Hegel's famous "negation of negation"? In Adorno's own formulation: "to equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in its purest form".¹⁰ It is worth remembering, however, that in Adorno's view, Hegel is a much more ambivalent thinker. He does not only discover and endorse the ideological principle of double negation fueling his bombastic Absolute Spirit, but offers through "determinate negation" also the remedy for the problem he himself created. Against the self-referential twist of double negation that engulfs any opposition in an abstract synthesis, Hegel's

does not obey totality, what opposes it or what first forms itself as the potential of a not yet existent individuation" (p. 12).

⁹ Wilding, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 158.

determinate negation allows us to critically address a concrete social context while obliquely pointing towards future possibilities of emancipation. Adorno, however, makes a more daring move than restricting this ambivalence to Hegelian philosophy alone, he extrapolates it to the whole 19th century liberal capitalism. Isn't Enlightenment and its political outcome, the bourgeois order generated by the French Revolution, marked by a similar ambivalence between, on one hand, the negation of the old, feudal order imbued with superstitions of some unquestionable authority (Hegel's determinate negation) and, on the other, the negation of this negation operated by the bourgeois ideology that ends up in eternalizing its own social order (Hegel's Prussian state as an embodiment of the Absolute Spirit)? From this point of view, 19th century liberal ideology perfectly embodies what Marx called "false consciousness", an illusion added to social reality that should obscure the fact that "liberty, equality and fraternity" are not universal principles as long as economic inequality allows only the bourgeois to enjoy them while the working class is doomed to survive. Moreover, this *gap* between the brutal economic exploitation and the rosy ideology of the bourgeois order offers Marx the possibility to expose the way capitalism works and even predict a future revolution. In other words, he can see *beneath* the ideological surface at the very heart of the system by describing its historical "laws" based on exploitation and *compare* them with the existing ideological claims of equality and freedom. But what happens when this gap is no longer visible because "infrastructure has become its own superstructure"?¹¹

For Adorno, 20th century "monopoly capitalism" or what Friedrich Pollock calls "state capitalism" no longer plays by the (usual Marxist) rules: you cannot *directly* compare the base with the superstructure simply because the distance between the two has been obscured. In the context of the newly emerged "culture industry", ideology no longer constitutes a false consciousness added to a flawed social reality since reality itself has become almost entirely ideological - "a real abstraction", as Marx would put it. Interestingly enough, Hegel is the one who managed to anticipate this evolution when presciently describing the Absolute Spirit in terms of a *systemic totality* that would become reality a hundred years later in 20th

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 267-268.

century capitalism.¹² So, the question is: what happens to the critique in the context of a much more opaque capitalist reality in which ideology becomes almost ubiquitous? For one thing, in contrast with the usual Marxist approach, the new critical theorist should be aware that the ideological operation no longer *explicitly* follows Hegel's double negation that still allowed grasping the contradictions running through social reality despite ideological manipulations (for instance, the sharp class division that could not be hidden away). So, the core of the new ideological formula is the attempt to erase all its traces, to *mask double negation itself* and turn it into a full-blown *double affirmation* (or in Hegel's jargon, into a "synthesis"). It is by no means an accident that Adorno relates the new ideology to a *caricature* of Nietzsche's imperative "Become what you are!" since both fascism and consumerism urge us to be authentic, to express our innermost being (of course, that of a racist or a compulsive buyer).¹³ The message seems pretty clear: "don't fight 'nature' (as 19th century still did), embrace what you are because it is pretty much all you have!" And "nature" is, of course, a mask for the collective power: the call for subjective activism is nothing but an attempt to confirm the individual submission to the community.

Moreover, Adorno thinks that the spread of "real abstraction" (that Marx still associated with "commodity fetishism") to the whole of society is strictly correlative to the generalization of *cynicism*.¹⁴ As such, the Nazi propaganda should not be understood as an effort to make people *really* believe in its crazy racial mythology - everybody knew, to some level, that it was "propaganda", a conscious manipulative device - but rather to induce a "mimetic" submission *as if* they do believe in it.¹⁵ No wonder that such a twisted ideological context requires a renewed and more refined critical approach than the traditional Marxist one. Adorno calls it "social physiognomy". Though the term "physiognomy" is quite fashionable in the first half of 20th century being deployed by psychoanalysts such as

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel. Three Studies*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 10.

¹³ See, for instance, Theodor W. Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I. Gesammelte Schriften 8*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, p. 476.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 465-466.

¹⁵ The twisted subtleties of contemporary cynicism are further developed by Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek.

Sándor Ferenczi or Siegfried Bernfeld¹⁶ or by a speculative philosopher such as Oswald Spengler in his gloomy reflections about the West, most probably, Adorno borrows the term from Walter Benjamin who analyses “the surrealist ‘face’ of metropolitan Paris to reveal its impact on subjective experience”¹⁷. But as in the case of the traditional physiognomical approach that interprets facial expressions as indications of the character of a person, Adorno’s social physiognomy wants to decipher the faces of the new form of capitalism in order to have a glimpse into its *total* character. The critical theorist can no longer enjoy the privileged status of taking the red pill and have *direct* access to the functioning of capitalist Matrix. In a society in which the gap between infrastructure and superstructure becomes fuzzier, in which social mediation captures almost everything even our innermost spontaneous gestures and emotions, the critical theorist should start not from the depth of the system, but from its *surface* for even the tinniest of things (from “innocent” gestures to movies, radio speeches or advertising etc) can now be a symptom of the way social totality reproduces itself. Choosing between the red and blue pill is no longer a clear cut option since the choosing itself is tainted by ideology. There is, however, an obvious ironical undertone in applying social physiognomy to monopoly capitalism. After all, how can we talk about social “physiognomy” in a capitalist society that wants to erase the individual traces of human physiognomy by colonizing almost every inch of bodily impulses? Or even worse, how is it possible to use a term that comes dangerously close to a view that understands society as an *organism* with racism waiting just around the corner? No doubt, Adorno’s point is exactly the opposite, namely to indicate the twisted dialectical reversal in which the body gets repressed whenever ideology hails it. Isn’t fascism an ideological expression of the capitalist attempt to hide its systemic, highly abstract character under organic metaphors and, thus, to create the illusion of immediacy and biological connections in an almost totally mediated world? Though both “organism” and “system” imply the same tendency to integrate particular elements in a totality, capitalism is not an organism, but

¹⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, New York and London: The Free Press, 1977, p. 176.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

a system.¹⁸ Or perhaps more accurately put, capitalism constitutes an *abstract body* in which contradictions are no longer directly visible like an open wound, but only indirectly through small, sometimes almost invisible symptoms spread all over its surface. As such, the task of a dialectician is not to bluntly apply totality to individual things, but to accept that “the societal essence which shapes appearances, appears in them and conceals itself in them”.¹⁹ And, thus, to direct physiognomy towards “what is silenced”²⁰ by giving voice to those individual things that have been repressed in the name of abstractions.

Bye, bye, liberalism!

One key point of consensus among the members of the Institute for Social Research led by Max Horkheimer is Friedrich Pollock's idea of the emergence of a different type of capitalism than the liberal one - described by Marx in 19th century - and in which the state intervenes heavily in the economic sphere. For Pollock, “state capitalism” constitutes “the successor of private capitalism, that the state assumes important functions of the private capitalist, that profit interests still play a significant role, and that it is not socialism”²¹. In state or monopoly capitalism, the free market collapses into politics. The state drastically regulates economy and its class relations. So, “if free trade, enterprise, and freedom to sell one's labor-power – in short, the exchange market – are becoming a thing of the past, then the critique of the emergent social and political order can no longer take the form of the critique of political economy”²².

That being said, the question we have to answer is: how can we accommodate Pollock's description with Adorno's dialectical approach? Are we able to reconstruct (even though in a highly simplified manner) the whole process of going from liberalism to statism by using the dialectical trick of double negation as our guiding line? Let's start with the 19th century

¹⁸ Adorno, “Introduction”, in Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Albert, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Habermas, Harald Pilot, Karl R. Popper (eds.), *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p. 37.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 36-37.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²¹ Pollock *apud* Seyla Benhabib, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

²² Seyla Benhabib, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

liberalism by covering three interrelated dimensions. As we know from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, modernity comes with the promise to liberate the *individual* from the dark *collective* forces based on superstition and authority, but instead of assuming this determinate negation to the fullest, modernity ends up in negating this negation by hypostatizing rationality in an absolute, non-questionable authority. But can't we find a similar logic operating at the level of *class* relations as well? The bourgeois class negates the old hierarchical order in the name of equality and liberty only to negate this negation once again when trying to hide away the existence of a new social hierarchy with bourgeoisie at the top while the working class relegated at the bottom of it. And at a closer look, we can even apply this dialectical move to the relationship between the *state* and the *market*. As a bourgeois creation, the free market comes, in a sense, with the liberating message of rejecting the social and political control over economic processes.²³ What is usually missed, however, is the dialectical follow-up since the "freedom" of the market is itself negated by the ideology of an "impartial" and "minimal" state masking the fact that a liberal state is "neutral" only in the sense of neutralizing all those who reject the bourgeois market.²⁴

Adorno allows us to interpret the emergence of state capitalism at the end of 19th century in the same dialectical vein. But there is a new twist to it: instead of presenting itself in a full-blown manner, double negation becomes low-profile and operates only at an *implicit* level. Trying to evacuate any traces of negativity, the new ideology is like a parody of Zarathustra's double yes to life²⁵ perfectly captured by the positivistic

²³ Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I...*, p. 381: Adorno says that history is a history of monopolies. So, we might add that the emergence of economic competition constitutes an emancipatory, though still ambivalent (because it also generates a new form of exploitation, this time against the working class) moment in this social evolution.

²⁴ When approaching 19th century liberalism, Adorno seems to mostly agree with Marx's analysis of capitalism including here the idea that the state is simply an extension of the economic interests of the bourgeoisie. See, for instance, Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I...*, p. 385.

²⁵ The ideological caricature of Zarathustra's double affirmation of life seems pretty transparent if look at passages in which the affirmation of the existing reality is shamelessly reiterated behind the mask of neutrality and objectivity: "Ideology is split between the photographing of brute existence and the blatant lie about its meaning, a lie which is not articulated directly but drummed in by suggestion. The mere cynical reiteration of the real is

gesture of affirming only the “facts” that confirm the (positivist) *theory* while in the background, of course, still *negating* the other ones, all those “irrational” or “utopian” “facts” that do not fit into the accepted theoretical framework.²⁶ The marriage between capitalism and the state with all its techno-scientific capabilities generates an unprecedented social control over individuals. That is why, in a specific dialectical move in which double negation remains at work, Adorno asserts that the *liquidation* of the (bourgeois) subject is realized through its social *totalization*.²⁷ Once society has taken over the individual, society itself becomes subjectivized as proven, for instance, by the ideological effect of the “jargon of authenticity” which bombastically hails individual choices only to *mask* the powerlessness of the individual²⁸ in a capitalist society in which everything depends on arbitrary *decisions*.²⁹ No longer an expression of the rebellion against social constraints, the individual becomes instead an abstract, mediated reality (the first affirmation) who tends to almost automatically confirm society's abstraction (the second affirmation). And the same thing can be noticed in the sphere of class relations. The proletariat that allowed Marx to dream about a global revolution is liquidated through its extension to the whole of society: because of the *systemic* nature of capitalism, everyone, in a sense, becomes a proletarian, bourgeois and workers alike.³⁰

enough to demonstrate its divinity.” Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 118.

²⁶ Adorno, “Introduction”, in Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Albert, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Habermas, Harald Pilot, Karl R. Popper (eds.), *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p. 16, p. 21, p. 50.

²⁷ Actually, this move expresses the way second negation negates the subject only by masking this under the guise of expanding the subject to the whole of society. The subject is liquidated when society itself is subjectivized and transformed in a place of unaccountable, arbitrary decisions.

²⁸ Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 72-73.

²⁹ The social spread of paranoia is a symptom of this subjectivizing process of society. See Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 156-157.

³⁰ Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I...*, p. 380, p. 386. There are two points to be made in understanding why Adorno would imply this kind of social evolution: the *first* one has to do with the erosion of the 19th century difference between *theory* (as an expression of a bourgeois status) and *practice* (as something that belongs to the workers) once society enters into the stage of monopoly capitalism. Adorno notices that the tension between theory and practice is liquidated only to be replaced by an ideology that hails action (see, for instance,

Though class division remains an “objective” reality, bourgeoisie no longer controls the system and turns into a *function* for its reproduction. The market suffers the same fate by disappearing once it is globalized: the commodity form that used to be present only in the economic sphere (19th century) extends to the whole of society (20th century). The political monopoly over economic activities are not meant to limit capitalism, but to expand it by trying to commodify everything left untouched by 19th century capitalism, from individual consciousness, emotions or gestures to cultural creations.

Hello, neoliberalism!

Adorno died in 1969, ten years before Margaret Thatcher would rise to power in Britain signaling the birth of neoliberal “revolution”. We can only imagine what a shocking spectacle would have been for Adorno to witness the alliance between Thatcher and Reagan in promoting their aggressive “return” to classic liberalism and dismantle the economic and social monopoly of the state. Given this late mutation in capitalism, all we can do is to invoke Adorno's “spirit” and try to dialectically decipher the faces of this new social reality. So, let's initiate the ritual of this medium session and begin, of course, with the skeptics.

There are numerous accounts of how to tackle neoliberalism due, in part, to the ghostly character of the phenomenon itself.³¹ For a Marxist theoretician like David Harvey, neoliberalism constitutes the political attempt of addressing *structural* problems within capitalism that is meant “to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the

Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I. Ohne Leitbild. Gesammelte Schriften 10. 1*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, pp. 23-24). Thus, we might safely add that the emasculation of the proletariat comes only through the generalization of “pseudo-activity” to the entire society. In monopoly capitalism, everyone seems to work, even intellectuals perform a rather repetitive activity of assembling “stereotypes” that resembles the boring work in a factory. The *second* point is that the new form of capitalism is about the “monopoly” of the state over economy and its individuals. The power of the state transforms everyone into an underdog, thus, in a sense, reproducing the working class status from 19th century.

³¹ See Ciprian Bogdan, “Politics but not too much. Neoliberalism as infra-ideology”, in Sergiu Mișcoiu, Valentin Naumescu (eds.), *What is Left From the Left-Right Cleavage? A Comparative Perspective*, București: Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale, 2015.

power of economic elites".³² As a justifying mechanism for the capitalist order, neoliberalism comes with the promise of emancipating the "individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade".³³ Jürgen Habermas shifts, however, the focus from the structural problems of capitalism to those that are specific to a differentiated modernity. Neoliberalism is simply an attempt of economic and political systems to "colonize" "the lifeworld" by replacing "communicative action" which impregnates socialization and identity building with systemic imperatives (individualism, profit etc.) driven by instrumental rationality.³⁴ By contrast, Stuart Hall focuses on the way Thatcherism has managed to win the *cultural* battle in Great Britain and to replace the social-democratic "common sense" (Gramsci) centered on "egalitarian and collectivist attitudes" with one advocating "a more competitive individualistic market-driven, entrepreneurial, profit-oriented outlook".³⁵ In a rather similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu explains the neoliberal success in terms of a cultural battle fought by various organizations (newspapers, institutions, think tanks etc.) to transform a "pure mathematical fiction" that, in fact, undermines the very conditions of social reproduction (education, unions, families etc.) into a "self-evident" reality that would free individuals from the tyranny of the state.³⁶ Last but not least, Michel Foucault tries to move away from the usual understanding of neoliberalism as an *ideological* mechanism and associate it with specific "*practices of power*". From this perspective, neoliberalism radicalizes 19th century liberal practices: instead of defining itself as a force meant to limit government intervention in the economic market (the classical *laissez-faire*),

³² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 19.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

³⁴ Timo Jütten, "Habermas and Markets", *Constellations*, vol. 20, 4, 2013, available at [http://repository.essex.ac.uk/10834/1/Habermas_and_Markets_-_Academia-libre.pdf], accessed July 2017.

³⁵ Stuart Hall, Alan O'Shea, *Common-Sense Neoliberalism*, [https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/s55_02hall_oshea.pdf], p. 11, accessed August 2014.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance. Against the New Myths of our Time*, Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 1998, p. 66, pp. 94-95.

neoliberalism goes much further by evaluating the entire society, including the state, according to the economic standards of the market.³⁷

So, what would be Adorno's position in this spectrum of "leftist" accounts of neoliberalism? Though sharing a strong affinity with the Marxist approach, Adorno would most probably not endorse Harvey's idea of an economic base (capitalism) that simply triggers changes in the political superstructure (neoliberalism). Since 20th century capitalism is already a systemic totality, the base and superstructure are already profoundly enmeshed. Thus, *the central difference brought by Adorno in this debate resides in viewing neoliberalism as a dialectical expression of contemporary social totality*. That would be the reason why the dream of saving an untainted lifeworld (Habermas), a social-democratic consensus (Bourdieu, Hall) or a larger space for individual resistance (Foucault) means to be in denial: these spaces are not "outside" capitalist totality, but already mediated by it.³⁸ When dialectically looking at neoliberalism, we should notice right away the "neo" attached to liberalism, a supplement that fits, to some extent, Hegel's point on *Aufhebung* as both preservation and overcoming of the previous historical phase by the new one. What is different, however, from the Hegelian narrative is that neoliberalism does not simply preserve and overcome liberalism as its preceding stage. Neoliberalism absorbs and radicalizes liberalism only as a reaction to its previous stage, monopoly capitalism. Otherwise put, neoliberalism "goes back" to liberalism only as a way to *negate* the previous stage of capitalism in which the state is the central social force. Such a dialectical approach should make us reluctant to a comparative analysis between liberalism and neoliberalism by counting their ideological similarities and differences because, again, the real problem lies not in the relationship between neoliberalism and liberalism, but in that between neoliberalism and monopoly capitalism. So, if the answer does not reside in counting particular ideological features, we should look at a deeper level, at the very mechanism that allows ideology to reproduce itself in a specific social

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 239-313.

³⁸ In a similar way, Moishe Postone relates capitalism to a systemic totality that finds its exemplary model in Hegel's Absolute Spirit. See Moishe Postone, *History and Heteronomy. Critical Essays*, Tokyo: UTCP Booklet 12, 2009.

totality. Remember that, for Adorno, monopoly capitalism negates 19th century liberalism, or that double positivity (as the ideological mechanism of monopoly capitalism) negates double negation (the ideological mechanism of liberalism). From this perspective, neoliberalism does the same thing, it negates monopoly capitalism, thus, reviving double negation *against* the double positivity of monopoly capitalism. However, by making double negation *explicit* again is in no way a return to 19th century liberalism. Adorno would surely say that the end result of this dialectical process is not less ideology, but more since capitalism is fatally programmed to increase control and domination by turning everything into abstractions. Compared with 20th century ideology that tries to deny all traces of negativity, neoliberalism dialectically reverses this process, *it brings negativity once again to the surface, but instead of using it to criticize the existing social order (as in liberalism), it ends up legitimizing it.* If there is a central feature of neoliberalism, that would be the attempt to eliminate the emancipatory content of *determinate negation* and transform it into a tool for justifying the *status-quo*.

As Bourdieu and others have noticed, one of the basic gestures of neoliberalism is to naturalize social competition between individuals.³⁹ Thus, if in 19th century liberalism, competition could still retain an emancipatory side by rejecting social dogmatism in the economic sphere, paradoxically, in neoliberal capitalism competition seems to vanish in its very expansion to the whole of society. Because there is no external limit (like the state), the entire society being transformed into a huge enterprise of producing social athletes, the *negation* induced by competition does nothing, but to confirm the functioning of social order. Ironically, the monopolistic tendency of 20th century capitalism comes back under the guise of a new type of monopoly, that of a competition that wants to *exclude* any other possible form of social relationship (such as altruism, generosity, equality etc.). If we switch the focus on class relations, there is a similar dialectic at work. While in monopoly capitalism, the proletariat is liquidated because everyone, in a sense, becomes a worker, a simple piece in a huge system, it seems that in neoliberalism everyone should turn into a

³⁹ Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

bourgeois.⁴⁰ Shouldn't we all become entrepreneurs ready to come up with creative solutions to the challenges addressed by the market? Shouldn't workers themselves get accustomed with flexibility and risks and forget about doing the same repetitive work all their life? Isn't everyone's destiny to be engaged in "lifelong learning", so that we can adapt to the existing uncertainties?⁴¹ The irony is, of course, that the bourgeois type itself (that once symbolized the promise of emancipation from feudal hierarchy) has disappeared in the generalized *uncertainty* of our contemporary "risk society" (Ulrich Beck).⁴² This doesn't mean, of course, that everyone experiences the same level of uncertainty: the distribution along class lines, as Adorno continuously reminds us, stays in place as an "objective" reality in systemic capitalism.⁴³ "Subjectively" speaking, however, capitalism no longer makes distinctions between classes, *everybody* has to align itself to the new ideological imperative of being flexible. And when everybody is a risk-taker, the system itself is no longer at risk, it has absorbed the energy of negating reality into its own reproduction. This kind of "strategy" is also visible at another level. Once neoliberal capitalism has managed to impose itself, the economic monopoly that used to be the privilege of the state disappears by being globalized, it becomes transformed, we might say, into a monopoly of multinational corporations engaged in the *parody* of a global competition. The masking of monopoly under the guise of global

⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, Adorno also anticipates this ideological mystification (that becomes widespread in neoliberalism) in which some part of the proletariat views itself as middle-class: "The institutional and psychological structure, which in 1930 Kracauer diagnosed as a culture of employees, deluded the celluloid-collar proletariat, who were threatened by the immediacy of losing their jobs. It deluded them into believing that they were something special. Through this delusion the superstructure make them toe the bourgeois line, while in the meantime, thanks to a lasting market boom, that superstructure has become the universal ideology of a society which mistakes itself for a unified middle class". Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, pp. 19-20.

⁴¹ Moreover, if monopoly capitalism is based on a generalized "pseudo-activity", neoliberalism seems to be working on a widespread pseudo-intellectual thinking. This can be easily explained by considering the contemporary development towards a "speculative" capitalism which combines several factors: the economic impact of service sector, market speculations and virtual technologies.

⁴² See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society – Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage, 1992. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the bourgeois concept of "risk" is already anticipated by the adventurous behavior of Odysseus. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 48.

⁴³ Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I...*, p. 15.

competition is visible not only because, usually, the small economic actors end up in being swallowed by the big ones, or that the latter are more competitive than the former because of their know-how to use tax avoidance,⁴⁴ or that prices are often settled through secret negotiations between the big actors, but also because the state itself becomes a guarantor against the bankruptcy of banks and corporations since they are “too big to fail”.⁴⁵ At this point, we can see how capitalism has evolved from one in which the state has monopoly over economy to a really globalized system in which the state itself looks like a corporation obsessed with austerity in order to avoid default, with privatization as a way to externalize costs or, most of all, with securing the big economic players against bankruptcy. To put it dialectically, the parody of global competition (the first negation) is constantly negated by the intervention of a state that itself parodies the corporate model (second negation).⁴⁶

But what about a “superstructural” phenomenon like postmodernism or post-structuralism? How does it fit into the broader picture? Shouldn't Adorno have become one of the darlings of this new

⁴⁴ See, for instance, “Corporate tax avoidance by multinational firms”, in *Library of the European Parliament*, 23/09/2013, available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130574/LDM_BRI%282013%29130574_REV1_EN.pdf], accessed July 2017.

⁴⁵ The financial crisis from 2007-2008 that emerged in the private banking sector was stopped only by state intervention that ended up paying the debts of the private sector. The basic slogan behind this intervention was that the banks were “too big to fail”. See Mark Blyth, *Austerity. The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁴⁶ This is, no doubt, a very sketchy manner to describe what happens at the level of global capitalism. A much more detailed analysis would be needed. All we intend to do is follow Adorno's basic point about a systemic capitalist society: the extraction of surplus value from the work of the proletariat (Marx) is part of a larger social tendency to reduce particular objects to abstractions (commodities). Capitalism is both an economic and ideological system in which profitability rates go hand in hand with abstractization and domination of (internal and external) nature. So, capitalism as a self-referential mechanism can reproduce only by pushing forward this tendency to commodify every inch of reality. The move from monopoly capitalism to neoliberal capitalism is the expansion of commodification to the global level in which the state seems no longer capable to remain the central actor being limited to a specific territory, by comparison, multinational corporations are much better equipped for globalization in virtue of their capacity to transcend territories and adapt to local contexts.

wave considering his unrelentless effort to save “nonidentity” from the grip of “identity-thinking”? Well, not really. Despite sharing certain similarities (including their love of art), there is a fundamental difference in their critical approaches. Adorno would surely say that postmodernism continues to be in denial by ignoring the elephant in the room: capitalism itself. After all, isn't the postmodern mantra of “difference”, “differance”, “diferend”, “heterogeneity” etc. strangely attuned to the flexibility and fragmentation induced by contemporary capitalism looking for profit? While both Adorno and postmodernists engage in a fierce critique of identity/totality, the latter end up in denying the very existence of such a (capitalist) totality: the critique is lacking an object. In dialectical terms, the negation of (capitalist) totality is itself negated by the fact that totality turns out to be nothing but a “grand narrative” that covers the irreducible heterogeneity of human “language-games”. Or as Keyser Söze, the evil character from *Unusual suspects* played by Kevin Spacey, would sum up the paradox: “the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he didn't exist”.

Another strange irony haunts, however, all this postmodern critique against “metanarratives”. What should have been a devastating charge against any oppressive totality and objectivity ends up in justifying pretty much everything by simply labeling it as “alternative”. This strategy is perfectly encapsulated in Kellyanne Conway's cynical smile at an American television when disarmingly rejected clear video footage by claiming that there were “alternative facts” that still proved the contrary, namely that Donald Trump's crowd size at his inauguration day had been bigger than his predecessor's. “Leftist” relativism gone mainstream and right-wing (let's not forget about “alternative right”). But Conway's reaction also signals a change in the *cynical* package of contemporary ideology. As Adorno and Horkheimer brilliantly point out, the fascist ideology is not about the revenge of some irrational, instinctive forces repressed by Enlightenment, but exactly the opposite, the resurgence of a cynical, manipulative rationality that knows all too well that its racial mythology is fake and still acting as if it's true. So, what it is really new? Instead of covering the fake through a huge propaganda apparatus by securing *monopoly* over information (culture industry, fascism or stalinism), contemporary ideology seems to transform cynicism itself into a *critical*

gesture against the “system”, “elites” or whatever. “You can show us as many 'facts' as you want, but there are 'alternative realities' that you cannot repress!” In other words, contemporary capitalism no longer reproduces itself by inhibiting “alternatives”, but, on the contrary, by multiplying them to the point that the fake almost completely obscures the real ones.

From (positive) utopia to (Trump's) dystopia and beyond

The fact that George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984*, has known lately a spectacular comeback should not be interpreted solely as a symptom for the prescient manner in which he described the manipulation of language, strangely resonating with the recent production of “fake news”, but, maybe more importantly, for the negative reaction that utopian thinking triggers in contemporary society. What if one of the major signs of neoliberal ideology is the repression of the utopian horizon? Before elaborating further on this, we shouldn't forget, however, that, for Adorno, one of the basic illusions of “culture industry” or totalitarian propaganda consists in promising a paradise that is always delayed.⁴⁷

From an instrument of criticizing domination (that shows us that there is a better world), utopia becomes a tool for its reproduction: “if you are obedient enough, you'll get your reward ... eventually!” So, to be clear, for Adorno, the problem is not with utopia as such, but with “positive utopia” that projects some future social paradise only by mimicking the ideological imperatives of the existing domination. As the reflex of *indirectly* pointing towards a better reality, “negative utopia” is the only one that allows us to preserve the critical function of utopia and resist giving in to the *status-quo*.

⁴⁷ “The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises.” Or: “This principle requires that while all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfillment by the culture industry, they should be so set up in advance that individuals experience themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers, as the culture industry's object. [...] The culture industry presents that same everyday world as paradise. Escape, like elopement, is destined from the first to lead back to its starting point. Entertainment fosters the resignation which seeks to forget itself in entertainment”. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 111, p. 113.

But what about neoliberalism? Where should we look for the source of the unprecedented appetite for dystopian scenarios in our society?⁴⁸ To remain faithful to Adorno means to take his dialectics seriously and point out that neoliberalism makes its way only by *negating* the utopian character of monopoly capitalism. Instead of promising an alternative utopia that should *confirm* the existing social reality, neoliberalism seems to propose an alternative dystopia *against* an already dystopian social reality. Otherwise put, if monopoly capitalism claims that “reality is utopian, so, utopia is the only alternative!”, in neoliberalism, the basic ideological formula would be something like: “reality is *not* utopian, so, there is *no* alternative to dystopia!” And Trump seems to be the epitome for this self-legitimizing process of neoliberalism. What is striking about “making America great again” is the relationship between the post-apocalyptic shape of contemporary American society in which everything seems to collapse (the so-called “American carnage”)⁴⁹ and the promise of a brighter future that looks more like a sublimated dystopia driven by fear and the urge to build “walls” for stopping Mexican “rapists” or “drug dealers” coming into the country. The discourse elaborated by Brexiteers seems to operate in a similar fashion. While they deplore the current state of Britain that is invaded by immigrants and European regulations, they promise a rather chilling future in which deregulations and tax cuts would make Britain some sort of paradise, but only for the wealthy. This by no means implies that the above mentioned ideological mechanism is restricted to “exotic” figures like Trump or Brexiteers. It can be easily detected in the way the politics of austerity has been imposed at European level. The German discourse about the Greek debt remains symptomatic for the neoliberal approach. The underlying message of the divide between “responsible” Germans and “irresponsible” Greeks seems to be that the world is a scary, risky place in which (Southern) people tend to behave irresponsibly and the only alternative is to impose strict, austerity measures to limit the

⁴⁸ A short list of dystopian movies should tell us something about the current ideological “mood”: *Mad Max* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990), *Gattaca* (1997), *Matrix* (1999), *Minority Report* (2002), *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Children of Men* (2006), *The Hunger Games* (2012), *Elysium* (2013).

⁴⁹ Donald Trump, *Inaugural Address*, Friday, January 20, 2017, available at [<https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>], accessed July 2017.

damage. So, to put it crudely, the neoliberal “paradise” is a dystopia in which you might have a good life only because many others are failing. The critical function of dystopia (that Orwell still used against totalitarian utopias) tends to almost automatically legitimize dystopia itself, the only *real* alternative to the existing (dystopian) reality.

What is left after (briefly) exploring this topsy-turvy world of neoliberalism? What should be the task of a critical theorist in this capitalist stage? As we have tried to indicate, Adorno can still provide us with useful critical insights and tools despite moving into a new form of capitalism. If Adorno tries to make Marxist critique better equipped for catching up with the “cunning” of monopoly capitalist ideology, neoliberalism comes with a new strategy of concealing its contradictions. Instead of hiding these tensions, neoliberalism makes them visible by naturalizing them. Thus, the ideological concealment operates now in the very gesture of unveiling the cracks within the system. How else can we understand the paradoxical situation in which, on one hand, contemporary media unashamedly exhibits human suffering provoked by economic inequality while, on the other, even a modest change like taxing corporate profit is fiercely labeled as left-wing radicalism? In this new ideological context, the main task of a critical theorist is no longer to indicate the mechanisms that conceal negativity and create the illusion of a totally transparent reality, but to uncover the *parodical* side of most contemporary *critical* gestures that simply justify the existing social reality. If in neoliberal capitalism, the critical gesture is disconnected from the promise of emancipation with the future being depicted as even bleaker than the present, a renewed critical alertness is required to shed light on today’s opacity and reification by still pointing to the possibility of having a better world.

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