'RADICALISING' THE PUBLIC SPHERE: FROM HABERMAS TO ADORNO

by

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY.

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a product of my own labour. Any work that has been appropriated from other people has been properly acknowledged within the text.

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Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action continues to animate discussions on the nature of democracy in contemporary societies. Indeed there has been rarely a work of serious scholarship about the evolution of modern society that is not informed by the writings of this German philosopher. Yet there is a growing realisation that the evolution of contemporary societies has been accompanied by fundamental changes that have exerted strains on the relevance of Habermas's political philosophy. This fact has been popularly highlighted by that body of mainly French thought that comes under the rubric of poststructuralism. As a consequence there has been a suggestion that the tradition of critical theory that Habermas represents is irrelevant. The dissertation agrees with the first argument: that the changes in contemporary societies have rendered Habermas's model of discursive democracy problematic. However, the conclusion of critical theory being in its twilight does not follow from this. The problem that is embedded within Habermas's oeuvre is well noted within the Frankfurt School. In fact, one of its original members anticipated the problems currently encountered by a communicative theory of society and puts forward a programme of critique that would ensure the continued relevance of Habermas and the critical tradition that he belongs to. The dissertation argues that a turn to Adorno's negative dialectics would address some of the debilitating features of Habermas's theory. Specifically, the incorporation of the insights of Adorno's dialectics into the theory of communicative action and by extension to the Habermasian public sphere would go a long way in realising the goals inherent in Habermas's political philosophy. This is to say that the current exercise stems from the conviction that an Adornian critique of communicative ethics, by way of a negative dialectics, offers improvements to Habermas's model of discursive democracy.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Idea of a Rational Society ........................................... 8

1.2 Thesis Objectives

   1.2.1 Historical Condition ............................................. 15

1.3 An Outline of the Chapters ............................................. 17

## 2.0 The Dialectic of Enlightenment as the ‘Archimedean point’ between Adorno and Habermas.

2.1 The Background

2.2 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the narrative of ‘retrogressive anthropogenesis’

   2.2.1 The delineation of a ‘nonidentity’ of conceptual thought in the Dialectic of Enlightenment ............................................. 33

2.3 The Performative Contradiction of a Nietzschean inspired ‘totalised’ Critique of Society: Habermas and the Dialectic of Enlightenment.

   2.3.1 Parallels between the *Dialectic* and the French Poststructuralist school ............................................. 43

2.4 A Hermeneutic of a ‘Damaged’ life as Disclosing Critique: A Tentative First Defence of Adorno’s Anti-Positivist stance in the *Dialectic*.

   2.5 Conclusion: ‘Two Roads diverged in A Wood’............................................. 55

## 3.0 From Subjective to Intersubjective Consciousness: Communicative Reason and the Politics of Emancipation

3.1 Jürgen Habermas and the tradition of Western Marxism ......................... 58

3.2 From ‘Cognitive Interests’ to a Universal Pragmatics ............................. 66

3.3 The Theory of Communicative Action: A two-tier system of society. ................. 73
3.3.1 Shifting Textualities: From 'Ideology Critique' to 'Colonisation of the Lifeworld' 80

3.4 Communicative Antecedents in Habermas's Early Works: The centrality of the notion of public sphere in Habermas's oeuvre. 82

3.5 Concluding Remarks: Communicative Theory and Political Practice 89

4.0 In Defiance of the 'aura' of the Subject: Negative Dialectics and Transformative Praxis 94

4.1 The Development of a Radicalised Critique of Society 95
4.2 Negative Dialectics as a 'Logic of Disintegration' 102
  4.2.1 Negative Dialectics as an Ontology of the false state of affairs 107
  4.2.2 A Hermeneutic of a Failed form of Life 108
  4.2.3 Evaluating 'wrong' forms of life 110
4.3 'The Road not taken': Adorno's conception of language 112
4.4 The Dynamics of Negative Dialectics: the idea of Constellations 115
4.5 The Idea of Determinate Negation as Disclosing Critique: A defence against Performative contradiction' 123
4.6 Concluding Remarks: Defying the aura of the Subject 128

5.0 Apotheosis of Reason: Interrogating Communicative Ethics 130

5.1 Problematising the System and Lifeworld Distinctions 132
5.2 The 'Kantian' subject in Habermas's Discourse Ethics 137
5.3 Intersubjective Symmetries 140

5.4 From Epistemology to Society: Intersubjective Symmetries as Exchange Relations 144
  5.4.1 Reaffirming the Neo-Liberal Order 151
  5.4.2 The problem of 'pure' subjectivity: The dilemma of Fundamental Ontology 154
  5.4.3 The Invisible hence 'Invincible' Subject: The Absence of Corporeality 155
5.5 Conclusion

6.0 Negative Dialectics and the Idea of Autonomy

6.1 ‘Nonidentity’ as Transformative Political Praxis: From Theory to Practice

6.1.1. The conception of Truth and the fate of Freedom in an Action-Theoretic model

6.2 The Somatic Character of Thought

6.3 Towards a new Public Sphere: Redeeming Adorno’s Dialectical Philosophy of Language

6.3.1 Introducing dialectics: Reanimating the Public Sphere.

6.4. Concluding Remarks: From Habermas to Adorno

7.0 Writing Poetry after Auschwitz: Radicalising the Public Sphere

7.1 The spectre of an ‘objectless’ universality and the ‘turn’ to Adorno.

7.2 From Adorno to Habermas

7.3 Concluding Remarks

7.3.1 Enabling Continuities
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0

The political philosophy espoused by the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas remains one of the most compelling articulations of the democratic framework given its own internal cogency as well as its broad engagements with other philosophical traditions. This is made evident by the fact that there has been scarcely a work in the terrain of social theory that has had such a broad and lasting impact in contemporary social sciences and humanities as the one that flowed from his prodigious pen. Yet even this impressiveness in scope has been astonishingly eclipsed by the ‘unity of perspective’ that runs through his seemingly disparate writings. The congruence of his thoughts is evident in his contributions to fields such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, political science, intellectual history and social theory.

Despite this, however, it is only quite recently that the English-speaking world has begun to delve into his writings seriously. The difficulty in the reception of his work in the English speaking world has to do more with the specific cultural trajectory of his many interlocutors than anything else. Indeed the works of Habermas assume the reader already has a specialised knowledge of a number of philosophers and social theorists in the German epistemological landscape. They range from the transcendentalism of Kant to the idealism of Hegel, from the hermeneutics of Gadamer to the Marxian writings of Lukács, from Weber’s ‘verstehen’ sociology to the linguistics of Searle and Austin, from the psychology of Piaget and Mead to the critical tradition of Western Marxism. Moreover Habermas requires us to be conversant with a whole set of German schools of thought, so encountering him without adequate preparation would be almost guaranteed to result in a total sense of bewilderment compounded by confusion. In an era that has been defined by its sceptical approach to grand metaphysical systems or grand discourses, the majestic breadth of Habermas’s work seems like an exception to the rule.

To understand Habermas, one has to grasp the fact that for him, current attempts at philosophising the world still make us contemporaries of Hegel, however much we would

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2 Ibid. This point was also made by Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, p. 3.
have liked to think we have transcended his system. In the Lectures that became the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas traced the thought trajectories of the 'young Hegelians' by noting the common ambivalence that these philosophers had toward their former mentor's system of synthesis.\(^3\) That is on the one hand, these students acknowledged the efficacy with which Hegel denounced the one-sided metaphysical formulations prevalent in materialist, idealist and pluralist discourses of the time and the 'violence of omission' that they perpetuate. On the other hand, however, they were also convinced that Hegel's system retained a contradiction that even his scheme could not surmount. This is demonstrated by 'the gulf between his claim that the dialectical process, which unites thought and history, culminates in the fundamental triumph of reason, and the obvious irrationality of the social world'.\(^4\) Therefore we are still contemporaries of Hegel in the sense that we are still trying to finish what he started. This label, by Habermas, is simultaneously, an oblique reference to the attempt by young Hegelians to retrieve reason 'from the abstruse, abstract world of metaphysical concepts', and to apply it, 'in the lives of finite embodied beings'.\(^5\)

For the young Hegelians, therefore, the problem lies in translating Hegel's philosophy into the historical realities of the world.\(^6\) Hegel's fault, according to this line of reasoning, was that, contrary to the stated aims of his dialectical process, the culmination of his system was the outright triumph of reason over history. The aim therefore is to rectify this anomaly by historicising reason while simultaneously retaining its links with the principles that undergird the Enlightenment.\(^7\) It is this background in Hegelian philosophy that has to be kept in mind when sifting through the Habermas oeuvre. Habermas's version of Critical Theory, in this way, becomes a particular strand of theorising that incorporates Hegelian, Marxist as well as Weberian themes in an attempt to address some of the aporias that he associated with the critical theory of the older generation of the Frankfurt School.

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\(^5\) Ibid.


\(^7\) Habermas refers to this redress as the 'desublimation of reason'. If we are to use this against Hegel then it would be akin to saying the 'desublimation of the Spirit'.
Yet for all its novel approach to the tensions within the ‘old’ theorising of the Frankfurt School, there is nevertheless a dark and disturbing development on the horizon of the conceptual terrain occupied by Jürgen Habermas. This problem is highlighted by the disputes surrounding the validity of his main assumptions and tenets. Some claim that the predicament is symptomatic of a chronic illness that is in its latter stages. The premises upon which these allegations rest range from an alleged ‘deflationary conception of philosophy’ that outlaws the role of the metaphysical, to what has been termed the exclusive sociologism in Habermas’s critical theory; that is, one that imagines that pathologies of the present can only be articulated effectively by sociological theories. A critical theory based on these tenuous grounds, the argument goes, will remain blind to our ways of knowing and being in the world. Others differ, pointing out that what besets Habermas’s theory is nothing ‘incurable’ and that indeed the overall relevancy of his theoretical endeavour is very much intact. The jury is still out for a final adjudication on the matter. Significant though, for the purpose of this dissertation, is that these disputes also highlight the contrasting evaluations on the emancipatory potential (or lack thereof) of Habermas’s concept of the public sphere.

The current dissertation marks its point of departure from the problems associated with the Habermasian public sphere and the inherent telos embedded within it: the completion of the modernity project. It is a taken for granted fact that the public sphere, derived directly from his theory of society, lies at the heart of Habermas’s political philosophy. It is, indeed, the crystallisation of an ingenious attempt to redress what, in Habermas’s opinion, was a monumental failure in the critical theorisation of society by the older members of the Frankfurt School as exemplified by the works of its chief theoretician – Theodor Adorno. The differences between the two are well documented. From Habermas’s point of view, Adorno immerses himself in an epistemological paradox in his stringent critique of rationality. This is in the way the latter radically critiques reason using reason’s own resources. In so doing, Habermas argues, Adorno contradicts himself. Adorno’s protagonists, on the other hand, would insist that Adorno’s critique of the Hegelian scheme of sublating...
the particular to the universal can also be applied to Habermas's rational consensus as the culmination of the process of contestation between individual validity claims.

What is less known in the din accompanying all this is the extent of the continuities between Habermas's theory of society and the one that can be discerned from Theodor Adorno's social and philosophical critique. The degree of convergence between the two authors is primarily seen in the way both accounts are oriented towards the realisation of a rational society. Their disagreement, in this way, centres chiefly on the question of how best to achieve this shared aim. The dispute, if one can call it that, comes about as a result of their contrasting views on prevailing conditions, which, from both points of view are a hurdle to the realisation of their goal. Adorno admittedly harbours a more pessimistic evaluation of contemporary conditions, the contours of which, for him, are defined predominantly by the capitalist enterprise. Employing Marx's 'principle of exchange' simultaneously with the Nietzschean critique of reason as just a 'will to power', which are then broadly revisited on an epistemological matrix defined by a critical evaluation of Hegelian dialectics, Adorno developed an evaluation of life in contemporary society as 'damaged' and, as such, not worth living. The normative undertone of his critical theory finds quintessential expression in this formulation as nowhere else in his voluminous and often extremely dense writings. By contrast, Habermas claims to show a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of prevailing conditions of life. This understanding led him to identify more emancipatory potentials in contemporary contexts than Adorno did before him. Put simply, the realisation of a rational society, for Habermas, rests on an effective form of resistance against the infiltration of 'systemic logic' (read positivist reason), which is driven by the non-linguistic media of power and money, on the linguistic environs of the lifeworld. These differences also bring to light the two philosophers' diverging conceptions of what a rational society may look like.

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1.1 The Idea of a Rational Society

For Habermas, a rational society is one that is premised on a clear demarcation between its two components, the 'system' and the 'lifeworld' and their respective dynamics. The 'system' in this scheme of things is comprised of the structural arrangements that ensure the material survival of society. Regulated by instrumental reason, or what Habermas, following Weber, called 'purposive rationality', this sphere is the site of strategic actions. By contrast, the 'lifeworld', a concept he borrowed from Dilthey, is supposedly guided by a communicative reason that is attuned to rational consensus. By conceiving society as made up of systems and lifeworld, Habermas alludes to the two different ways of integration in capitalist society – those of systemic and social integrations. As such, the lifeworld becomes the site of intersubjective actions based on a linguistic framework provided by what Habermas sees as the telos of a universal pragmatics – undistorted communication.

At first glance, Adorno's conception of what a rational society should be is somewhat more ambiguous than the one propounded by his erstwhile assistant at the Institute. This is because Adorno, unlike Habermas, did not come up with a positive formulation of what modern society needs to protect itself from regressive tendencies. In fact he associates positive identification of a rational society with Hegel's positive affirmation through negation; that is, it can only come about via an illegitimate deployment of reason to seek identity. What he offers instead is a negative conception of utopia that comes as a result of a relentless critique of modernity. In this way it is much easier to get an index of what a rational society must not be, from Adorno. Yet in spite of this, the convergence between the two holds. Like Habermas, Adorno views the hegemonic status of positivism in the terrain of epistemology as constituting a problem for the realisation of the goal of his critical theory. Positivism, for him, breeds conservative dispositions within the populace. The transformation of the current status quo, therefore, is contingent on the determinate negation of positivistic and conservative tendencies, exemplified in his time with equating the concrete with the rational, in comprehending social life. This would entail a more sustained form of critique than the one offered by Hegel.14 It is in this way that a dialectics based on negativity is to work against the imperialism of positivism in the terrain of knowledge and the concomitant apathy of conservatism in the field of emancipatory politics. By continuously bringing to light the limitations of positivistic thought through a searing critique of the status quo, this

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14 Hegelian philosophy exhibits both conservative and revolutionary impulses as evinced by his equating the real with the rational, see Philosophy of Right, translated by T M Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) p. 10.
dialectical orientation hopes that the rational force of reason will be brought to bear on the sediments of irrationality that impinges from within.

1.2 Thesis Objectives

The current thesis has two interlinking objectives in mind. Firstly the thesis aims to investigate Habermas's concept of the public sphere in light of its currency as well as its efficacy in dealing with contemporary issues. This entails a hermeneutic interrogation of his communicative theory as well as how this is manifested in his political oeuvre. The thesis, therefore, starts from the supposition that the overall structure of Habermas’s theory of communicative action and its manifestation in the public sphere, still offers the best way forward to the political realisation of human autonomy. In fact Habermas sees his work as salvaging the ‘project of modernity’: a project that hinges on the Enlightenment ideals of emancipation, freedom and liberty. For this to happen, the philosophic tradition that emerges as a result of Enlightenment thinking must transform itself, if it wants to maintain its currency, into a reconstructive science. It needs, in other words, to be ‘a comprehensive theory of rationality that focuses on the centrality of communicative action and discourse’.

The appreciation of Habermas’s two-tier theory of society as a definite improvement in critical thinking in the way it delineates different forms of reason in different spheres is, at the same time, tempered by the conviction that some fundamentals of his theory have to change in light of our contemporary challenges. This change necessitates a return to some of Adorno’s novel insights into what ails society. The specific dynamic that I wish to engage with is the uncritical way in which Habermas sees his public sphere as a mechanism generating justifiable outcomes. In other words, human autonomy follows automatically from fair and equal deliberations. To provide an appropriate critique of this, one has to examine the foundation on which Habermas’s theoretical edifice rests: universal pragmatics.

It is the view of this essay that the adoption of a universal pragmatics to guide the discourse in the lifeworld, and by extension the public sphere, is inadequate in the face of the reifying incursions of identity thinking or ‘purposive rationality’ in the lifeworld. To paraphrase, contemporary historical conditions suggest that the dynamics of communicative action are

inadequate to stem the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’. This is evinced by the social malaise of the times as well as the entrenchment of ‘old’ problems associated with class disparities.\textsuperscript{16} The intrinsic links between the lifeworld on one hand and the public sphere on the other will necessitate a direct engagement with Habermas’s theory of Communicative Action and its two-tier system of society. Only thus may we effectively address the inadequacies of the public sphere. The main reason for this is provided by the fact that the theoretical impetus of rational discourse in the political public sphere is propelled by the dynamic interplay within the ‘lifeworld’ as well as between this sphere of symbolic reproduction and the ‘system’.

The thesis therefore ultimately revolves around the argument, already highlighted above, that the inadequacy of Habermas’s public sphere and its linkage to the idea of freedom stems from the fact that the world has been reified to an extent that surpasses Habermas’s own estimation of it. That is, Habermas has mistakenly underplayed the degree of encroachment of positivist thought in the lifeworld, resulting in the continuing vulnerability of his theoretical edifice to functionalist impulses. Indeed the two-tier theory of society is grounded in the normative belief that the colonization of the lifeworld has not yet reached a critical stage. This is clearly evinced in his suggestion of building sensor-like barriers to protect the autonomy of the lifeworld from systemic encroachments.\textsuperscript{17} Universal pragmatics in this sense becomes a mechanism to secure the parameters of the lifeworld. The thesis proposes, however, that if we are to start from the supposition that the lifeworld has already been reified by identity thinking, the function of universal pragmatics immediately becomes aporetic. In light of this, we need to institute a critique of instrumental reason within the lifeworld in order to clear away any sediments of positivist thought that might affect the rules of engagement within this sphere.

Towards this end, the thesis sets out to correct some of these ‘weaknesses’ perceived to be endemic in Habermas’s political philosophy as delineated by his notion of the political public sphere. The thesis argues that the political realisation of the ‘project of modernity’ that Habermas vehemently defends lies in dealing effectively with this issue. This is primarily done via a return to Adorno. In fact, the argument that the lifeworld has been reified by systemic impulses is an Adornian one. Starting from the \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} as a disclosing critique of enlightenment and \textit{Minima Moralia} as ‘reflections from a damaged

\textsuperscript{16} An incisive analysis of contemporary social malaise and the need to ground thinking in an ethic that would act as corrective to Habermas’s ‘discourse ethics’ is offered by Jay Bernstein’s \textit{Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{17} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Philosophical Discourse}, p. 364.
life’, Adorno has never shirked from critiquing what he perceived as the greatest threat to freedom and therefore justice: identity thinking. Freedom or redemption is a rallying call that can be heard throughout his disparate writings. In fact, a life without freedom has become, for him, the chief symbol of our era. He immortalises this event by remarking that, ‘[O]ur perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer’.

The second objective of the thesis, directly emerging out from the first, is based on the hopes to rehabilitate Adorno in light of the historical contingencies of our epoch. To be sure this attempt is not novel. Fredric Jameson’s Late Marxism in 1990 is symptomatic of the nuanced hermeneutic that has emerged in regard to Adorno’s oeuvre. Although faulted by many in its interpretation of Adorno’s negative dialectics as the quintessential form of Marxism for the 1990s, the era which was defined by the apogee of poststructuralist thought, Jameson nevertheless sets the stage for a more sympathetic re-reading of Adorno. This culminates in the spring–summer special edition that the journal New German Critique on the different aspects of Adorno’s work that still have so much to offer to contemporary theorising.

1.2.1 Historical Conditions.

The current attempt therefore takes very seriously the view that the theoretical weaknesses inherent in Habermas’s theory of society render his political philosophy ill-equipped to face the challenges of the new millennium. These challenges are contextualized within an emerging global order that at face value seems bent on reintroducing a form of abstraction that would inevitably wreak ‘violence’ on those that fall outside its optical gaze. Indeed, by attempting to construct a framework where everyone becomes associated in a ‘global

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18 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, translated by Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). This seminal text will be referred to as the Dialectic from here onwards.

19 He argued that, ‘[T]he only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption’. See Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from damaged Life. Translated by E F N Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974) p. 247.

20 Ibid, p. 15.


village’, the neoliberal order runs the risk of an abstraction that will, by necessity, perpetuate the violence on the particular and non-conformity.

The new development and its universalist impulse is a troubling one, to say the least, for people already on the margins of this political and economic matrix. It is as if we are being told to conform once again to the conceptual categorization that comes with a new order. Others who have dared to differ have been at best demonized or, at worst, forced to conform via the use of economic sanctions and military might. In this way the slogan of ‘Might is Right’ becomes a simple variation of the positivist belief in the correspondence between concepts and their material exemplifications (objects). Conceptual thought, a way of thinking that has been criticised for its repressive stance against any form of ‘difference’, seems to have regained lost ground in the aftermath of the perceived demise of the ‘Left’. In Adornian parlance, a new idealism seems to be on the horizon: an idealism that symbolizes that universalism is destined to triumph against the particular once again. This will, amongst other things, render context-dependent moral and ethical considerations problematic. The sense of disempowerment that accompanies this seems to have already encapsulated the spirit of the age.

The suggestion for a return to Adorno has a few implications. These implications in turn become my working hypotheses in the course of this project. They are as follows:

1. that Habermas misrepresented key motifs in Adorno’s social philosophy on the way to articulating a theory of Communicative Action
2. that a reappraisal of Adorno has shed new light on his oeuvre and its continued contemporary relevance
3. that contemporary conditions are but an apotheosis of the environment that was blisteringly critiqued by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*
4. that the ‘linguistic turn’ in Habermas does not, as he claimed, constitute a step forward out of the epistemological paradox that he perceived to be inherent in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

In light of these implications, my hypothesis is that the turn to a universal pragmatics is a turn in a different direction, so much so that Habermas risks getting ensnared within paradoxes that were the products of an ill-advised abandonment of the central thesis of
Dialectic of Enlightenment and Negative Dialectics as well as Aesthetic Theory. This hypothesis is driven by the belief that despite their differences, Adorno and Habermas still have much in common. Indeed the feasibility of the current endeavour stems from the fact that upon closer examination, the differences between the works of Habermas and those of Adorno are not such that they constitute ‘incommensurable language games’. In fact the continuities are such that they warrant a closer examination of the possibility of a ‘hermeneutical fusion’ in their philosophical outlooks. In Kantian terms, the conditions of possibility of the project stem from a shared concern, for reason to be more reflective of its powers and limitations. The dissertation is guided by the belief that the weaknesses in Habermas’s theory of communicative action, and by extension his political philosophy, will benefit immensely from a new form of hermeneutics inspired by a return to Adorno.

1.3 An Outline of the Chapters.

The overall structure of the thesis revolves around its main thematic argument that Habermas’s notion of the public sphere is fraught with weaknesses. There is no other ideal place to start with than the Dialectic if we are to have a historical sense of the philosophical problems Habermas was trying to overcome as it is here that Habermas locates the rupture between him and his theoretical forebears. Chapter 2 therefore starts the discussion by examining some of the basic motivations that drove the authors of the Dialectic to display such a pessimistic view of social reality. In so doing the chapter will tease out some of the Dialectic’s seminal arguments, restating its central motifs as well as their antecedents. It will then go on to highlight the two different paths taken by Habermas and Adorno as a result of their interpretation of the arguments inherent within this seminal paper: Habermas’s path led to a deontological approach based on intersubjectivity while Adorno’s led to a searing critique of subjectivity based on a dialectics that eschews any form of idealistic ‘closure’ in the process of knowledge production.

Chapter 3 outlines the path that Habermas took, by giving an account of the theoretical contours of his approach and the traditions that it drew from. In this way the connection will

23 Gillian Rose notes the continuity inherent in Adorno’s writings. So while the main framework of re-examining Habermas will be from Negative Dialectics, pertinent motifs from Adorno’s other works will also be used, see Gillian Rose, ‘Negative Dialectics by Theodor Adorno’, The American Political Science Review, Volume 70, No. 2 (June 1976) pp. 598–599.
be made between Habermas’s critique of the *Dialectic* and the emergence of his communicative theory of society. For Habermas, the *Theory of Communicative Action* is the culmination of an attempt to identify the only viable ‘exit’ from the theoretical cul-de-sac that, in his view, the *Dialectic* ended in. He locates this ‘way out’ within the linguistic structures of speech acts. By dividing society up into two components regulated by linguistified and de-linguistified social processes of integration, Habermas hopes to achieve two overlapping objectives: first, to rejuvenate a critical theory of society that hitherto was mired in the aporias of the philosophy of consciousness while, secondly, delineating a way forward in which emancipatory politics can take place without the abject pessimism that usually gives way to cynicism as well as nihilistic predispositions in political praxis. This is to say the two-tier model of society is Habermas’s rejoinder to the problem of subject-centred philosophy and the kind of political practises that ensue from it. The second part of the chapter makes the connection between the theory of communicative action and its political correlate – the Public Sphere. One of the obvious advantages of approaching the public sphere this way, is that it allows you to examine the trajectory of Habermas’s thoughts from his original publication on the subject in 1962, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to the publication of *Between Facts and Norms*.24

Chapter 4 explores in some detail the major suppositions behind Adorno’s adoption of a ‘negative dialectics’. As such the chapter includes an adumbration of the path that Adorno took, by showing the continuity of the arguments of the *Dialectic* with the central principles of *Negative Dialectics*. Unlike Habermas who, as is seen in chapter 3, moves away from subject-centred philosophy, Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* calls for a new stance for processes of cognition, a stance that is rooted in a defiance against the power of subjectivity – a power whose dynamics are quintessentially shown by Hegelian dialectics. The new stance consists of moving away from the affirmation associated with Hegel to more negativity. In other words, a negation of negation, for Adorno, culminates in a negative dialectics instead of positive affirmation. In identifying the tenets of *Negative Dialectics*, attention will also be paid to its heritage. Given this, an attempt will be made to highlight its relevancy as well as its limitations. As such, trajectories of thought from Kant to Hegel as well as to other schools of thought such as fundamental ontology and existentialism are discussed and evaluated in the way they orbit each other, as though they form a constellation

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in Adorno’s writings. Habermas is by no means the only theorist from the Frankfurt School whose disparate writings are held together by a common vision. His mentor, Adorno, is also known for this. The latter’s analyses, from the ‘tonal’ music of Schoenberg to his philosophical articulation of the universal and the particular as well as his discussion on capitalist modernity are held together by a unitary vision that is underpinned by an overriding concern for difference or the ‘other’. Thus in light of this continuity there is no tension if *Negative Dialectics* is to be used as the principal document while overtures are to be made to other key works including *Aesthetic Theory* and *Critical Models*.

Chapter 5 signals the beginning of a critical interrogation of Habermas’s theory of communicative action that forms part of the backbone of the whole dissertation. Specifically, the chapter launches an immanent critique against the theoretical moorings of the theory of communicative action. An immanent critique is one that is conducted from within; that is, a critique based on the tension between the stated objectives of the framework and how it actually ‘pans’ out in reality. The main argument in this chapter is that there is a discontinuity between the stated aims of the theory of communicative action and how this theory turns out in light of our contemporary conditions. On one hand, Habermas’s turn to a universal pragmatics spells, for him, the deliverance of philosophy from the problems that have accompanied modern thought since Kant. Yet, as we see in this chapter, the suppositions behind the rules of language use are problematic when evaluated against the emerging pluralities of the social, which is the hallmark of the period associated with modernity. This yardstick regulates the tenor of the critique in this chapter. Apparent also in chapter 5 is the establishment of the linkages that will set the tone for the next chapter. In other words, the chapter, in teasing out the foibles associated with the linguistic turn also, at the same moment, starts to work out how these weaknesses are carried over to the internal dynamics of the public sphere. The implications, therefore, of the critique in this chapter are then re-cast onto the public sphere in the next.

Chapter 6 follows on from the discussion of the previous chapter, this time redirecting the critique towards the efficacy, or lack thereof, of the public sphere as a political device that is suited to the needs of democracy in the new millennium. This is done by a close examination of the fate of ‘freedom’ or autonomy within the public sphere. To be sure Habermas’s

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concept of the public sphere continues to exert considerable influence on the political agenda of a broad spectrum of positions ranging from democratic movements emerging from the ashes of totalitarian regimes to smaller social movements seeking empowerment within the interstices of more established democratic environs. Historically this concept stems from two interrelated developments: the publication of Habermas’s work on the subject and to a lesser extent, the interest in Hannah Arendt’s works on political theory. However, its reception has not come without criticism, the most telling of which comes from two opposing directions. The first of these is the critique mounted by the French intellectuals of the postmodern tradition and those who follow in their wake. The second is a sympathetic one and is generated internally from within the ranks of Critical Theorists working broadly within the contours of the Frankfurt School of thought. Chapter 6 tries to navigate between the two impulses by arguing for a return to Adorno and his dialectics. The chapter starts off by attempting to put to rest one of the most controversial allegations against Negative Dialectics: that it is incoherent as a theory of knowledge and incompetent as a political philosophy. One of the most common observations directed at Adorno is that his philosophy, unlike Marx, is devoid of an addressee. It is akin to a ‘message in a bottle’ meant for a future assignee who would then reconcile what is in the bottle with the historical conditions of that moment. Rejecting this view, the chapter proceeds to problematise the public sphere by examining the implications inherent within deliberations that are regulated by discourse ethics and the way these affect notions of autonomy in political practice.

The last chapter sums up the whole argument of the dissertation by revisiting the arguments in the text and restating the way the current attempt is meant to further the course of critical interrogation within our contemporary conditions. It argues for the direct relevance of Adorno in an age where, in direct opposition to Habermas’s view, ideologies still dominate

29 These would include postmarxists such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, whose book, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a radical Democratic Politics (2nd edition), (London: Verso, 2001) p. xiii., professes to steer a path that avoids the universalism reminiscent of Habermas’s speech pragmatics and the politically disempowered radical atomism of Lyotard, who insisted that the plurality of ‘incommensurable language games’ renders any attempt at consensual mediation an abomination in the postmodern epoch for it masks a process of subjugation taking place in any rational consensual agreement between differing parties – The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p. xxv.
30 The Frankfurt School is a name that became synonymous with a group of mainly neo-Marxists intellectuals of German origin, all members of the ‘Institute of Social Research’, who fled Germany during WWII because of their Jewish heritage. Its inner circle of members included Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal and Franz Neumann. Theodor Adorno later joined the institute during its period of exile in America.
our social landscape. It posits some ways in which Critical Theory could appropriate Adornian maxims in an attempt to keep itself abreast of the new dynamics of the age, hence ensuring its relevance for the future.
Chapter 2

The Dialectic of Enlightenment as the ‘Archimedean point’ between Adorno and Habermas

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Any discussion on the merits or demerits of that tradition of Continental thought that comes under the rubric of the ‘Frankfurt School’ will inevitably have to engage with the seminal text co-written by two of its grand theoreticians. Such is the influence that Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* continues to exert in contemporary social and political analyses that any understanding of current forms of Critical Theory would be incomplete without due recourse to it. The main aim of this chapter is to delineate the original fault-line between Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* and Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. This is done by tracing their historical disjuncture back to the *Dialectic*. The text thus becomes the basis from which the respective dynamics of the two paradigms are subsequently extrapolated.

The chapter starts with a sketch of the backdrop from which the *Dialectic* as a critique of society emerges (2.1). In true Hegelian fashion, the authors of the book remain steadfast in their assertion that the text is a product of its time, so an examination of the social and political conditions prevalent at the time goes a long way in the attempt to understand the impetus behind the unrelenting critique of society and culture that the *Dialectic* offers. This historical scrutiny of ‘the conditions of possibility’ of the text, to use a phrase from Kant, is followed by a discussion of the basic tenets of the book (2.2). Discussion here will revolve around themes that, in my view, play a pivotal role in the subsequent ‘break’ that Habermas makes from what he sees as aporias associated with the critical theorisation of the first generation members of the Frankfurt School. These include the nature of conceptual thought and nonidentity (2.2.1), the intertwining of myth and enlightenment and the notion of redemption or emancipatory practices. These are the pillars on which the social philosophy of Theodor Adorno rests.

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31 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Henceforth will be known as *Dialectic*. The term Critical Theory will be used interchangeably in the entire manuscript with the ‘Frankfurt School’ to distinguish this ‘school’ from other schools of thought.

32 The members of the Frankfurt School are usually distinguished in generational terms. First generation means Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Pollock, Benjamin and others while theorists such as Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and Wellmer are known as members of the second generation. Axel Honneth is perhaps the best known of the ‘third generation’ from that school.
Habermas’s critique of the *Dialectic* which is based on his assertion of a ‘performative contradiction’ inherent in the text’s analysis follows (2.3). The discussions in this latter section are primarily derived from a series of lectures that together make up *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.* One of the more pertinent themes discussed in this section is the logical continuity that Habermas establishes between the *Dialectic* and works of what he terms ‘black’ commentators of the bourgeoisie exemplified by Nietzsche and his modern-day followers. These modern day followers include such theorists of the poststructuralist tradition like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (2.3.1). This is done in order to illuminate the epistemological paradox that Habermas alleges to be inherent in the analysis of the *Dialectic.*

The chapter closes by restating Adorno’s polemic against society in light of the Habermasian claim of performative contradiction (2.4). The aim is to show the different considerations at play that propel each to different theoretical planes. The section also acts as the precursor of the new scholarship that has since emerged to rehabilitate the *Dialectic* and, by extension, the subsequent works of its primary author. This re-evaluation is the framework in which Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* is to be understood later on in the thesis. This final round of discussion will also serve to highlight the affinities between the *Theory of Communicative Action* and *Negative Dialectics* as well as their main thematic disjuncture.

2.1 The Background

The ‘Institute of Social Research’, as the Frankfurt School is formally known, came into being on February 3, 1923. It was established through a grant that was generously made possible by one Felix Weil, whose father was a successful German-born grain merchant who plied his trade in Argentina before sickness forced him back to Germany. The perception, amongst ‘leftist’ intellectuals in Germany, which gave impetus to the establishment of this institution, was that of a need for an autonomous research centre that would not sacrifice intellectual integrity at the altar of party politics. In Germany itself the problem was one that

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33 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.*
34 In 1992, *New German Critique* puts out a special issue to mark the renaissance in Adornian scholarship. The issue was introduced with a piece from Peter Hohendahl sketching the contours of this new philosophical landscape. See Peter Hohendahl, ‘Adorno Criticism Today’, *New German Critique.* No. 56, Special Issue on Theodor W. Adorno, (Spring–Summer, 1992), pp. 3–15.
could be located in the interstices of academia and party politics or between theory and practice. The Social Democratic Party’s (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)) ascension into power and its subsequent split into various factions with differing doctrines proved to be a dilemma for intellectuals ‘who still maintained the purity of Marxist theory’. Compounding this fragmentation was what could only be termed as an intellectual tectonic shift happening in mainland Europe. Germany was, prior to this, deemed to be the heartland of the socialist intellectual and political traditions. However, the Bolshevik revolution changed all this with the new centre gravitating towards Moscow. This also meant that Marxist doctrines became increasingly identified with Bolshevik socialist practice, to the utter consternation of Marxist theoreticians and practitioners alike. Thus for Marxist intellectuals such as Rosa Luxemburg, the new directions in which Marxism, as both thought and practice, seemed to be heading was justified grounds for increasing reservations and suspicion.

As if this was not enough, the ideological limitations imposed by positivist and objectivist approaches to defining and comprehending social reality further added to the consternation in the 1930s amongst Marxists of specific Hegelian leanings, as it implied that the age of speculative philosophy as well as social criticism was indeed on the wane, to be replaced by a new horizon defined by the ‘hard’ sciences. Karl Popper was one such intellectual at the forefront of this onslaught against non-objectivist approaches to social understanding. What troubled these groups of Marxists at the time was what they saw as the inevitable outcome of the new approaches to understanding: ‘the paralysis of social criticism’ in that period, leading to social and cognitive conformity. For Adorno, the tendency of the period to equate the ‘real’ with the ‘rational’ highlights a conservatism that is inherent in all correspondence theories of truth and as such, precluded the emergence of social critique. In light of the daunting grip conservative variants of thought, such as positivism, have on cognition, the task, for Adorno’s critical theory becomes the attempt to break this hold. This would, for him, entail an approach that includes a critique of the idealistic assumptions embedded within Hegelian dialectics, an adaptation of Nietzsche’s critique of reason as ‘will to power’, and the

36 Ibid., p. 4.
37 Ibid.
39 Ibid., p. 102. See also Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, p.10.
Marxian motifs relating to the alienating character of the capitalist enterprise. Indeed the intrinsic linkage between reason and power was further brought home, for Adorno, by the machinations of a fascist state to stigmatise, exclude and ultimately decimate those it deemed foreign. The collusion between the state, technology and capitalism convinced the Frankfurt scholar that humanity’s only hope lies in the adoption of a searing critique against the regressive tendencies immanent in Enlightenment thought itself.

The new approach to social critique was to be evaluated against a Kantian mantra that Adorno adopted; that is, the Enlightenment heralds the emergence of human beings from their self-induced immaturity. The specific way in which these different and often contradictory strands of thought were arranged to create an insightful critique of the malaise besetting modernity was pioneered in the Dialectic, co-written with Max Horkheimer, the then director of the Institute of Social Research. It is to this that we must turn to if we are to understand the subsequent position of the Frankfurt School as well as criticism directed against it later on by one of its own, Jürgen Habermas.

2.2 Dialectic of Enlightenment as the narrative of ‘retrogressive anthropogenesis’

One of Adorno’s main concerns during the earlier part of the 20th century is to do with what he perceives as the wholesale succumbing of thinking processes to positivism. For him, the hegemony of this system of thought, whose quintessential feature lies in the conviction of the veridical nature of the methods used in the natural sciences to attain knowledge and its indiscriminate use in all areas of social life, has led to the circumvention of the enlightenment process. Enlightenment for him, following Kant, is closely interwoven with the idea of autonomy. In fact the right kind of life can emerge only in an environment that is conducive to the expansion of human potentials to realise themselves. This, for him, has been stunted by the totalitarian impulse that informs positivist as well as idealist thought. In a clearly Weberian vein, Adorno posits that the dominance of positivism in the field of epistemology has a direct correlation to the complete suppression of human agency. In other words what makes a society totalitarian is not only its political, economic and cultural systems but also the specific type of cognition that drives these processes. The one cannot be divorced from

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40 Marx’s argument against the alienating character of capitalism as a social system was appropriated by Adorno via Lukács’s reading of it—see especially Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, pp. 83–209.
the other. Hence for Adorno, the preponderance of positivistic reasoning in the seemingly different political and economic systems of the United States, Germany and Russia in the 1930s meant that, ironically, there is very little that lies between capitalism, fascism and Stalinism.

The hegemony of totalitarian impulses in both positivistic and idealistic forms of reasoning contributed to their scepticism of the proletariat as the agent of historical change. Given this loss of faith in an autonomous revolutionary subject of history, and the hegemony of positivism in both thought and praxis, Adorno and Horkheimer began reconstructing a philosophy of history that was more reminiscent of Weber than of Kant and more like Nietzsche rather than Marx. Unlike Kant, they viewed enlightenment knowledge as leading away from greater autonomy to the increasing retrogression of the human species. This is chiefly because of their belief that knowledge has succumbed to instrumental reason. Contrary to the materialist transcendence of Hegelian dialectics advocated by Marx, they argue that the improbability of a proletariat uprising lies not so much in a false consciousness amongst the working class as in the subsumption of all critical philosophy in a reified environment defined by the new conservative orthodoxies.\textsuperscript{42} In other words the problem confronting the belief in the proletariat as the subject of history, for them, lies not at the level of consciousness but at how this consciousness was constituted in the first place. To be sure there were two interrelated developments that were behind the jettisoning of the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary change. The first was the increasing incorporation of the German working class with National Socialism while the second lies in what Adorno perceived as the complicity between the American working class and the controlling dynamic of the institutions of mass culture.\textsuperscript{43} The \textit{Dialectic} thus becomes an attempt by Adorno and Horkheimer to extrapolate on the root cause of the problems besetting their social world in order to clarify the lengths to which one must go if one is to try to begin addressing these anomalies.

The Frankfurt School, therefore, was guided from the very beginning by an interest in evaluating modern socio-economic and political formations. This interest is guided by an appreciation of the dialectic at the root of the Enlightenment process: one that sees the specific historical constellation of the Enlightenment as complicit in the unfolding of machinations of the ‘World Spirit’. This is to say that the members of the school agree that

\textsuperscript{42} They include both idealism and positivism in this group.

\textsuperscript{43} See chapter on the culture industry in the \textit{Dialectic}, pp. 94–136.
Hegel was correct in pointing out that the Enlightenment is to be understood primarily as a dialectic; a double-edged process that facilitates processes pertaining to human progress, on the one hand, and processes leading to its negation, on the other. These antagonistic processes are intertwined, thus progression – or regression for that matter – are both plausible. Unfortunately, Adorno argues, the influence of the Hegelian Spirit and its scientific correlate has pushed this dialectic towards a path of ‘retrogressive anthropogenesis’. That is, the underside of modernity seems to have found dominant expression in a particular trajectory of the enlightenment dialectic that has gained currency in the period of modernity. This, for Adorno, is nowhere as evident as in the rise of fascism in Germany, the nature of the ‘culture industry’ in America and the pogroms of Bolshevik rule. Eschewing the notion of a harmonious synthesis that lies at the heart of Hegelian philosophy, the movement away from Hegel was to have a telling effect on the Dialectic’s analysis, as could be discerned by the stringent tone of the text as well as its bleak prognosis.

One of the first lessons of the text is that the history of civilisation is one of ever increasing rationalisation and subjugation; progress has been matched each step of the way by decreasing human autonomy. This is to say that our own peculiar form of civilisation came at a cost to ourselves as sensual beings. The objective, therefore, is to examine the specific trajectory that has landed us into such a lamentable state. This was made explicit on the preface of the book’s 1944 and 1947 editions, where the authors laconically state the Dialectic is to be ‘nothing less than to explain why humanity instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’.44 Published at the end of the Second World War, the book explicates how humanity, instead of reaching the apotheosis envisaged for it by Kant and Hegel, has sunk even lower to the horizon of barbaric idiocy.45 By implicating reason in its positivistic guise as the sole determinant of a world marked by chronic social malaise, the Dialectic was able to put forward its thematic programme. For the authors of the Dialectic, instrumental reason with all its positive attributes was a deception wrought on humanity facilitating, in its destructive wake, the emergence of the ‘totally administered society’.46 By conveying the progress of Enlightenment thought in this way, the

44 Dialectic, p. xiv.
45 It is generally agreed amongst scholars of the Frankfurt School that Adorno was the primary author of the study based on the fact that the editing of the final manuscript before publication was solely done by him, see James Schmidt, Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno’s “Dialectic of Enlightenment”, Social Research, Volume 65, No.4, (Winter 1998) p. 811.
46 The concept of the ‘totally administered society’ is an exemplification of the Weberian influence in the works of these self-confessed neo-Marxists starting from Georg Lukács.
authors of the *Dialectic* hope to bring to light its ambivalence as to the final destiny of humankind. In order to salvage the enlightenment for humanity, reason needs to be rearmed with a self-reflective mechanism. Before this, however, reason needs to be made aware of its role in our current demise. This can only come by a critique directed at reason itself. That is, as reason becomes the handmaiden of power dynamics, the only avenue available for the redemption of the promise of the Enlightenment is to cast suspicion on the internal logic of reason itself. Reason as 'identity thinking’ must therefore undergo a process of determinate negation in order to expose its limitations.47

So how did reason become enlightenment’s nemesis? To answer this question, Adorno and Horkheimer did a historical excavation of the emergence of reason through a reinterpretation of a character in the literature of the ancient Greeks. Western rationality, according to the *Dialectic*, first emerged as an instinctual mechanism of self-preservation against the perceived threat posed by the unknown of nature. In an ingenious rereading of the Homeric *Odyssey*, Adorno and Horkheimer were able to delineate the concomitant costs associated with the ‘enlightenment’ that emerged as a direct consequence of this predominantly occidental mindset. This became the basis of their preference for a dialectical understanding of the enlightenment, eschewing any argument that sees the enlightenment as a uni-linear progression to an ideal.48 The conventional wisdom inherent in the Enlightenment tradition of pitting enlightenment thought against myth is rendered problematic by their analysis.49 Indeed they assert that myth is already enlightenment by its success in demarcating human thought from mimetic understanding, while their evaluation of the latter shows how it reverts back to mythology. That is, Adorno and Horkheimer went against the tradition of enlightenment thought by positing the genesis of western rationality as rooted not in a clear separation of enlightenment from myth but in their intertwinement. This thesis finds its exemplar in their interpretation of Homer’s chronicle of Odysseus.

According to the *Dialectic*, the adventures of Odysseus as he returned from Troy to Ithaca represent a narrative of the emergence of human consciousness; a narrative that also

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47 See chapter 4.
48 Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer ‘Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment’, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor., *New German Critique* No. 56 (Spring–Summer, 1992) p. 110. I am using this newer translation of the first Excursus in the *Dialectic* instead of the original one in the book itself. Any other reference from the book will be acknowledged as from the *Dialectic*. Ironically the understanding of enlightenment in dialectical terms is shared by the great antipodes Hegel and Nietzsche.
49 The opposition between enlightened thought and myth is well described by Jürgen Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 107.
highlights the impetus that drove that process as well as its consequences. The guile and astuteness showed by Odysseus in extricating himself and his men in situations of peril became the basis for the thematic statement, put forward by the authors of the book, that humanity’s survival strategies are intrinsically related to its own self-preservation. That is ‘[B]y calculating his own stake, he negates the power to which he has put himself in jeopardy. Thus he repossesses his forfeited life’. In so doing, a new type of engagement with nature gradually comes to light in the Dialectic. It seems that in order to subsume the challenges that nature affords us, we need to engage strategically with them. In order to do so, we need a new way of understanding them, a new reason, that would ensure that we are not overwhelmed by nature’s forces. The only way to do this is to ensure that this form of comprehension is driven by the need to dominate totally what is being comprehended. Indeed, Odysseus’s triumphs in the land of the lotus-eaters as well as in the cave of the Cyclops, Polyphemous, from the sorcery of Circe as well as the bewitching allure of the Sirens, are made possible only by the employment of strategic reason (cunning). This reason can only dominate in order to understand what is in front of it. Hence nature is transformed into a world of objects to be dominated and manipulated by a reason that seeks understanding through suppression. As the Dialectic points out, this became the archetype of social behaviour that still is applicable today. This is nowhere so obvious as exemplified in bourgeois colonists’ behavioural patterns; ‘[T]he seafarer Odysseus cheats the natural deities just as does the civilised traveller of a later date who offers the natives coloured beads in exchange for ivory’.

Exhausting the requisites of strategic reason the Dialectic moves on to account for its toll on humanity. It does this by arguing that the triumphs wrought by Odysseus in the face of adversity were not without consequences. Thus Odysseus managed to prevail against the forces of external nature only through a self-discipline that is premised on a systematic denial of his inner nature and longings. This is nowhere made clearer than when Odysseus ties himself to the mast of his ship and orders his men not to untie him under any circumstances. This is so that he may be able to hear the songs of the temptresses while at the same time avoiding the fate that accompanies this transgression. As the Dialectic puts it, ‘[I]n his

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50 Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment*, p. 112.
52 Adorno refers to this as *identity thinking*. For a case of Odysseus being the representative of the bourgeois individual see ibid p. 109.
53 Ibid., p. 114.
bounds, this listener is drawn to the Sirens as anyone else. Yet he has found an arrangement by which, in succumbing, he does not succumb to them.\textsuperscript{54} The price of living, therefore, is a continuous struggle against both outer (mythical powers) and inner (desires) nature. Wiggershaus explains this succinctly by observing that the ‘mythical powers have been outwitted; but the victims are then sacrificed to the identical self in a different form – they are internalised as renunciation’.\textsuperscript{55}

All in all, the\textit{ Dialectic} puts forward the argument that the\textit{ Odyssey} is a narrative that outlines the systematic subjugation of external nature through a process of objectification by identity-thinking and explains how this process necessitates a voluntary repression of inner nature.\textsuperscript{56}

The man of cunning survives only at the price of his own dream, which he bargains off by demystifying himself just as he demystified the external powers. He can never have it all, he must always wait, have patience, do without; he may not eat of the lotus or the cattle of holy Hyperion, and when he steers between Scylla and Charybdis he must calculate how many of his men will be torn from his boat. He just pulls through: such is his survival; and all the fame that he himself and others bestow on him for this just confirms that the title of hero is won only by vitiating the urge for total, universal and undiminished happiness.\textsuperscript{57}

The excursus on the\textit{ Odyssey} serves as a primer to the rest of the book. Lines of argument that range from the self-destruction of the Enlightenment to the reversion of enlightenment into mythology highlight one of the pillars of the text: that positivistic reason or conceptual thought comes into its own by subjugating nature through its objectifying gaze. Furthermore, the conquest of objective nature comes only through the systematic repression of its subjective counterpart – the self. This is done by way of a reason that has lost its ability for self-reflection and hence has become a coercive power in the process. The one-dimensional way in which reason seeks to conquer its objects is rendered possible, as shown in the quotation above, through an exchange of incommensurable values: those between the mastery of nature and the suppression of our inner selves.

Indeed one of the thematic arguments of the\textit{ Dialectic} concerns the ‘problematic of equivalence’ that is manifested in the exchange principle brought about as Odysseus sacrifices something of himself (i.e. his inner nature) in order to conquer the adversities that
nature forces upon him. Like Marx, the Dialectic articulates the exchange principle predominantly in terms of a ‘leveller’ of incommensurable values. In a discussion on sacrifice, the Dialectic highlights the affinities between this ancient ritual and the process of exchange as it occurs in capitalist societies. A sacrifice is usually a religious ritual where an offering is made to the gods as a substitution for a life already forfeited. Adorno argues that due to the incommensurability between the life and the substitute that is being sacrificed in its place, there is always, as a rule of thumb, a fraudulent dimension to the process. The same applies in the exchange of commodities. For exchange to take place there has to be a selective process where the general attributes, what Marx refers to as exchange value, of the two objects to be exchanged are identified and valued on the basis of an agreed criterion that by its very nature is always arbitrary. For Adorno, Odysseus is the quintessential exemplification of the modern homo economicus whose existence is rooted in his ability to extend the principle of exchange to all facets of society. Given the fact that Odysseus’s cheating of the gods of nature through the use of sacrifice becomes symptomatic of the modern trader who excels in expunging the incommensurability between unlike things in the name of commodity-exchange, there is really little difference between them. This is to say that both sacrifice and the exchange principle are functions of the need for self-preservation. Again it is worth quoting Adorno on this:

If exchange is the secularisation of sacrifice, sacrifice itself appears as the magical schema of rational exchange, a human organisation for controlling the gods who are overthrown by precisely the system that honours them.

The same principle of equivalence that enables the exchange of incommensurable entities in the ancient or in the capitalist world (as trade) is the very one that gives thinking its mandate to define reality.

As we have just seen, the origin of this way of understanding, according to Adorno, is not confined to the modern era but is in fact coeval with the emergence of human consciousness itself. That is, just as the use of sacrificial animals is a symbol (substitute) of human frailties and plea for forgiveness enabled through a mechanism that involves an effacement of the qualitative differences between two variables that lack parity, likewise, in the modern world, trade is only made possible by subjugating the actual value of a commodity (i.e. the value of the labour that is used to make it) to market mechanisms (exchange principle). The mastery of nature, as evident from the concept of sacrifice, is then subsequently extended inwards

58 Ibid.
towards the self as well as outwards to others in our search for control. Indeed, ‘[W]hat human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts’. But the attainment of power comes with a price – ‘estrangement from that over which it is exerted’, whether it is nature or fellow humans. Adorno refers to this strategic reason as Identity thinking. For him, identity thinking is a way of understanding the world based on an instrumental approach. The world as a consequence becomes an object to be understood and manipulated for one’s own benefit. This, for Adorno, is rendered possible only through the forced synthesis of objective reality with the conceptual apparatus of the mind. As such, things that are foreign are rendered familiar to subjective thought by means of the issuance of identities. In this way both positivistic and idealistic thought are manifestations of identity thinking. Yet for all its uses, identity thinking has always been vulnerable to its own logic. That is, it wilfully suppresses anything that it does not understand. In other words, it cannot even pretend otherwise. As an aside, this is a clear deviation from Marx’s concept of class conflict, for this re-conceptualisation of conflict as one between humans and nature suggests a more primordial origin of this conflict than the one suggested by Marx.

Identity thinking as an ideational expression of the ‘exchange principle’ subsumes the peculiarity of the object under the aegis of a cognitive matrix that employs only generalised concepts in order to understand things. For Adorno, the objective nature, or ‘nonidentity’, of ‘reality’ is always subsumed under its subjective or conceptual component. It is this problematic of unequal power between a subject and its object, or more specifically the problem associated with nonidentity that the Frankfurt scholar sought to redress as he probed into the possibility of disavowing the positive affirmation that is the hallmark of Hegel’s dialectics. Emancipation in this way would entail the freeing of our human nature through a relentless critique of a reason that seeks to subjugate systematically both external and internal nature. For this to happen, Enlightenment must be enlightened about the precarious relationship between its reason and repression. That is, reason must admit to the limitations

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60 *Dialectic*, p. 2. According to the authors of the *Dialectic*, this line of thinking resulting in the de-differentiation of power and knowledge was introduced by Francis Bacon.
62 Herein lies the difference in their conceptions of power.
63 This problem is also evident in Kant, who canvassed the view that reason cannot access an object-in-itself but has to make do with defining it based on its generalised attributes.
of its concepts through which it seeks to capture, literally, social reality. By doing so, reason
will then become a vehicle that will facilitate what lies ‘outside’ it by lending its voice to it.

2.2.1 The delineation of a ‘nonidentity’ of conceptual thought in the Dialectic of
Enlightenment.

The realisation of a ‘scourge’ that manifests itself in the distance between a ‘thing’ and its
conceptualisation has long been a topic of interest among dialecticians. However, the ways
these philosophers have elected to deal with the issue of nonidentity vary. Hegel, for
instance, prefers to view it as a residue of a thought process that does not in any way affect
the ability of the concept to represent an object as it truly is. That is, the nonidentity is not an
intrinsic part of an object, hence any identity that ensues as a result of a conceptual
understanding of the object is therefore true. In fact Hegel argues that the only possible
actualization of the nonidentity in an object is in a state of ‘idle’ existence.\(^6^4\) Thus the
nonidentity is rendered inconsequential in the process of conceptualisation. One of the
immediate consequences of Hegel’s articulation of nonidentity as having a transitory
existence is that it subsequently enabled him to view conceptual identities as stable and thus
valid categories. By articulating nonidentity in this way, Hegel was able to imbue a
philosophy of history within his grand philosophical system, one in which historical ‘forms
of consciousness’ progress in a dialectical manner towards a final ideal state.\(^6^5\) This is to say
that for Hegel, history has a telos whose realisation will come about in a final synthesis that
will see the emergence of an authentic identity or Absolute. In the Hegelian matrix, therefore,
representation is determined by the dialectical progression of concepts towards a master
signifier.

The fate of the nonidentity suffers a similar, if not worse, fate in philosophies that adhere to
the correspondence theory of knowledge and truth. In these schemata, truth (identity) or
knowledge comes about only through powerful abstractions that unavoidably entail the
suppression of the ‘nonidentity’. This view lies at the crux of the Dialectic’s contention
against positivism. To recast this line of reasoning, positivist thought arrogantly presupposes

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\(^{6^4}\) Georg Hegel *The Philosophy of History*, (New York: Cosimo Inc., 1899/2007) p.36. Also see Fred Dallmayr,
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\(^{6^5}\) Robert C Solomon, ‘Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit’ In *The Age of German Idealism* edited by Robert C
that a perfect symmetry between its concepts and nature is attainable. In other words, the internal dynamics of positivism is such that nothing is allowed to exist outside it. Yet the existence of the 'nonidentity' for Adorno means, on the other hand, that the only way for a concept to claim total representation of its object is via a violent abstraction that does great injustice to the component of the object that escapes conceptualization. This stance is encapsulated in his insistence that 'the whole is the untrue'.

Both examples above have been the sources from which Adorno's critiques against both Hegelian idealism and positivistic philosophies sprang from, subsequently finding sublime expression in his *Negative Dialectics*.

To be sure, Adorno’s concept of nonidentity has its roots in the Kantian notion of the chasm that exists between a 'thing in itself' and our understanding of it. This comes to Adorno by way of Walter Benjamin’s theory of language, whose conclusion was adopted by Adorno and Horkheimer even as they shunned the theological underpinnings of Benjamin’s work in this area. The *Dialectic* portrays this chasm as one ensuing directly from the intertwining of myth and enlightenment. Again, the specific phraseology used in this instance to denote the link between enlightenment and myth is to underscore the ambivalence of the enlightenment process that was extrapolated by Kant. Recasting Marcel Mauss’s anthropological discussion of magic and its role in the sustenance of society on a dialectical plane, the *Dialectic* seeks to highlight the fragile nature of modern civilisation through a problematisation of the Kantian duality of myth and enlightenment. For Kant, immaturity and enlightenment are polar opposites governed by diametrical relations. It therefore follows that humanity’s liberation rests solely on its ability to escape from a mythic past that was governed by a self-induced immaturity that itself is spawned by the fear to trust one’s own intellect. For the authors of the *Dialectic*, very little has changed as the poles are still intrinsic to the enlightenment process. In fact this process has seen the intertwining of myth and enlightenment in a way that was not envisaged by Kant. The fate of human autonomy then hangs in the balance. Arguing that ‘myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology’, the

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Dialectic wants to dissolve the dichotomy due to the subterranean relationship it sees between the two. It does this by first explaining the thread that holds them together – the principle of immanence.

The principle of immanence is one that lies at the core of identity thinking. Jay Bernstein clarifies this principle by noting that it works exclusively on a classificatory scheme. This classificatory logic eschews any form of particularity by adopting universal categories of representations. In this way,

an item (object, event, property etc.) is neither known nor explained by giving it a proper name; rather an empirical item is recognised, and so cognised, only when it is classified in some way, when it is shown, via subsumption, to share characteristics or features with other items.\(^{71}\)

This means that the principle of immanence explains its objects of analysis using conceptual categories that suppress the peculiarities of each object and at the same time emphasise the commonalities between objects that belong to the same category. In other words it works on the idea of repetition; things are analysed by their affinities to other things that fall within the same category.\(^{72}\) The deployment of conceptual reason to hide the particularities of a single event or object presupposes the idea of a sovereign subject. This suppression of differences between specific objects within a general category, in the area of epistemology, also manifests itself in bourgeois thought where all antitheses are erased, 'especially between moral rigour and absolute amorality'.\(^{73}\) Myth and Enlightenment thought both fall prey to this principle in their quest to 'narrate, record and explain'.\(^{74}\) In breaking this duality, the Dialectic hopes to highlight the proximity of conceptual thought and myth-making. For instance, in the era before science, mythic ritual was the medium by which society tries to guard against the unknown (natural forces). The dynamics of this ritual revolves around the idea of imitation or repetition: 'The magician imitates demons; to frighten or placate them he makes intimidating or appeasing gestures'.\(^{75}\) That is, myth seeks to dominate by way of imitation. Indeed, myth becomes enlightenment in the sense that the specific objective of its need to dominate is self-preservation. Science continues this practice of guarding against the unknown through a more direct route of enslaving nature: by claiming epistemological

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\(^{71}\) Jay Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 87.

\(^{72}\) *Dialectic*, p. 8.

\(^{73}\) *ibid.*, p. xviii.

\(^{74}\) *ibid.*

\(^{75}\) *ibid.*, p.6.
privilege over it. In claiming that its concepts are pure and true, science manages to hide its dominating nature and, propagating this untruth, reverts to mythic practices. As the *Dialectic* argues: ‘[J]ust as myths entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply into mythology’.

Exhausting the theoretical exegesis that links myth and enlightenment, the authors of the *Dialectic* then provide an account of what they see as watershed developments in the history of the world. These are then portrayed as concrete exemplifications of their theoretical account of the subterranean links between enlightenment and myth. In fact the two excursuses as well as the chapter on the culture industry in the *Dialectic* are attempts at delineating this relationship. The resulting product is a book or a mimeograph that is quite ambivalent in its view on the collective fate of humanity. As a whole, however, the *Dialectic*, for all its pessimism, does suggest how we may be able to transcend the vagaries that Enlightenment has bestowed on us. This is by way of its discussion and reinterpretation of Mauss’s work on magic and specifically on *mana*.

For Mauss, *mana* is associated with the practice of magic in Melanesian societies. It is the power behind all forms of magical practises in these societies, the condition of possibility for magic. What makes *mana* important to the *Dialectic* is the way it becomes an organising mechanism of the unknown (in the hands of a consciousness) emerging out of nature. Just as Mauss sees magic as blurring the distinction ‘between actor, rite and object’ so does the *Dialectic* perceive magic as a sediment of a phase in human development that took place prior to the separation of subject and object; that is before the subject extricated itself from nature. At the same time, however, the rituals associated with magic herald the chasm that was to emerge later on between subject and object. The concept of *mana*, for the authors of the *Dialectic*, points to an alternative way of relating to nature. By reinterpreting Mauss’s account of *mana* and giving it a somewhat different orientation, Adorno and Horkheimer came up with the concepts of mimesis and nonidentity as organising motifs for emancipatory politics. For the *Dialectic* these two notions stand for a mental attitude that engenders a status of epistemological symmetry between subject and object. Martin Jay noted that the

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76 ‘Magic is bloody untruth, but in it domination is not yet disclaimed by transforming itself into a pure truth underlying the world which it enslaves’ ibid., p. 6


78 *Ibid.*, pp. 84–86. It is in this way that, in their view, Myth is already Enlightenment.

79 This argument was made by Ben Morgan, ‘The Project of the Frankfurt School’, *Telos* 119 (Spring 2001) pp. 83–87.
idea of mimesis in the Dialectic was appropriated from Walter Benjamin and was used by Adorno and Horkheimer as a way to lament 'the loss or withering of a primal and inherently benign human capacity to imitate nature as the dialectic of enlightenment followed its fateful course'.

As such mimetic understanding stands in direct contrast to the enlightenment period where the relationship between the subject and object is marked by a correspondence born out of an illegitimate subjugation of one by the other. Ben Morgan observes that mimesis holds out, for Adorno, the hope for 'envelopment' between Subject and Object, humans and nature. It appears in the Dialectic to denote:

- a loose array of physiological, emotional, psychological and aesthetic impulses.
- The term and its cognates are important because they help Horkheimer and Adorno describe a particular psychological and emotional frame of mind, a pre-rational way of relating to the environment and to other people.

By defining mimesis (and nonidentity) in this way, Adorno wants 'to demonstrate that apparently abstract thought processes were in fact unacknowledged emotional response (sic)'. In other words all forms of thought are driven by their somatic character or, to use Brunkhorst's phrase, 'the "undomesticated" nature of life'. Hence the idea of mimesis is also used as a mechanism to counter the hegemony of an abstract thought: a thought that has shed its entire links to the existential conditions of individuals. This motif was to play a pivotal role in Adorno's subsequent writings.

By referring to a period marked by a mimetic quality that ensures that humans were in touch with both their inner and outer natures, the authors of the Dialectic were able to come up with an index of a transformative theory of modern society based on mimetic impulses.

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81 This would make this period pre-rational.
83 Ben Morgan, 'The Project of the Frankfurt School', p. 82.
86 This is in neither a call for a return to a primitive or mythic (pre-rational) past nor is it a reference to a utopia where there is consensus between the subjective concept and its object. Mimesis, as can be discerned from its use in the works of Adorno, is a psychological attitude. It is interesting to note that, for some commentators, what mimesis is for Adorno's attempt to alter the nature of the subject-object divide can be compared with what
These impulses, however, are being repressed because of the nature of modern reason and the language that it uses to define reality. The *Dialectic* posits that the link between thought and language, and how they both unite to highlight and celebrate the validity of the ‘commodity form’, must be viewed with suspicion if we are to excavate beyond them for the sources of social malaise. This is evinced in the way discussion on the ‘Culture Industry’ in the *Dialectic* revolves around the social repression that arises out of a false unity between conceptual thought and concrete reality.87 ‘The concept, usually defined as the unity of features of what it subsumes, was rather, from the first, a product of dialectical thinking, in which each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not’. In other words, Adorno and Horkheimer view thought in its positivist guise as having already lost its critical element, as it only asks how best to be of service to the existing order. It does not ask why it should be put in a position of conformity in relation to the existing social order. In failing to ask why, thought then transforms itself into an apologist for the status quo, losing its truth potential in the process. For them, critique loses its truth once it metamorphoses into a position of complete servitude in relation to the social order.89 More importantly, losing this truth about itself means that unmediated thought or non-reflexive reason simply leads the way back into myth.

Thus the problem of contemporary capitalist societies is one that is linked with the hegemonic status of positivist as well as idealistic philosophies and the concomitant marginalisation of all other forms of understanding. Furthermore, following Weber, the authors of the *Dialectic* see the emergence of this totalitarian system of thought as being compounded by the belief of people who are deluded into thinking that the historical epoch in which they find themselves reflects the apogee of enlightenment progress.90 They laconically explain this lamentable situation by arguing that, ‘Just as prohibition has always ensured the admission of poisonous products, the blocking of the theoretical imagination has paved the way for political delusion’.91 Just as myth already presupposes the desire of humans to expand their subjective horizons to the objective world, so does the apotheosis of

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the ‘ideal speech situation’ is for Habermas’s communicative rationality. See Ben Morgan, ‘The Project of the Frankfurt School’, p. 77.
87 *Dialectic*, pp. 94–136.
88 *Dialectic*, p. 11.
90 Weber noted that Modernity was the era when we become ‘specialists without Spirit and sensualists without heart’ while all the more believing that we have reached an unparalleled stage in our development.
91 *Dialectic*, p. xvi.
objective thought manifest itself in the alienation of people from their inner and outer natures. Reason in this way reverts to mythology.

The radical tenor of the critique in the *Dialectic* has singularly become the talking point between its protagonists and antagonists alike. For commentators such as Honneth, the seminal publication stands, albeit ambiguously, for a type of critique that seeks to ‘disclose’ the nature of enlightenment progress in an atmosphere that is thoroughly saturated with the reifying effects of the exchange principle.\(^92\) In a situation that is akin to what Durkheim terms ‘anomic’, the disclosing critique becomes justified in seeking a criterion for its attack from substantive notions that inform our perception of the right kind of life. Others, like Habermas take exception to the Nietzschean moment that resonates right through such forms of radicalism; that is, an impulse that leads inexorably to an epistemological paradox or ‘performative contradiction’. It is to a discussion of these differing positions in relation to the arguments within the *Dialectic* that we now turn. One of the motifs that also emerge from here, which will inform their later works is the conviction that a critique of any reigning system of knowledge in a society at any given point is also at the same time an indictment of all that is wrong with that society. This is given fuller expression in *Negative Dialectics*.

2.3 The Performative Contradiction of a Nietzschean inspired ‘totalised’ Critique of Society: Habermas and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The indictment that the *Dialectic* suffers from an epistemological paradox is nowhere made clearer than in the lectures of Jürgen Habermas published as *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.\(^93\) The gist of his argument is that the *Dialectic* adopts a Nietzschean turn that renders its critical intent incoherent. For Habermas, the reduction of reason to power has proved to be aporetic as far as the claims and intentions of the first generation of the Frankfurt School go. In his polemic against his theoretical forebears, Habermas contends that the analytic tone of the *Dialectic* is symptomatic of a radical strand of critique whose genesis can be traced to the ‘nihilistic dark writers of the bourgeoisie’ such as Nietzsche and the

\(^{92}\) Axel Honneth, ‘The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society’. A fuller account is offered in section 2.4 below.

\(^{93}\) Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp.106–160.
Marquis de Sade. Indeed Adorno and Horkheimer discuss these thinkers explicitly in the Dialectic.

According to this line of argument, it was Nietzsche who radicalized the counter-enlightenment discourse by casting doubt on the efficacy of reason itself in what Habermas termed the 'totalizing self-transcendence of the critique of ideology'. In this way reason, in the Nietzschean scheme became subsequently an auxiliary of the 'will to power'. In critiquing the Dialectic, Habermas points to the congruence of its line of thinking and those propagated by Nietzsche and his modern day followers, the French poststructuralists. By raising the complicity of reason with repression, the Dialectic veers away from conventional understanding of enlightenment thinking. For Habermas, like Kant before him, enlightenment thinking is understood predominantly as a demystification of myths. This demystification process has two interrelated dimensions. The first is based on the intention of illuminating the difference between myth and enlightenment reason, hence a contrast. The second, following from the first, is the provision of a counter-discourse against the spell of myths.

As a contrast because it counters the authority of tradition with the non-coercive coercion of the better argument; as an opposing force to the extent that it breaks the collective spell of the mythical powers by means of individually acquired insights which gain motivational strength. In this manner, the Enlightenment was supposed to contradict myth and thereby escapes from its power.

In this way modern reason, for Habermas, has been able to defend its role as the guardian of the project of modernity. Through a hermeneutic re-reading of the Odyssey, the first excursus in the Dialectic, Habermas alleges that the reason behind the Dialectic’s equating of enlightenment reason with myth, is to highlight a subterranean complicity between the apparent binary opposites. He notes that in doing so, the authors have rendered it impossible ‘to place hope in the liberating force of the enlightenment’. Yet he sardonically notes that despite extinguishing our hope in enlightenment thought, the authors of the Dialectic ‘still...
did not want to relinquish the now paradoxical labour of conceptualisation’. Herein, for Habermas, lies the contradiction within the text.

The problem as Habermas sees it is that by refusing to concede any rational potential to cultural modernity through what for him amounts to a controversial linkage between enlightenment thought and regression, the *Dialectic* falls prey to a ‘performative contradiction’. This contradiction comes about in the first excursus where:

> [R]eason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible – this far reaching thesis, as we have seen, is grounded in the first excursus by the fact that from the very start the process of enlightenment is the result of a drive to self-preservation that mutilates reason, because it lays claim to it only in the form of a purposive-rational mastery of nature and instinct – precisely as instrumental reason.

In other words, for Habermas, reason is the distinguishing feature that separates us from nature. Yet by claiming that reason is simply a tool of self-preservation, the *Dialectic* does two things: first it removes the potential of reason to be a tool of progress and, secondly, it equates reason with a truncated form of thinking – instrumentalism. If reason as identity thinking is rendered complicit with repression and if we at the same time only understand things via the conceptual schemes provided by identity thinking, then what we are left with is the question of how to validate our own critique of society.

For Habermas, the inability to differentiate between varying forms of reasoning coupled with the conceptualization of reason in a one-dimensional manner (as instrumental or technological reason) raises a number of theoretical problems. Chief amongst these is the defeatist attitude that is inherent in a theory whose claims are supposedly rooted in emancipatory politics. Habermas further suggests that this loss of emancipatory potential results from a theoretical misappropriation of nihilistic tendencies embedded within Nietzschean philosophy. Nietzsche argues in the *Twilight of the Idols*, for example that modern day institutions and their rationale are driven by the ‘drive to dominate’ or a will to power. In fact, this notion of a ‘drive’ or a ‘will’ is a leitmotif that runs through all of Nietzsche’s work. In contrast to the principles undergirding the philosophy of consciousness, Nietzsche puts forward the notion that man is just a compilation of different drives that seek to master or dominate the conditions that he finds himself in at any given time. Negating the

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid., pp. 110-111.
idea of the subject in both the Hegelian sense (as Spirit) and in the Cartesian sense (Cogito) or even the subject as the proletarian producer of Marx, Nietzsche canvassed the view that the subject is but an 'ordered plurality of drives which discharges its will in relation to other such pluralities'. If we are to follow this logic then, reason, rather than being a product of a thinking subject, is solely generated by the need to dominate when one plurality of drives come into contact with another. The end result is a simple conversion of knowledge to power. Instead of enlightenment thinking and myth being seen as binary opposites, they are conflated or seen as equivalents, since both are deemed to be mere effects of the will to power. It is this reduction of reason to power that troubles Habermas. This reductionist stratagem will, for him, mean that all subsequent validity or truth claims are exclusively determined by existing power dynamics. What became valid or otherwise is just a reflection of the power constellations in society. Habermas highlights the problematic nature of this line of reasoning in his extrapolation of the different forms of reasoning in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. In the final analysis the collusion between validity and power in the *Dialectic* renders enlightenment reason inconsequential by robbing it of its ability to adjudicate between competing validity claims. In this way Adorno and Horkheimer have moved away from their original position to a form of radicalism that cannot be legitimately upheld. Furthermore the radical critique of reason in the *Dialectic* signals a momentous break with the Enlightenment tradition towards a study of power politics reminiscent of Nietzsche as well as those belonging to the French poststructuralist school. For this latter group, power determines truth while truth cowers before power.

In a withering critique directed against the *Dialectic*, Habermas alleges that the authors' claim that reason is implicated in social repression cannot be validated, since the only criterion of judging it to be so has also been rendered suspect by its linkage with power configurations in society. Therefore to launch a radical assault on reason, as is exemplified by the *Dialectic*, will necessarily entail undermining its own critique of society. In short, this kind of analysis is self-defeating. The paradox, for Habermas, lies at the very heart of the performative contradiction that afflicts the analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer.

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If they do not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to continue with critique, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of all rational criteria.\textsuperscript{105}

For Habermas, the self-undermining critique of reason can only mean one thing: that the authors of the \textit{Dialectic} can only base their epistemological critique on illegitimate grounds. In fact this nihilistic tendency towards modern rationality is also found in other examples of neo-Nietzschean scholarship.

2.3.1. \textit{Parallels between the Dialectic and the French Poststructuralist school}

Habermas, to judge from the discussion above, makes quite a compelling case for the presence of an epistemological paradox in the \textit{Dialectic}. But is this justification enough to conflate the analyses of the \textit{Dialectic} together with Nietzsche and his modern day followers? Habermas certainly thinks so. To him, the authors of the \textit{Dialectic} erred grievously, as far as the aims of their Critical Theory go, in appropriating Nietzsche’s self-undermining critique of reason. This prevented them from identifying an alternative way out of the aporias they had theorised themselves into.\textsuperscript{106} Habermas argues that, for the authors of the \textit{Dialectic}, this ‘will to power’ encapsulates the concept of identity thinking; that is, reason is generated by the fear of the unknown.\textsuperscript{107} This fear of a perceived perilous environment provided by both society and nature in turn breeds a psychological need to dominate as a way of quelling the effect fear has. The \textit{Dialectic} in this way continues to conflate reason with power. This pessimistic outlook in the \textit{Dialectic}, Habermas continues, directly accrues from a triumphant drive for mastery on the back of a cognitive matrix informed by Nietzsche.

Habermas sees a similar vein emerging in the works of poststructuralists such as Foucault and Derrida in their attempt to radically critique the veracity of reason and the conventionally accepted equation between reason, knowledge and truth. Indeed, Habermas maintains that there are primarily two ways in which the self-referential critique of Nietzsche is manifested in poststructuralist thought. One is exemplified by Foucault, via Bataille, while the other one is provided by Derrida via Heidegger. Both are attempts at furthering Nietzsche’s radical

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid} p.126–127 (italics in the original).

\textsuperscript{106} To be sure, suspicion directed at the curative powers of reason for the problems of humanity has been an intrinsic part of the Enlightenment tradition. For instance, the triumph of reason for Max Weber meant the onset of an ambivalent situation where humans become ‘specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart’ while all the time imagining erroneously that society has reached a level never experienced before. This condition finds its best representation in his metaphorical ‘iron cage’. See Max Weber \textit{The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism}, translated by Talcott Parsons, (London: Allen &Unwin Ltd, 1930) p. 182.

\textsuperscript{107} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, p.106.
critique of reason. The latter does this ‘by way of a destruction of metaphysics’, while the former attempts a similar aim ‘by way of a destruction of historiography’. Both pathways serve to highlight the extent to which Adorno has veered off the course established by his theoretical forebears.

Habermas points out, for instance, that Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation*, a historico-philosophical study in modern psychiatry that traces the history of madness in the 18th century, shares the same theoretical underpinnings with *Negative Dialectics*. The relationship is underpinned by the romantic yearning to hear the authentic voice and expression of the ‘other’ of reason and not reason’s account of it. Just as Adorno argued that there is a facticity beyond the conceptual exemplification of an object that is barred from expressing itself, so Foucault believes that:

behind the psychiatrically engendered phenomenon of mental illness, and indeed behind the various masks of madness at that time, there is something authentic whose sealed mouth need only be opened up.

Furthermore, Habermas continues, both Adorno and Foucault refer explicitly to the coercive power of reason in repressing the object under its conceptual gaze. For the former, conceptual thought dismisses the ‘nonidentity of the object so as to dominate it while the latter sees reason as holding ‘madness at arm’s length from itself so as safely to gain mastery of it as an object cleansed of rational subjectivity’. This recurrent theme, according to Habermas, runs through Adorno’s as well as Foucault’s disparate writings and revolves specifically around how certain discourses, including philosophical ones, came to dominate a specific epoch in history and in turn become harbingers of definitive regimes of truth and untruth.

In providing us with a way of knowing the world, discourses became our only link to reason. This is how, Habermas notes, reason for Adorno became associated only with its

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110 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 240.
112 I have included both forms of regimes since there is an important qualification to be made here between Foucault and Adorno concerning the *regimes of truth or untruth* that in my view Habermas glosses over. For Foucault, truth is socially constructed via a power matrix, hence all truth regimes are in fact reflections of power constellations. For Adorno, the socially mediated ‘fact’ is false since it necessitates the repression of what falls ‘outside’ it; that is the ‘nonidentity that refuses conceptualisation. Truth for him therefore does not entail power but the negation of it.
The Nietzschean orientation that Foucault incorporates into his work can be discerned from his claim that since we can only think, talk or act by means of these discourses, it is logical to assume therefore that individuals are constituted by the prevailing discourses in a specific moment in history. By arguing in this vein, Foucault, like Adorno and Horkheimer, rejects conventional beliefs pertaining to the continuity and progress of enlightenment knowledge. Moreover, Foucault also challenges the notion of a conscious subject and the immutability of truth. In all these, Habermas accuses Foucault's archaeological works of succumbing to the Nietzschean theme of a will to power. Indeed Foucault's account of the formation and displacing of 'regimes of truth' is totally contingent on power 'which appears with ever new masks'. Everything in this way becomes a mere epiphenomenon to power and change occurs only when power configurations alter.

Discipline and Punish marks Foucault's 'genealogical turn' from his archaeological findings. To be sure the shift is strictly a shift of emphasis from the study of disciplinary regimes and their relationship to knowledge production to an investigation of how knowledge is really a product of power structures in society. In the 1970s, Foucault began canvassing the view that his earlier 'archaeological' works must be reconsidered in light of the Nietzschean will to knowledge. The new 'turn' must not be read as decisive break with his former writings but as a refocusing of those writings to include notions of power and 'power effects' in society. His genealogical bearing now explicitly focuses on the material conditions that give rise to the emergence of certain discourses in history. Read in this way, Madness and Civilisation is a study of the process by which the insane are judged and labelled as such, condemned as 'abnormal', and put under surveillance by discourses through disciplinary institutions. The Birth of the Clinic becomes the process whereby the clinical 'gaze' that exerts so much authority on a sick body is then extended to the rest of society, monitoring
and controlling public health.¹¹⁹ The *History of Sexuality* continues the genealogical tradition by examining how discourses on sexuality are implicated in power.¹²⁰ *Discipline and Punish* highlights the collusion between reason and repression by disseminating the effects of the ‘panopticon’ as a model of social surveillance that extends to all levels of society. The cumulative effect of these disciplinary institutions that house ‘experts’ armed with ‘discursive knowledge’ is the transformation of society into a ‘carceral archipelago’ where the subject is *decentred* by the dynamics of a knowledge that is generated by power. Consequently, what we have are ‘docile bodies’ that, through discourses, are rendered malleable to the needs of the institutions. The genealogical turn in Foucault’s work is therefore an account of the complicity of reason with power.

Just as Nietzsche before him defined knowledge as simply a ‘will to power’, Foucault now sees power/knowledge as the basis of a disciplinary society. The moral implication of this move, for Habermas, is disquieting to say the least. Questions of legitimacy are reduced to power relationships in society, since the very idea of right and wrong is embedded within power dynamics. Moreover, for Habermas, this scepticism concerning the adjudicative functions of reason is something that both Foucault and the authors of the *Dialectic* inherited from Nietzsche.

The archaeological and the genealogical phases of Foucault’s work, argues Habermas, are interrelated in that the latter presupposes the former. As an archaeologist, Foucault sees history as pregnant ‘with the crystallised forms of arbitrary formations of discourses’.¹²¹ But it is as a genealogist that the Nietzschean impulse comes to the fore in Foucault’s writings. It is under the genealogical gaze that history dissolves into a plurality of discourses in a state of perpetual flux and whose concretised moment is but an effect of reigning power configurations.¹²² The reduction of every occurrence to power is problematic for Habermas. A totalised critique of society, whether as an Adornian determinate negation of reason or in terms of a Foucauldian theory of power, suffers from a performative contradiction, because they both undermine the basis of their own critique. As Habermas argued, totalising critiques need to have a valid criterion from which to launch their critique.¹²³

Derrida’s critique of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ clearly follows the poststructuralist critique that ended up with the ‘death of the subject’ in the Cartesian sense.\(^{124}\) His writings on Nietzsche’s Dionysian model are a distinguishing feature of his work. Derrida uses this Dionysian element to create havoc on the ‘text’ by ‘the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation’.\(^{125}\) By insisting that the world is a text, Derrida goes on to explicate how meanings are derived within ‘texts’ and how these meanings are contingent on certain power constellations. His deconstructionist approach to ‘texts’ has a dual role. The first is to illuminate the process by which texts produce meanings and truths. The second is to undermine these meanings and truths by deconstructing their logical bases through an act of wilful reversal of the process that gave rise to meanings and truth in the first place. For Habermas, this reversal ‘inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, of all the significations that have their source in that [signification] of the logos’.\(^{126}\) Derrida’s aim, of course, is to upset the balance of power that determines meaning, hence creating instability by showing the contingency and localized nature of all forms of meaning and truth. ‘Any orientation towards truth’, for Derrida, involves ‘a submission to the metaphysics of presence’.\(^{127}\) Deconstruction then aims at a perpetual deferral of a concretized moment that by necessity signals the triumph of a master signifier and the reversion to a philosophy of the subject.

The cumulative effect of these poststructuralist critiques on society is to cast doubt on the veracity of enlightenment reason and to render suspect its stated intent. That is, the totalizing and systematic thought associated with enlightenment is radically problematised with its truth claims coming under a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.\(^{128}\) Their critique became in effect an epitaph on the ‘project of Modernity’. However the ‘decentred’ subject in poststructuralist thought does not come without concomitant costs. There is a strand of feminism, for instance, which claims that the deconstruction of subject-centred reason sabotages the conditions that will enable resistance against tyranny of any form. Others, like Habermas, contend that the totalizing critique of meaning reduces validity claims to issues of power and


\(^{126}\) Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 164.

\(^{127}\) Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, p. 44.

\(^{128}\) ‘Hermeneutics of Suspicion’ is an expression by Paul Ricoeur to denote a type of critique that is animated by the 3 ‘masters of suspicion’ – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) p.32.
as such negates the claim to rightness as a means to adjudicate between competing truth claims. He expresses the problem faced by the poststructuralists in this way: ‘[T]he critical capacity to take up a “Yes” or “No” stance and to distinguish between valid and invalid propositions is undermined as power and validity claims enter into a turbid fusion’. As such, a radical critique of reason that reduces it to an expression of power runs the real risk of being an apologist for the status quo. By arguing in this vein, Habermas aims to bring to the fore the affinities between the *Dialectic* and the works of Nietzsche’s modern-day disciples. Habermas contends that the incoherent and nihilistic tendencies intrinsic to their analysis can only further political acquiescence and social disenchantment in the face of despair.

Yet all this need not be, according to Habermas. Indeed the common thread of the lectures that make up the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is, according to its author, ‘to identify and clearly mark out a road indicated but not taken: the determinate negation of subject-centred reason by reason understood as communicative action’. Habermas concludes that the only way out of this impasse is to turn away from a philosophy of consciousness to one based on intersubjective understanding. This is possible because of what he sees as the ‘quasi-transcendental’ telos of speech. For Habermas, the performative logic of all speech acts is geared towards understanding and not domination. This highlights the basis from which Habermas then subsequently makes the ‘linguistic’ turn from subject-centred philosophy to a paradigm based on communicative reason. For all its persuasive force, Habermas has, however, not quite surpassed the works of his mentor. Amidst the din surrounding the general agreement over what the ‘linguistic turn’ has to offer is a growing realisation that the work of Adorno needs a second, more careful, appraisal. This stance is clearly evident in the reconsideration given to Adorno by Seyla Benhabib, Albrecht Wellmer and Axel Honneth. It is to these reconsiderations that we now turn.

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1. Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 112.
2. Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. vi. This will be dealt with fully in the next chapter.
3. Ibid. From a perspective based on intersubjective understanding, Habermas alleges that the authors of the *Dialectic* got themselves entangled in epistemological paradoxes by putting a Nietzschean twist to their coupling of Lukács’s concept of reification and Weber’s thesis of rationalisation. For an account of the Habermasian notion of intersubjective understanding rooted in speech see his essay titled ‘What is Universal Pragmatics?’ in Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1979) pp. 1–68.
4. A simple comparison, for instance, of the recent writings of Honneth in ‘A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno’s Social Theory’, *Constellations* Volume 12 Number 1(2005) and ‘The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment’ in light of current debates in
2.4 A Hermeneutic of a ‘Damaged’ life as Disclosing Critique: A Tentative First Defence of Adorno’s Anti-Positivist stance in the Dialectic.

Axel Honneth, in an engaging discussion of the Dialectic, highlights that one of the primary causes of misreading Adorno stems from the tendency to consider his philosophical, sociological and aesthetic writings in isolation from each other.\(^{133}\) To treat his sociological writings as a body of self-contained truths about society would liquidate the vital connection between his sociological, philosophical and aesthetics oeuvre.\(^ {134}\) This unfortunate tendency is in direct contradiction to Adorno’s practice of viewing ‘even his sociological analyses only as part of the hermeneutic of natural disaster he had presented’.\(^ {135}\) Adorno’s main aim for his sociological writings therefore was to reveal ‘the second, reified nature of historical reality’ in order ‘to expose the determining figures of action and consciousness’.\(^ {136}\) By juxtaposing the socio-economic and political dynamics of this period with their interpretation of the historical trajectory of the enlightenment as a hermeneutic of a damaged form of life, Adorno and Horkheimer were able, like Hegel before them, to put forward the argument that the enlightenment has to be understood primarily as a dialectic.

To Honneth this amounts to a ‘disclosing critique’ of society, which is characterised by its ‘trans-historical’ nature. Honneth takes great pains in distinguishing two forms of social criticism and their respective justifications. The first one is an ‘immanent’ form of criticism against perceived social maladies. A case in point would be social injustices wrought against a shared normative horizon. Immanent critique is usually directed at actions that contradict the cultural or moral dictates of a society.\(^ {137}\) As such the criterion for critique is derived internally from the social fabric of the society in question. A ‘disclosing critique’ on the other hand is directed at what he, in a Durkheimian vein, termed ‘pathologies’. These pathologies have an ontological dimension in the sense that they may threaten the status of a society’s moral standards by posing an insurmountable threat to them. The reifying effect of the commodity form under capitalism can be classed as one such example of pathology. Because

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\(^{133}\) Axel Honneth, A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life, pp. 50–51.

\(^{134}\) ibid, p. 50.

\(^{135}\) Ibid.

\(^{136}\) Ibid.

a ‘disclosing critique’ is directed at a situation that is fundamentally equivalent to Durkheim’s idea of ‘anomie’, its appeal to standards outside the particular context under critique becomes, for Honneth, justified.\textsuperscript{138}

There are two types of social malady or disorder that can be legitimately made the object of social criticism; the second type which in contrast to social injustice I term “pathology”, in my view justifies transcending the given value horizons by means of world-disclosing critique.\textsuperscript{139}

More importantly, recasting the critique in the \textit{Dialectic} as ‘disclosing’ would clarify Adorno’s insistence that life under capitalism is one of mutilated existence or ‘damaged life’. Furthermore Adorno seems to realise the epistemological paradox that surrounds the idea of a ‘disclosing critique’ that would derive its criterion for critique externally. As Honneth notes, the context-transcendent nature of a disclosing critique warrants a different kind of approach: that is, ‘because it eschews metaphysical presuppositions, the normative judgement is not justified rationally’.\textsuperscript{140}

From the vantage point of a hermeneutic of a ‘damaged life’, the \textit{Dialectic} becomes not an explanatory schema of enlightenment reason gone berserk ‘but the hermeneutic of a failed form of life’.\textsuperscript{141} As it stands in the context of the 1920s to the 1940s, reason, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, was complicit in the horrors of the Second World War. They were convinced ‘that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it was intertwined, already contains the germ of regression’.\textsuperscript{142} Yet contrary to what Habermas has alleged, the authors of the \textit{Dialectic} had in the very next sentence highlighted the disclosing nature of their critique: ‘If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate’.\textsuperscript{143} Read this way, one can begin to see that the alleged aporia that lies at the heart of all of Adorno’s writings, from the \textit{Dialectic} to \textit{Negative Dialectics}, is, in direct contrast to the allegations hurled at them, an assertion of the possibility of transforming the capitalist status quo.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{138} Treating the \textit{Dialectic} as a ‘disclosing critique’ would, in Honneth’s view, avert the charge of ‘performative contradiction’ levelled against it by Habermas.

\textsuperscript{139} Axel Honneth, ‘The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society’, p. 118.


\textsuperscript{141} Axel Honneth, ‘A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life’, pp. 50–51.

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Dialectic}, p. xvi.

\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{144} Adorno’s \textit{Minima Moralia} has as its subtitles the words: ‘Reflections from damaged Life’. For a synopsis of the congruity of Adorno’s oeuvre see Gillian Rose, ‘Negative Dialectics by Theodor Adorno’, pp. 598–599.
The guiding principle of this disclosing critique that Adorno employs to interrogate the Enlightenment process lies in the Kantian conviction expressed at the very beginning of the *Dialectic*, that ‘freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking’.

To understand Adorno therefore one has to grasp the fact that his writings on society come under the rubric of a disclosing rather than an immanent critique. The latter is an end in itself while the former is a means towards an end. The criticism directed against *Dialectic* as a form of nihilism reminiscent of Nietzsche stems from misconstruing it as the explanatory model while the intentions of the authors point to it as a disclosing critique. Honneth observes:

> What began as an immanently intended question as to whether a critique of society could be conducted consistently if it simultaneously doubted the discursive means of its own arguments soon developed into the generalized suspicion that the project of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* as a whole represents a form of critique that cannot be justified theoretically and is, moreover, politically dangerous.

This is what differentiates the analysis of *Dialectic* from that of the poststructuralist critiques of reason. In other words the critique of society is undergirded by some moral considerations as to what an ideal society should be. Admittedly this form of consideration is missing from poststructuralist analysis. For Horkheimer and Adorno the main intention of the *Dialectic* is to highlight the consequences of what they see as reified consciousness emerging as a product of the capitalist system. From the point of view of disclosing critique, the logic of this socio-economic model means that there is no space possible to imagine what the ‘other’ could be since ‘reason itself is reduced to an instrument and assimilated to its functionaries, whose power of thought serves only the purpose of preventing thought’.

This lack of space to imagine the ‘other’ has in no small way contributed to the longevity of the capitalist enterprise. As long as reason is equated with identity thinking or positivistic thought, there is no way we are going to salvage our freedom from the clutches of capitalism. Indeed, the *Dialectic* claims that instrumental rationality undermines the zeal to overhaul our present by systematically blunting our critical faculty through cognitive and institutional means of control exemplified by both reigning epistemological and bureaucratic frameworks. In this way, Adorno argues, men are turned into objects, by others and by themselves (self-objectification). For him, self-objectification is an anomaly: the consequence of a warped

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145 *Dialectic*, p. xvi.
146 Axel Honneth, ‘The Possibility of a Disclosing critique of Society’, p. 117. Honneth puts Habermas in this category (see note 3).
147 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 123 (aphorism 79). This parallels Weber’s argument on how reason leads to the iron cage while all the while deluding people that it is the highest stage of their development.
transformation of the subject. The individuality of persons is systematically subverted by instrumental reason within a capitalist environment – ‘The individual is entirely nullified in the face of the economic powers’.\textsuperscript{148} Under the ‘exchange principle’ in capitalist societies, all peculiarities that arise from the concreteness of an individual are obliterated. In its stead, a caricatured abstraction that sways only to the tune of total mastery of inner and outer nature stands. Hence for Adorno, the freedom of humankind in the capitalist system is far from being reassured. For us to begin the recovery process one must be willing to see the link between instrumental reason and our un-freedom. This is the context in which to gauge the merit of appropriating Nietzschean impulses within the Dialectic.

To be sure, the Nietzschean dimension that is interwoven into the analyses of the Dialectic stems from the belief of the authors that Marx’s critique of economic exchange, essential as it may be in providing insights into the failings of the economic system, nevertheless needs to be reworked due to its ‘class biases’.\textsuperscript{149} Economic exchange transforms, as Marx states, social relations to a relation between things (objectified relations). In capitalism, the calculating and manipulative logic of instrumental reason comes to the fore in social intercourse. For Adorno, the transformation of human relations takes place at the level of the individual. By looking at exchange relations in terms of class, Marx risks obscuring the varying effects of exchange relations on specific individuals. These biases, in Adorno’s view, render Marx’s outlook susceptible to a variant of identity thinking that is consistent with an abstract classificatory system. This realisation of the complicity of Marx in the logic of exchange prompted them to turn to Nietzsche. The ‘turn’ is not defeatist, as it is an attempt at an alternative vision of society emanating from an enlightened suspicion towards an enlightening process that has succumbed to positivist thought and lost its critical potential.\textsuperscript{150}

In fact, the Dialectic is littered with passages that evince a nuanced understanding of modern rationality by its authors. For them, the yielding of enlightenment to positivism ultimately leads to the ‘barbaric’ environment that they lamented in their preface. In other words, the enlightenment as dialectic has, through positivism, oscillated towards regression and un-

\textsuperscript{148}Dialectic, p. xvii By the same token, instrumental reason practised by the subject leads to the mastery of nature. The Dialectic is able, in this way, to identify the historical errors in Marx’s conception of the inevitability of a proletarian revolution. Its insistence on individuality marks a rupture between critical theory and both proletariat and party versions of Marxism.


\textsuperscript{150} Dialectic, p. 32.
freedom. However, as we have seen, Adorno has always held a door open for resistance against this overarching system of domination that bases itself on reified social reality. Therefore in order to resist one first has to define the contours of what one is resisting. Adorno is of the view that the most effective way of defining what is to be resisted is by elevating its retrogressive aspects to an exaggerated level in order to illuminate them. This will stimulate the movement for change. Adorno in this way harboured a deeper Marxian moment than he is given credit for. Indeed he was paraphrasing Marx when he argued that 'out of the construction of a configuration of reality... the demand for its real change always follows promptly'.\(^{151}\) It is in this context that Adorno's later work has to be understood.\(^{152}\)

Hence, as Honneth succinctly puts it, Adorno's sociological pieces cannot be read on their own but have to be understood together with his analysis of the deformity of humans' ability to think critically in a (capitalist) system that produces reified consciousness.\(^{153}\) If we were to take his sociological writings in isolation from his philosophical considerations, then we would conclude that Adorno has assumed a defeatist attitude in light of reified consciousness that emerges as a result of the dynamics of the capitalist system. The interesting point to note here is that this analysis marks a shift from Honneth's earlier treatment of Adorno's work as a sociologically induced explanatory scheme to one that sees Adorno's philosophy of life under Capitalism as a 'hermeneutic project'.\(^{154}\) This is but one of the instances where Adorno makes a definitive statement about an 'oppositional' form of thought and practice emerging out of the misery imposed by the vicissitudes of everyday life under the absolutism of capitalist hegemony. Time and again we see him making 'resistance' seemingly an automatic impulse in the face of repression. This is palpably made clear in his bemoaning the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz.\(^{155}\) Indeed, his lament in the face of the Holocaust was at the same time a rallying call for resistance against such atrocities against humanity.

\(^{151}\) Theodor Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', p. 34 quoted in Axel Honneth, A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life, p. 51.

\(^{152}\) I am referring here to Negative Dialectics, Minima Moralia and Against Epistemology. See Gillian Rose, 'Negative Dialectics by Theodor W Adorno', for an account of the continuity in Adorno's early and later works.

\(^{153}\) Axel Honneth, 'A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life', pp. 50–64.

\(^{154}\) Compare the current argument with the one on Adorno in Axel Honneth, The Critique of Power.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno outlines a form of resistance based on his concept of 'suffering'. In a move inspired by Freud’s adumbration of how neuroses motivate the need to recover, Adorno points to the almost instinctual impulse to free oneself as we become aware of our own ‘suffering’ in an environment whose contours are to a very large extent defined by capitalism. For him, ‘[T]he physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different’. That is, an awareness of the existence of suffering unequivocally points to a need for a remedy. Honneth sums up this situation succinctly by noting that for Adorno, the negative feelings of a deformation of reason always bring with them a wish to be freed from social pathologies. To this extent ... suffering impulses guarantee the subjects' ability to resist the instrumental demands of the capitalist form of life.

Given the discussion above, we are now faced with a number of questions the most important being: how can this awareness of suffering be generated, given the level of the reification of consciousness in capitalism alleged by the *Dialectic*. That is, how do we mount a challenge against an instrumental reason that has summarily reduced objects to concepts in the attempt to claim mastery over them, thus producing an illusionary social world that arises directly from our diminishing capacity to reason?

We can discern the traces of an answer to these questions by looking at Adorno’s work on the development of reason. According to him, although Western reason has its roots in fear, it nevertheless develops via a process of mimesis. In other words our capacity to reason was nurtured at our mother’s breast, so to speak. By imitating the perspectives and practices of loved ones, we learn to move away from subject-centred positions to one that embraces the viewpoint of the ‘significant others’ in our lives. This is a clear contrast to the Habermasian allegation that for Adorno, like Nietzsche, awareness of the self comes as a result of one’s mastery over external nature. As Adorno observed in *Minima Moralia*, ‘[T]he human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings’. This process is, for Adorno, a primal form of love. Love for the other, which is premised on a mimetic procedure that occurs in childhood, becomes the underlying basis from which to reach beyond the objectifying conceptual screen that

156 *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 202–204.
prevents us from acknowledging the facticity of the other on its own terms – the nonidentity in thought. In other words, a politics opposed to the status quo is always a historical possibility enabled by a realization of one’s suffering, the awareness of which is, even in an environment of reified consciousness, always a given in light of the mimetic impulse.\(^{161}\)

The discussion has made it clear that there is more to Adorno than Habermas would have us believe. Even Honneth, who once derided Adorno’s social philosophy as an attempt at ‘pessimistic self clarification [that] cannot commit itself to an idea of historical progress which goes beyond total reification’, has had reason to temper his readings of Adorno’s work.\(^{162}\) A disclosing critique is rather different from a hermeneutics of suspicion in that it holds out the hope for a future transformation of society as a result of the overcoming of even the most abysmal of aporias. In Adorno’s case this will entail a new political practice anchored in a different kind of thinking – nonidentity thinking – which will allow us to see the glimmers of hope, a hope that continuously beckons to us in the midst of our suffering.

2.5 Conclusion: ‘Two Roads diverged in A Wood’.

The rehabilitation of Adorno has somewhat altered the dynamics pertaining to the output of the Frankfurt School. One of the factors that gave rise to this more open reception of Adorno is the realisation that the Dialectic does not support the supposition that Enlightenment thought is manifested only in the processes that gave rise to a new era of barbarism. For the authors, ‘what is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfilment of past hopes’.\(^{163}\) In this way the Dialectic’s critique of the Enlightenment and its cognitive processes, in contrast to what Habermas thinks, ‘is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination’.\(^{164}\)

The discussion thus far serves to highlight the fact that Adorno’s and Habermas’s respective philosophies represent two distinct yet interrelated paths away from the philosophy of consciousness. The latter sees more promise in a communicative reason as a way out of the aporias of subject-centred reason, while the former sees no way other than to break the spell

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\(^{162}\) *ibid*, p. 109. As noted before, a simple comparison between his account of Adorno in *The Critique of Power*, pp. 57–96 with ‘A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life’, proves this point.

\(^{163}\) Dialectic., p. xvii.

\(^{164}\) *ibid*. 

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of positivistic reason using the power of the subject itself. In other words Habermas offers a way out from what he sees as the performative contradiction besetting Adorno's critique by turning to a notion of universal pragmatics. For the latter, the problem of contemporary society lies in its valorising a form of thought that is rooted in domination. The need for enlightenment thought to be reflexive is an oft repeated mantra of Adorno in the context of the disempowering effects of living in a mass consumer society, where the intellect is deflected from its true task of negating reified forms of life, by being made to be subservient to the social order. As he observes in the Dialectic,

> [W]hat is at issue here is not culture as a value ... but the necessity for enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed. What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfilment of past hopes.\textsuperscript{165}

The next chapter will outline the main arguments of Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action. This will then be followed by a chapter on Adorno's \textit{Negative Dialectics}. The discussion in both chapters will start from the contours of their respective theories of society.\textsuperscript{166} This is to be followed by an evaluation of their respective attempts to negate the objectifying gaze of a reason that, by its very own logic, threatens the survival of humans in their social environments.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{166} To be sure, Adorno does not offer a comprehensive theory of society that is comparable to Habermas. What is being attempted instead is to tease out an index of his critique on society and from there try to construct what a theory of society from his perspective would be.
Chapter 3

From Subjective to Intersubjective Consciousness: Communicative Reason and the Politics of Emancipation.

3.0

This chapter traces the major contours of the ‘linguistic turn’ that was made by Habermas culminating in the publication of the two volumes of The Theory of Communicative Action as well as how it presupposes the existence of the Public Sphere as a vehicle of emancipation. Habermas’s theory of communicative action is the end result of an attempt to sketch an alternative route out of the philosophy of consciousness without regressing into what he sees as the nihilistic tendencies embedded within the Dialectic. The work is widely viewed to be his magnum opus, as it crystallises his earlier attempts at formulating a theory of society that tries to hold on to the Hegelian notion of a philosophy of history, while at the same time acknowledging the contribution made by the different branches of analytical philosophy in shaping contemporary life. The links between his theoretical and political positions, as highlighted by his concepts of communicative reason in a two-tier model of society and public sphere respectively, will in this way be brought closer to home.

The discussion starts with some general remarks on where or how to situate Habermas in the tradition of ‘Western Marxism’ (3.1). This is then followed by an adumbration of the contexts in which his theory of communicative action emerged (3.2). As would be expected, the discussion here will recap on some topical themes introduced in the last chapter as well as developing a line of reasoning that will take into account the historical trajectory of his work up to the time he wrote his seminal text. It also discusses the ‘communicative shift’ that became the guiding principle to his two tier theory of society (3.2.1). The next section continues on from the last by fleshing out his communicative theory of social action and what this entails (3.3). This discussion then goes on to consider what Habermas means by ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’ and the implication this has on his theory (3.3.1). It will also include the reasons why Habermas thinks that his new philosophy surpasses that of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and that of Adorno in particular. Finally the last section will work out the implications of his two tier model of society on contemporary politics (3.4). It is here that his concept of the Public Sphere is reintroduced as a prerequisite to a
democratic model that is based on deliberative practices (3.4.1). One argument that this chapter makes pertaining to the ‘public sphere’ is that Habermas’s recent understanding of it is informed by his two tier model of society. This will be explained in the last subsection 3.4.2.

With the above in mind, all the discussion in the chapter will be oriented towards the general aspects of Habermas’s oeuvre that revolve on his notion of a public sphere. In other words, this chapter will try to highlight the salient features of the Habermassian communicative oeuvre from the vantage point of his concept of the public Sphere. It goes without saying therefore that this selective appropriation will necessitate omitting and glossing over major elements of his work.

3.1 Jürgen Habermas and the tradition of Western Marxism

Western Marxism as a definitive school of thought is relatively of recent origin. In fact it was not until the mid 1950s that Merleau-Ponty came up with the name to describe a tendency within certain circles of Marxists, mostly in the West, to try and ‘balance’ the materialistic thrust of orthodox Marxism. This was done by a (re)turn to Hegel’s philosophy and the role of ‘ideas’ in the dialectical unfolding of a history that, in turn, leaves its indelible mark on these same ideas and corresponding consciousness.

The whole process, arguably, started with the publication of George Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness as well as Marxism and Philosophy by Karl Korsch and gained historical momentum through the rediscovery of the ‘early’ works of Marx. Hitherto the tradition of Marxism was informed largely by the ‘scientific’ works that Marx wrote after 1844. What is distinctive about these latter works is the stress on the unstable systemic tendencies of capitalism as a social system. The discovery of the Paris Manuscripts in 1844 signalled a shift to philosophy from economics and politics. It also denotes a move from

1 An account of the historical and theoretical trajectory of the Habermasian Public Sphere (from the liberal public sphere as an ideal type, and its disintegration to the populist concept of the public sphere that he seemed to favour later on) is offered by Peter U Hohendahl, ‘Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture: Jürgen Habermas and His Critics’, New German Critique, No. 16, (Winter, 1979) pp. 89–118.


3 Ibid.
backroom vanguard politics to theorization in the halls of academia.\textsuperscript{170} The main reason for this shift is the bleak prognosis on the capabilities of a ‘materialistic’ Marx to transform the world in the face of a theoretically lacklustre experiment in socialism by the Bolsheviks in Russia. This was further compounded by the internal bickering between various communist groups in Western Europe as to the ‘right’ way to revolutionary practice and change. It is against this backdrop that Western Marxism is to be understood. Indeed given the above scenario, the founders of this school turned to a Hegelian form of Marxism that propagates the view that a ‘correct’ form of society can only stem from a ‘right’ way of thinking.

Trying to situate Habermas’s critical theory within the tradition of Western Marxism is an arduous task. This is because of the breathtakingly eclectic way his theory has developed in conjunction with the, for want of a better word, ‘engagements’ that Habermas variously undertook in the course of his academic career with other schools of thought. These range from his contributions to the positivist debate between Adorno and Karl Popper in the 60’s, in which he sided with the former, to his engagement with Gadamer on the pitfalls of the latter’s ontological hermeneutics in relation to emancipatory politics and practice, as well as his exchange with Niklas Luhmann on ‘systems theory’.\textsuperscript{171} This is not to mention the ‘borrowings’ from Dilthey and Pierce as well as from the sociological triumvirate of Marx, Weber and Durkheim and later, Parsons.

To say all this however is not to admit to the impossibility of the task. In fact the basic contours of his theoretical edifice are still transparent enough for us to see its affinities with the tradition of Western Marxism. Perhaps the best way to start this process of situating Habermas is to take a closer look at the ensemble of ideas that make up Western Marxism as outlined above. For instance, the guiding motifs of the work of Georg Lukács, a Hungarian Marxist, began a new way of approaching the works of Marx that subsequently became an avalanche of epic proportions in the fields of philosophy, politics and sociology. This is by way of his moving beyond the materialism of Marx to elaborate on the role ideas play in the historical development of societies. As such Lukács brings into focus a segment of society that hitherto was considered as a mere epiphenomenon of the socio-economic ‘base’ in the

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\textsuperscript{170} With the exception of Gramsci, all other advocates of the position occupied university chairs in philosophy (Korsch, Lukács, Adorno etc) — see Perry Anderson, \textit{Considerations on Western Marxism}, (London: Verso, 1979) p. 50.

\textsuperscript{171} For an overview of the Positivist Debate and Habermas’s intervention see Robert C Holub, \textit{Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere}. (London: Routledge, 1991) pp. 20–48. For Habermas’s engagement with Gadamer see p. 65. His exchanges with Luhman are also outlined by Holub on pp. 106–132.
orthodox Marxist tradition of the 20th century. In placing ideas alongside the ‘base’ as co-determinants of social change, Lukács heralded a Hegelian or philosophical twist to the chief variant of Marxism at the time.

In ‘What is Orthodox Marxism?’ Lukács attacks the dogmatism that he perceives to be inherent in the dominant strands of ‘scientific’ or vulgar Marxism. The conservative nature of science exemplified by the unproblematic way it equates capitalist reality with objectivity meant, for Lukács, that the historical nature of ‘reality’ is suppressed. A dialectical method thus is needed to penetrate through the mirage of capitalist reality to its essence. In other words, the inner core of contemporary reality can only be ascertained if ‘facts’ as they appear in their current context are ‘subjected to a historical and dialectical examination’. What, then, is known as ‘Western Marxism’ is based on the re-appropriation of the young philosophical Marx, who ultimately believed in the inner truth inherent in the method of Hegel’s dialectics. This move has a number of profound implications when compared to ‘orthodox’ Marxism. In contrast to the unabashed ‘scientism’ of the latter, Western Marxism advocates a return to Hegel via the works of the ‘young’ Marx. That is, it espouses a philosophically oriented Marxism applied in a materialistic direction as opposed to its scientific variant and its related insistence on the immutability of the laws of revolution. In this way the dialectic as a method of social analysis that places a premium on the transformative role of human agency once again occupies centre stage within the pantheon of Marxist analyses.

One of the social theorists whose work played a major part in Lukács’ reconstruction of Marxism is the German economic historian and sociologist, Max Weber. In fact Lukács’ first understanding of Marx was through the lens provided by Weber. Weber in his account of the challenges facing the modern period is one of the first to clearly highlight the connection between rationalization and the ‘disenchantment’ of the world. In the hands of Lukács, this link becomes one between rationalisation and reification. For Lukács, like Marx before him, the notion of reification is tied in with the commodity form which, in turn, presupposes the existence of a system of exchange via the medium of money. The logic of this system of
exchange imposes a form of symmetrical equivalence between qualitatively different products through a process of abstraction.\textsuperscript{177} What this means is that the 'commodity form' has the tendency to transform relations between people according to the dictates of the principle of exchange that undergirds bourgeois society. Cumulatively, this process of abstraction, for Lukács, culminates in a fundamental misrepresentation of social reality. Lukács himself explains it this way:

\begin{quote}

The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus requires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.\textsuperscript{178}
\end{quote}

This abstraction is enabled by a way of comprehension that is encapsulated by what Max Weber terms 'formal rationality': a system of thinking that includes the 'application of technical rules to external reality'.\textsuperscript{179} This definition reveals the resemblance between Weber's formal rationality with later re-workings of it such as instrumental reason, purposive-rational reason, classificatory thinking, conceptual thought and identitarian logic to name a few. Thus societal rationalisation, undergirded by formal rationality, becomes, for Lukács, the penetration of the commodity form and its reifying effects into all areas of social life. Combining Marx and Weber in this analysis of capitalist societies enables Lukács to attribute the pathological character of modern life to the dynamics of the 'commodity form' under capitalism.\textsuperscript{180}

Members of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer incorporated this Lukácsian theme into their works, most notably in the Dialectic. Just as Lukács reads Marx from a Weberian vantage point, so too did the younger theorists of the Frankfurt school begin appropriating the works of Weber into their Marxian template using indices established by the older representative of Western Marxism. For example, Lukács' critique of the 'commodity form' becomes a generalized critique of positivistic thought in the hands of the Frankfurt Scholars. From this vantage point therefore, the common thread that weaves right across the tradition of Western Marxism lies in its inversion of Marx's discursive itinerary.

\begin{itemize}
\item Benhabib notes that 'The establishment of equivalence among qualitatively different things and human activities requires that one abstract precisely from the substantive concrete characteristics that distinguish them from one another', see Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory, (New York, Columbia University, 1986) p. 183.
\item Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p. 83.
\item David West, Introduction to Continental Philosophy, p.68.
\item Thomas McCarthy's 'Complexity and Democracy, or the Seductions of Systems Theory', New German Critique, No. 35, (Spring–Summer, 1985) p. 27.
\end{itemize}
that made him move from philosophy to politics and economics. In this way, Western Marxism tries to examine the particular ways in which ideas affect praxis and by extension society. The whole of Marx’s oeuvre therefore in their hands,

was typically treated as the source material from which philosophical analysis would extract the epistemological principles for a systematic use of Marxism to interpret (and transform) the world – principles never explicitly or fully set out by Marx himself.\textsuperscript{181}

By turning back to philosophy, Western Marxism became known for its incorporation of Weberian themes concerning the rationalisation of the world with Marxian tenets such as reification and emancipation of humanity.\textsuperscript{182}

It is this context that has to be taken into account if we are to situate Habermas within the tradition of Western Marxism. The clearest indication of Habermas’s adherence to the tenets of Western Marxism is shown in his contribution to the ‘positivist dispute’ between Adorno and Popper in 1961. In fact the position that Habermas adopts in this debate helps to illuminate how he situates himself within the tradition of Western Marxism. In that dispute, Habermas basically supports Adorno’s position by highlighting the limitations of positivism.\textsuperscript{183} To be sure, Popper also showed in that debate an ambivalent attitude to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle’s affirmation of the possibility of knowledge verification.\textsuperscript{184} For him the epistemological standing of a body of knowledge depends on its being able to be falsified. In other words it is philosophically sound to build knowledge up based on his falsification thesis rather than on the idea of verification as mandated by the Vienna Circle. The main difference that separates Adorno from Popper, though, is a methodological one. Popper saw no problems in using the methods of the natural sciences to investigate social phenomena, while Adorno, like Habermas after him, sought a separate grounding of the human and social sciences away from positivistic methods.\textsuperscript{185}

\textsuperscript{181} Perry Anderson, \textit{Considerations on Western Marxism}, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{182} David Ingram notes that for Habermas, Lukács’ \textit{History and Class Consciousness}, defines to a great extent the importance of Max Weber to ‘Western Marxism’. See David Ingram, \textit{Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason}, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) p. 60.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid, pp. 106–107.
To be sure, the position that Habermas embraced within this dispute is not enough, on its own, to draw a link between Habermas and Western Marxism. An equally scathing critique of positivism, for instance, was launched by Gadamer from the vantage point of a philosophical hermeneutics associated with the Heideggerian school. The central categories of this hermeneutically-informed critique, especially its insights into the social basis of positivism was in fact appropriated and modified by Habermas in the dispute.\footnote{Jack Mendelson, ‘The Habermas-Gadamcr Debate’ \textit{New German Critique}, No.18 (Autumn, 1979) p. 46.} What sets Habermas’s position apart vis a vis Gadamer is in the deployment of Hegelian motifs in the former’s critique of positivism. It is the ways in which these Hegelian impulses infiltrate his work that leaves very little doubt of which tradition Habermas can be generally categorized in. For him, our current attempts to philosophize about the world still make us contemporaries of Hegel, however much we would like to think that we have transcended his system. In the \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, Habermas lays bare the thought trajectories of the young Hegelians by noting the common ambivalence these philosophers have towards the synthetic system of their mentor.\footnote{Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, pp.51–74.} On one hand they acknowledge the profound way in which Hegel denounced the one-sided metaphysical formulations prevalent in materialist, idealist and pluralist discourses as well as the violence of omission that they perpetuate. On the other hand they are also convinced that Hegel’s dialectical logic retains a contradiction that even his entire system could not surmount. This is demonstrated by ‘the gulf between his claim that the dialectical process, which unites thought and history, culminates in the fundamental triumph of reason and the obvious irrationality of the social world’.\footnote{Peter Dews, ‘Habermas and the Desublimation of Reason’, p. 3.} For the young Hegelians, the triumph of historical reason lies in the materialistic inversion of Hegel’s dialectics. That is, what is needed is a translation of Hegel’s philosophy into the historical realities of the world.\footnote{Rudiger Bubner, ‘Habermas’s Concept of Critical Theory’, pp. 42–43.} Instead of the anomalous outright triumph of reason over history, the young Hegelians sought to correct Hegelian dialectics through a historicisation of reason while simultaneously retaining reason’s historicity; that is, its ability to grapple and influence historical realities.

The unfolding development of views pertaining to Hegel’s dialectics as depicted above could be summarized into three basic steps: the first involves the recognition of the value of Hegel’s dialectic and his critique of Enlightenment as extrapolated from Kant. The second involves the materialist inversion of Hegelian dialectic by the ‘left’ Hegelians and lastly, the
scepticism about the ultimate ‘triumph of reason’ in the face the irrationality of our social reality. This is to say that, in the eyes of these leftist intellectuals of the Hegelian tradition, there is a gulf between what is and what ought to be. Habermas thus claims that we are still contemporaries of the 18th century philosopher in light of the fact that we continue to grapple with his thematic project, a project that seeks to reconcile contradictions in its search for absolutes. It is also here that the danger of travelling along this path is made obvious by the Frankfurt social theorist. Hegel’s dialectic, according to Habermas, epitomises a mode of thinking that falls under what he calls the philosophy of consciousness, which comprises all forms of thought which rests on the premise that any mode of cognition is, by logical necessity, subject-centred. In other words they paid no attention to the communicative character or intersubjective dimensions of reason.

The new direction for Habermas entails a desublimation of the World Spirit or reason as a historical subject. What this means is that the status of World Spirit as a historical subject must be reconceptualised to avoid the aporias associated with the philosophy of consciousness. That is, we need to shift away from this philosophy towards a new orientation that is embedded within the universal grammar of dialogue. For Habermas, the turn towards communication is not just one alternative; it is the only viable exit out of the pitfalls of subject-centred reason. It entails a new sensitivity to the way contemporary societies have changed. It also means, he further posits, a revision of the theoretical categories that animate the accounts of Weber and Marx. This if we are to preserve the emancipatory potentials that would aid us in the realisation of the enlightenment ideals. The theory of communicative competence in this way is seen by Habermas as ‘a second attempt to appropriate Weber in the Spirit of Western Marxism’, after Lukács. More specifically, this ‘second effort’ is aimed at coming up with a more adequate account of reification that is more reflective of contemporary realities. As such, one of its more distinctive features, that sets it apart from Lukács, is its more positive evaluation of the emancipatory potentials existing in the prevailing conditions of ‘late’ or ‘high’ capitalism in the West. This potential was less obvious in Lukács’ seminal work. Ultimately Habermas’s ‘revision’ led to a reconceptualisation of the commodity form and its reifying effects on society, which in turn became the basis for a programme that explores the conditions of possibility for a rational society. To this end, Habermas’s Critical Theory basically reconceptualises Lukács’ notion

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190 An enthralling account of the different schools of thought within the Hegelian tradition can be seen in Karl Lowith, From Hegel to Nietzsche, pp. 53–162.
191 Thomas McCarthy, ‘Complexity and Democracy, or the Seductions of Systems Theory’, p. 27.
of reification as the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’.\textsuperscript{192} It is at this juncture in his development that the elective affinities between the works of Weber, Marx and Hegel coalesce with themes that make up the tradition of Western Marxism.

Later on however, the lines associating him with that tradition became blurred. The primary factor for this can be attributed to his ‘linguistic’ turn towards a universal pragmatics as the basis for his critical theory. The new turn stems from a number of critical considerations, the most pressing of which is his conviction that the aporias associated with the philosophy of consciousness or subject-centred reason could be, in part, due to the fact that the logic of material development (within instrumental rationality) does not in any way contribute to a corresponding development at the level of intersubjectivity.\textsuperscript{193} The specific thrust of Habermas’s turn, however, did not arise from a blanket rejection of subject-centred philosophy.\textsuperscript{194} Indeed he recognizes the outstanding contribution of this mode of thought to the survival of the human species. His problem with subject-centred reason however lies in the way it transforms science into an immutable dogma.\textsuperscript{195} In so doing the philosophy of consciousness precludes any attempt by thought to reflect on itself. This lack of reflection stultifies reason’s potential to recognise its communicative dimension. The failure to do so, according to Habermas, reduces thought to positivism. This is the main reason why, in his view, Horkheimer and Adorno could not find an exit out of the dilemma evinced in their critique of reason in the \textit{Dialectic}.

For Habermas the exit lies in the move towards a communicative reason that is geared towards intersubjective understanding.\textsuperscript{196} In the first volume of his \textit{Theory of Communicative Action}, Habermas points out that the epistemological paradox that the \textit{Dialectic} found itself in was enough to ‘furnish us with reasons for a change of paradigm within social theory’.\textsuperscript{197} He argues that a reason based on universal pragmatics is by its very nature oriented towards agreement. As early as \textit{Knowledge and Human Interests}, Habermas posited that ‘Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus’.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{193} See Chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{194} He sees this as a major point of difference between him and Adorno. It is also, as is shown in chapter 1, the basis from which he mounts his critique of ‘performative contradiction’ against the \textit{Dialectic}.
\textsuperscript{196} This exit was highlighted by Thomas McCarthy. See his introduction in Habermas’s \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, p. x.
\textsuperscript{197} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Theory of Communicative Action (I)}, p. 366.
\textsuperscript{198} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Knowledge and Human Interests}, p. 314.
This new turn shows the extent to which Habermas has departed from the parameters set by the Frankfurt School's first generation of theoreticians as well as the continuity he holds with the emancipatory aims of that tradition. In other words, Habermas's shift to communication was done to realise the explicit aim of the 'old' critical theory for a rational and emancipated society. The achievement of this aim means, for him, the completion of the 'project of modernity'.

3.2. From ‘Cognitive Interests’ to a Universal Pragmatics

To be sure, the idea of a communicative reason has always been an intrinsic part of Habermas's oeuvre. This is nowhere more obvious than in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* where he analyses the processes of will-formation within different periods in Europe. Yet he was too immersed in the analytical framework of the 'old' Frankfurt scholars, at this point in time, to immediately abandon their theoretical legacy that revolves around the philosophy of consciousness. Indeed Habermas harboured the faith that an epistemological undergirding of critique is still possible as early as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, its communicative content notwithstanding. It was not until *Knowledge and Human Interests* and its attempt to make 'cognitive interests' the basis for a rational critique of society that the insurmountable problems associated with the framework of the philosophy of consciousness became very clear to him. Contextualised within the years defined by the 'positivist dispute' in Germany, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, was meant to be 'read as an effort to open – or rather reopen – certain avenues of reflection that were blocked by the ascendancy of positivism during the last hundred years'. This was Habermas's answer to the problem of reification associated with the capitalist enterprise as was raised by the 1st generation theorists of the Frankfurt School. It was to mark the reinvigoration of critical reflection in a terrain that has given rise to reified consciousness, brought about by the socially debilitating effects of the instrumentalist logic of capital. As such *Knowledge and Human Interests* marks a fundamental shift in

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200 Jürgen Habermas, 'A Philosophico-Political Profile', *New Left Review*, 151 (May/June, 1985) p. 78.


Habermas’s position in relation to orthodox Marxism as well as the neo-Marxist variant of the Frankfurt School.

The most telling of these changes revolves around the way he attributed different forms of reasoning to specific cognitive interests. For instance, Habermas alleges that for Marx the only appropriate grounding of reason lies in labour, whereas for Adorno and Horkheimer, reason stems out of an anthropological or human need to master the ‘fear of the unknown’.

Habermas posits, on the other hand, the view that instrumental rationality is just a part, specifically, one third of what makes up the whole critical enterprise. This position mirrors the one that Gadamer also adopts in relation to science. In other words, instrumentalism depicts one form of reason that correlates to a specific orientation or cognitive interest in society. This part of the critical enterprise is generated by the technical orientation that is best expressed in the ‘empirico-analytical’ sciences. For Gadamer, reducing reason to instrumentalism gives rise to the emergence of a scientific-technological civilisation that is inadequately geared to facilitate intersubjective interactions between subjects ‘in whose veins real blood flows’.

For Habermas, the reduction of reason to only its purposive rational dimension leads to the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’: a situation that throws up social dilemmas similar to the ones argued by Gadamer as endemic in scientific-technological civilisations. Following hermeneutics, Habermas argues that in addition to an interest in technical mastery of an objective world, we also harbour a practical interest based on a collective quest for mutual understanding. This practical orientation gives rise to an intersubjective dimension of reason that is missing in purposive rational action. Habermas charts the trajectories of these different forms of logic by observing that

[W]hereas empirical-analytic methods aim at disclosing and comprehending reality under the transcendental viewpoint of possible technical control, hermeneutic methods aim at maintaining the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding in ordinary language communication and in action according to common norms.

In addition to this, Habermas claims that there is a third dimension of reason: one that is made up of an interest in autonomy or freedom. This interest facilitates the emergence of a critical orientation that ensures the means to emancipate society remain firmly within the

203 ibid.
205 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, p. 176.
grasp of interactive subjects. This emphasis on a third human orientation based on freedom is where Habermas casts himself adrift from Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Habermas’s main argument against hermeneutics lies in the latter’s inability to reveal what is systematically wrong with society. Indeed Gadamer insists that one cannot step outside society (or the hermeneutic circle) as one must always analyse society from within. Habermas believes this insistence by Gadamer robs society of the ability to find certain truths from which it may redeem itself from unenlightened practices. In other words, hermeneutics renounces the objective perspective that would identify relations of domination by power. As such, a defective society will not have within itself the ability to rectify internal anomalies, as this capacity hinges on an analytical framework that is able to distinguish between what is good or bad for its members.206

For Habermas, society retains the means to evaluate its own internal coherence by making a transcendental claim on emancipatory grounds. He uses the case of psychoanalysis as a case in point where ‘[T]he latent meaning of the present situation is made accessible through reference to the un-mutilated meaning’.207 Given that it is possible to map out psychological disorders by appealing to an ideal so it is possible to delineate distortions in society by petitioning for a free society. Hence for him there are three basic human orientations or interests with corresponding reasons. Furthermore, he posits that the three different modes of reason correspond to three distinct areas of social engagement, that of work, language and power or domination.208 As McCarthy notes, Habermas sees these distinct areas as universal mediums ‘in which the social life of the human species unfolds’.209 All human life in whatever society, with their unique specificities, is nurtured, developed, and lived through these three mediums.210

Clear as these distinctions maybe, problems emerge in relation to how Habermas views these interests. For instance, there is an obvious link between technical interests and work, or for that matter between practical interests that aim at understanding through language.

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207 Ibid.
208 Peter Hohendahl, ‘Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture’, p 111.
210 Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 189. It must be noted at this juncture that Habermas’s notion of ‘constitutive interests’ is a direct appeal to Kantian philosophy as well as that of Fichte. For an account of how Fichte proposes amendments to Kantian transcendentalism that is also directly relevant here see Peter Dews, Logics of Disintegration, pp. 24–26.
Furthermore, work and language are easily understood as distinguishing features of human life. Since social evolution 'first took place in the structures of labour and language', it is therefore logical to assume that they 'are older than man and society'. However the third cognitive interest which relates to emancipation cannot be grounded in the same way as the first two. Indeed it cannot be linked to a 'site' or concrete reality that supports it nor is it seen by Habermas as predating human existence. In other words, an epistemological grounding of critical theory in terms of an anthropology of knowledge, as shown in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, is problematic due to:

the tension between the assumption that there existed a unified generic subject, on the one hand, and the foundation provided by the structures of intersubjectivity for a practical and emancipatory interest in knowledge, on the other.

This is to say, amongst other things, that the emancipatory interest is not as intrinsic to society as the other two, hence an interest like this can only arise from reflection. However, there is a problem in this proposition as reflection, in this way, is made to do a double task. First it is employed as a tool to ascertain that there is such a thing as an emancipatory interest. Then it is being tasked once again to define what this interest entails. To paraphrase, Habermas attributed an emancipatory interest in society to a moment of reflection. Yet he saw this same reflection as a derivation of an emancipatory interest. Thus the ambiguity lies in Habermas's failure to tie a specified domain of action to this cognitive interest. This problematic arising out of the formulation of the emancipatory interest was not lost on Habermas who immediately suggests that it should be seen as a 'guiding' (as opposed to intrinsic) interest oriented towards redemption from the problems associated with 'communicative incompetence'. McCarthy provides an excellent insight as to how Habermas came by these cognitive interests as well as a critical but sympathetic evaluation of these 'standards'. By reaffirming that the emancipatory interest is actually a guiding interest of the critical sciences as well as philosophy, McCarthy wishes to show the different status the first two interests have compared to the critical impulse. That is, the emancipatory interest can only be a guiding interest because it is not connected to 'anthropologically deep-seated

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211 Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, p. 137. Habermas evinces a positivistic understanding of social evolution in asserting that structures preceded humans.
213 Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 639
systems of action.\textsuperscript{216} As such societies can often function under a system of domination, whereas they cannot be said to function without work or language and their knowledge constitutive interests.

By allocating different interests, and therefore rationalities, in the three spheres of life, Habermas hopes to come up with a solution to the problem of identity thinking that was highlighted by Horkheimer and Adorno in the \textit{Dialectic}. One of his central objectives in \textit{Knowledge and Human Interests}, as stated by McCarthy, was to come up with a more 'systematic and theoretically adequate account of the relation of theory to practice, one capable of countering the hegemony of scientism on all fronts'.\textsuperscript{217} But the controversy over the ambiguities surrounding the grounding of the emancipatory interest in reflection and vice versa (i.e. reflection as a derivation of an emancipatory interest) is further exacerbated by a notion of critical theory limited to analysing the linkages between knowledge and human interests and their implications for society. A fundamental issue, for instance, that ensues from Habermas's alignment of different forms of knowing with different human interests revolves around the difficulty of determining a normative warrant for an impartial quest for truth. Indeed, '[O]nce a solid connection is established between knowledge and human interests, critical reflection cannot establish itself as a disinterested pursuit of truth and must find some other way of justifying the normative force it seeks'.\textsuperscript{218}

For Habermas, the answer for this problem lies not within the aporias of the philosophy of consciousness but in the promise of universal pragmatics. Critical theory, therefore, can only be normatively grounded in the sphere of language. It is only after this aborted attempt to rationally ground critical theory in 'cognitive interests' as evinced in \textit{Knowledge and Human Interests}, that Habermas at last turned to the theory of language and its operational rules defined by a 'universal pragmatics'.\textsuperscript{219} In the essay 'What is Universal Pragmatics?' Habermas outlines his ideas on the general presuppositions underlying speech acts.\textsuperscript{220} He argues that there is a telos towards greater understanding that undergirds all forms of communication. Each utterance or speech act raises what he sees as three redeemable validity claims. These claims are part and parcel of any language hence their universality. Habermas

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{216} Ibid., p. 75.
  \item \textsuperscript{217} Ibid., p. 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{218} Jonathan Culler, \textit{Communicative Competence and Normative Force; New German Critique}, No. 35 (Spring-Summer, 1985) p. 133.
  \item \textsuperscript{219} To be sure, the 'linguistic turn' was already anticipated in \textit{Knowledge and Human Interests} and even its embryonic form could be traced to \textit{Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}.
  \item \textsuperscript{220} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Communication and the Evolution of Society}, pp. 1–68.
\end{itemize}
grouped these claims in terms of the values of truth, sincerity and rightness. As such these validity claims can only be redeemable if they are discursively contested in what he calls the 'ideal speech situation' or the public sphere. The emergence of this sphere is conditional on a few prerequisites. Habermas is of the view that, firstly, there must be certain 'symmetries' pertaining to the characteristics of all who participate in the public sphere. This is to say that the interlocutors must have the same 'life chances' and must adhere strictly to the rules of discourse allowing the intersubjective symmetry which guides the discourse within the public sphere to be maintained. The insistence on intersubjective symmetry stems from Habermas's awareness of the possibility of constraints that might distort the kind of communication that he has in mind. These barriers could come in the form of communication itself, whether in terms of ideological or neurotic barriers. Alternatively they could come as psychological barriers exemplified by conscious strategic actions within the intersubjective dialogue site. Against this, he offers the concept of an 'ideal speech situation' where the dialogue is conducted on the presupposition that all involved want to achieve a consensus at the end of the process. Furthermore the 'ideal speech situation' accords 'symmetry' to all the participants in the intersubjective exchange. This 'intersubjective symmetry' arises out of an even distribution of chances to initiate, question or refute claims in the discussion process.

To be sure, Habermas notes that the contestations only arise when certain validity claims are disputed. The 'shared' background assumptions often ensure that these claims are agreed upon without disputes. The 'ideal speech situation' therefore is the corollary of the public sphere where consensus is reached through a rigorous contestation between competing validity claims raised by engaged individuals who share certain symmetries in this contest. All claims are hence tested in discourses, both theoretical and practical, which are subject to the criteria implicit in the ideal speech situation. But before contestation takes place each interlocutor 'must choose a comprehensible expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another'. This condition sets the scene of the contestation that subsequently takes place. Every comprehensible utterance that is geared towards

221 Ibid., p. 3. Note that comprehensibility, strictly speaking, is not a claim, but a condition that all claims must meet in order to be pitted against truth, truthfulness and rightness.
222 Jürgen Habermas, Autonomy and Solidarity (interviews), edited and introduced by Peter Dews (London: Verso, 1986) pp. 89–90. Later on Habermas increasingly uses the term 'Public Sphere' as a 'stand in' for the 'ideal speech situation'.
224 Ibid., p. 145.
224 Jürgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, p. 2.
understanding raises three validity claims. The first of these is a claim to ‘truth for a stated propositional content’[^226]. This refers explicitly to the claim that what is being asserted by the speaker is also ‘true’ for the hearer. The second condition pertains to the acceptance by the hearer that the speaker is sincere in his assertion. For Habermas the claim to sincerity is accepted when the hearer grants that the speaker is sincere when making the truth claim.

The last claim is a claim to rightness. This claim appeals to the normative standards of appropriateness of the hearer or what would amount, in Gadamer’s view, to an appeal for a ‘fusion of horizon’. In other words, the third is a claim that what is being said is also ‘right’ in the sense that it meets the expected normative standards shared by interlocutors. In sum, rational consensus comes about when three conditions are met[^228]:

1. when a hearer accepts the ‘truthfulness’ of an assertion made by a speaker
2. when the hearer also accepts the sincerity of the speaker when making the ‘truth-claim’
3. that what the speaker asserts meets the normative standards of appropriateness of the hearer.

These claims in turn appeal to distinct ‘domains of reality’ namely, an external domain of nature (truth claim), an intersubjective world of understanding (rightness claim or claim to legitimacy), and an internal or subjective world (claim to sincerity).[^229] In other words each of these claims is made in relation to their corresponding ‘domains of reality’. Like Popper’s notion of ‘three worlds’, the claims of truth, sincerity and appropriateness are made in the domains of an objective world, a subjective world and a social world.[^230] For instance, in the utterance of a ‘standard speech act’, a speaker will be, simultaneously, making three validity claims whose requisites are outlined above. These standards correspond to: the objective world where truth claims are made; the social world where appeals to legitimacy are adjudicated; and the subjective world where the normative standards of appropriateness

[^226]: Ibid., p. 65.
[^227]: Ibid., p. 66.
[^228]: Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, p. 3.
[^229]: Ibid., p. 68. Also see *Theory of Communicative Action (II)*, pp. 119–126. Interestingly these validity claims and their corresponding domains of reality is a reworking of the Habermas’s model of cognitive interests and the types of knowledge they spawn that was outlined in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. This reworking signals the shift of the grounding of his critical theory to language.
within a lifeworld are evaluated. Agreement between hearer and speaker can only come about when all three conditions are met.\textsuperscript{231}

The above requirements imply that all those who participate in the ideal speech situation must be able to speak their minds openly and without fear of recriminations. This openness to dialogue must also extend to those who wish to question the position of others. Collectively these criteria, which regulate the dialogic engagements in the ‘ideal speech situation’, will facilitate the ‘procedures and presuppositions of free argument (that) are the basis for the justification of opinions’.\textsuperscript{232} It is also in the adherence to these criteria that the legitimacy of decisions, opinions and outlooks derived from the ideal speech situation, or the liberal public sphere, is presupposed. This is how, for Habermas, the ideal speech situation becomes the mainstay of democratic practices in the period of modernity.

By sketching a sphere where intersubjective dialogue is contingent on the ideal suppositions of a universal pragmatics, Habermas therefore is able to delineate a realm of the social that operates outside the instrumentalism exemplified by both positivistic thought and strategic action. In other words the site where the contestations of validity claims take place becomes a key design in his articulation of a two-tier system of society, as it establishes the conditions of possibility of that realm that lies outside the purview of systemic logic, namely the ‘lifeworld’. The delineation of a model of society that encapsulates two interrelated yet distinct schemes of integration becomes, for him, an undertaking from which the completion of the ‘project of modernity’ can be realised.

3.3 The Theory of Communicative Action: A two-tier system of society.

The two volumes that made up Habermas’s exegesis on the theory of communicative competence is best understood as a critical intervention by Habermas to retrieve the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment through a philosophic reinterpretation of the conditions that, according to him, gave rise to the defeatism that had earlier overwhelmed Adorno and Horkheimer. This defeatism can only, by this account, be averted by jettisoning the philosophy of consciousness; a philosophy that lends its aporetic tenor to the arguments in the \textit{Dialectic}. David Ingram sums up the problem for Habermas in this way: ‘The chief

\textsuperscript{231} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action (II)} p. 121.

73
defect of philosophy of consciousness is its location of the original source of valuation and cognition in an isolated subject, thereby ignoring the significance of communicative interaction. Salvaging the emancipatory potential of modernity, for him, necessitates a turn to the linguistic structure of communication as the basis for a critical theory of society. Society in this way cannot be perceived exclusively as the locus of reifying consciousness and its concomitant objectifying outlook; it must also be seen as a site where humans linguistically communicate and justify their wishes as well as actions to each other against a shared normative horizon. Furthermore, each time there is a consensus amongst competing claims, it in turn facilitates an enlarged normative horizon that encompasses two or more competing worldviews. This is clearly evident very early on in Habermas’s appropriation of Heidegger and Gadamer’s hermeneutical insights in the ‘positivist dispute’. The publication of the two volumes of The Theory of Communicative Action represented in its clearest form the uses of the idea of a universal pragmatics to sketch the contours of a reason that is generated by the idealising suppositions of speech acts and which, in turn, are geared towards rational consensus. This reason, which he terms ‘communicative rationality’ becomes the harbinger of his two tier model of society that is premised on a union between the functionalist concept of ‘system’, which reverberates with Durkheimian and Parsonian undertones, and a notion of the ‘lifeworld’ borrowed from phenomenology. By steering clear of the aporias of the Dialectic, Habermas at the same time hopes to ground Critical Theory on more secure epistemological foundations.

One of the most troubling aspects of modern social theories, in Habermas’s view, is their tendency to explain the social world exclusively in terms of either social action or structural impetus. What is needed, in his view, is a model of society that incorporates both tendencies in a unified whole. To be sure, Habermas admits that reconciling the systems paradigm with the action paradigm or the lifeworld has been a central preoccupation of the sociological theories of its founding triumvirates (Marx, Durkheim and Weber) as well as Talcott Parsons.

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233 David Ingram, Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason, p. 104.
234 Jack Mendelson, ‘The Habermas–Gadamer Debate’, p. 46. Adorno on the other hand adopts an ambivalent attitude towards Heidegger alleging that the latter’s philosophy reeks of fascism through and through.
235 Jürgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, p.3.
236 Adorno has the same view but directed against subject or object centred philosophies. Philosophies which falls into either/or category, for Adorno suffers from ‘transcendental delusion’. This discussion is covered in the next chapter.
237 Jürgen Habermas, Autonomy and Solidarity, p. 88.
The problem lies in the reductionism that often accompanies these theorizations. That is, these authors tend to lean towards either a systems-theoretic scheme or an action-theoretic model in their final analyses. The point however is to maintain the integrity of the different trajectories of material and symbolic reproduction in society.

Habermas’s critical reconstruction of Marxism very early on in his career stems from a conviction that the economistic version popularised by the Second International reduces the communicative dimension of Marx’s theory to its structural base.\(^{238}\) In a move that was designed as a protest against the forms of vulgar Marxism, especially the materialist and scientific versions that abounded in the 60s, Habermas wanted Marxian thought to recover the communicative dimension that was originally part of Marx’s conception of modern society.\(^{239}\) For Habermas, Marx defines society as the outcome of the dialectical mediation between labour and its organising principles: a formulation he (Marx) later skewed by privileging practice (material production) over the social relations (theoretical interests) that ‘guide’ this process - a relation that covers the intersubjective relation between producers.\(^{240}\) Instead of the dogmatism that is associated with its ‘scientific’ formulations, Marxism, for Habermas, is to be seen as an ‘empirically falsifiable philosophy of history with practical intent’.\(^{241}\)

One of the implications arising out of this move is that Marxism, far from being a dogma, is to be nothing more than a hypothesis to be tested against historical conditions. Habermas argues that Marx’s dialectics cannot be regarded as an explanatory theory for no theory can profess to account for all the contingencies of history. This is clearly a shift away from the meta-theorising associated with the grand narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In so doing, Habermas is trying to protect Marxian critical insights from the vices of the grand theoretical models – vices that have been condemned by poststructuralists such as Lyotard and Foucault. Habermas insists instead that Marx’s theory of society is critical in the sense that it sees society as a dialectical system that comprises, on one hand, the ‘means of production’ and, on the other, the ‘productive relations’. These dual notions are

\(^{238}\) See Ingram, *Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason*, pp. 118–123.

\(^{239}\) Jürgen Habermas, ‘Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism’ in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, pp. 130–177.

\(^{240}\) *This reduction is nowhere made clearer than in Marx’s A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in which he proclaims that ‘[t]he consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness’ cited in Robert C Tucker, *The Marx–Engels Reader (2nd ed.)*, (New York: W W Norton and Company, 1978) p. 4.

\(^{241}\) Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie and Praxis* (cf. 271–279) as cited in Peter Dews, ‘Habermas and the Desublimation of Reason’, p. 4. This is also a position that is associated with Western Marxism in general.
representative of the tensions between the philosophical concepts of Spirit and History that had previously occupied the thoughts of the young Hegelians. In a shift from what he sees as excessive philosophic orientation on the part of these disciples of Hegel, Marx, according to Habermas, subsequently began placing more emphasis on the scientific nature of his theory to oppose what he saw as ‘mere speculation’. This new emphasis is strictly a corrective measure as it affords, for Marx, the realisation of the liberal ideals embedded within a philosophy of history: ideals such as truth, autonomy, reason and justice. Marx’s disenchantment with what he sees as the futility of unbridled philosophising is fully encapsulated in his 11th theses on Feuerbach, where he laments that ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point however, is to change it’. It is thus clear that Marx, from the very beginning, intended his theory of society to rest on the twin pillars of forces of production and relations of production. The former consists of labour-power, technical knowledge related to production and organisational know-how while the latter consists of ‘those institutions and social mechanisms that determine the way in which (at a given stage of productive forces) labour power is combined with the available means of production’. Together they make up a mode of production.

The important thing to remember, for Habermas, is that the different spheres also contain the outlines of different ways of coordinating action. For instance, the sphere that is defined by the ‘means of production’ is geared towards greater productivity, hence the kind of knowledge that will be most useful there is instrumental which, in turns, guides ‘purposive-rational’ actions. The ‘relations of production’ is interesting in the sense that, apart from aligning itself to the maximisation of output, it also suggests, for Habermas, the vestiges of a different form of reason based on intersubjective understanding. This is essential if we are to ensure the alignment of cooperation from the workers with the general interests of the bourgeoisie - the owners of the means of production. Thus Marx, for Habermas, was already defining two relatively different and autonomous logics embedded in the two distinct spheres that make up a mode of production. On the one hand, we have an instrumental logic that is utilised in the sphere of the ‘means of production’ ensuring maximum output, while on the other, we have another logic that is explicated in terms of intersubjective reason. This latter logic determines the degree of integration of the members of a society by ‘regulating access

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244 See *ibid.*, pp. 130–177 for a more detailed overview of this discussion. 76
to the means of production and thereby indirectly regulating the distribution of social wealth.\textsuperscript{245} For Habermas, regulating both the access to the production process as well as distribution of social wealth is intrinsically tied in with normative questions on what a 'rational society' should be. Such questions, in turn, can only be posed and answered through a process of discursive argumentation in which all are given fair and equal chances of raising validity claims. This, in turn, becomes the basis of his normative approach.

Habermas points out that the peculiar development of Marxism both in the hands of Marx and then his latter-day followers saw the subversion of communicative reason in the production process. That is, the logic prevalent within the sphere of the 'means of production' became recognised as the only one inherent in Marxism. It was especially true of the different 'scientific' variants of Marxism ranging from Stalinism to the more orthodox versions prevalent in the 60s, which gave rise to a form of 'materialist metaphysics'. The charge of economism and scientism directed against Marxism around this time highlighted the truncated version of a critical theory that was designed to transform the world. However, Habermas was not simply trying to bring Marx back into vogue by redeeming certain insights in Marxian thought: his objective is much grander. Indeed Habermas aims to use Marx's insights as a platform to articulate a more comprehensive account of sociality. Marx, for all his far-reaching analyses of society is, for Habermas, still firmly a child of his epoch who was naively optimistic about the destiny of the proletariat as a historical subject in humanity's march towards autonomy.

In another move that mirrors the earlier one by Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas claims that freedom is a product of historical conditions and as such has not always existed. There is no basis, therefore, for assuming, as Marx did, that there is an underlying subject of history: one that will realise, in concrete terms, the relations between history and philosophy.\textsuperscript{246} This is to say that Habermas is suspicious of Marx's claim about the historical relationship that links freedom with the actions of the proletariat. However, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, whose theory was vehemently attacked after it summarily dismissed the proletariat from their historical role, Habermas aims to address this dilemma in a different way. Unwilling to be included together with the authors of the \textit{Dialectic} as theorists of revolutions with no clear revolutionaries in mind - a situation created by the departure of the proletariat – Habermas

\textsuperscript{245} \textit{ibid.}, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{246} Peter Dews, 'Habermas and the Desublimation of Reason', p. 5.

77
felt that change ought to be sought from everybody in society. In Neil Saccamano’s words, instead of relying on a subject of history, Habermas points out that the agent of change:

is to be derived, rather from the entity that has been transformed by the historical development of capitalism into the depoliticised “masses”: the public of private persons, capable of judging and debating rationally about political domination, which had secured through its critique of the absolutist state the institutional organs of liberal democracy.247

In this way Habermas aims to avert the spectre of revolutions without revolutionaries implicit in the *Dialectic*, which led to the accusation that Adorno and Horkheimer’s theoretical insights were directed at no one in particular: a ‘message in a bottle’ left to an imaginary future audience.248

To be sure, Habermas did not arrive at his final elucidation of societal processes and their accompanying logics and action-theorems through a simple hermeneutic reengagement of Marxian tenets. Indeed his final destination was reached after an exhaustive interrogation of virtually every conceivable model of sociality, the contours of which are beyond the purview of this thesis. Suffice to say that Habermas’s model entails a number of important considerations. First is the change that takes place concerning the epistemological ‘moorings’ of critical theory: from subject-centred philosophy to one based on intersubjective relations.249 Second is the incorporation of both systemic as well as social forms of reproduction in a workable way within a single model of society. This move reflects Habermas’s conviction that there are two different ways in which integration occur in society. Third is the appreciation, in light of the varying integrative functions in the two spheres of society, of dissimilar forms of rationality that are crucial to both material and symbolic reproduction. Fourth is how he maintains that the two tiers of society must be allowed to ‘evolve’ guided by the rationality intrinsic to each. Taking as his point of departure a paradox that he found in Durkheim’s explanation of integration in society, Habermas elucidates a new form of sociality based on the historically related but distinct dynamics of lifeworld and system. For Habermas, Durkheim is correct in pointing out the links between ‘forms of social integration and stages of system differentiation’.250 However


249 By way, of course, of an abortive attempt to ground critical theory in cognitive interests.

the problem, according to Habermas, stems from the tautological explanation that Durkheim advances about the specific links between normative regulations and forms of solidarity in society. For example, according to Durkheim the moral rules that govern modern society (as expressed in the notion of organic solidarity) are derived from the ‘division of labour’. In other words, the division of labour is regarded as the source from which modern forms of normativity are derived. Yet Durkheim also posits that ‘the dysfunctional character of certain forms of division of labour’ can be attributed to ‘the absence of such normative regulations’. The dilemma for Durkheim, as Habermas sees it, lies in the former’s inability to envisage any other form of social reproduction that can happen outside institutional settings. The answer, for Habermas, is to adopt a more holistic approach to society’s integrative processes on the basis of the two action-systems and their corresponding logics of reproduction that, collectively, make up society. As Habermas observes,

[In one case, the integration of an action system is established by a normatively secured or communicatively achieved consensus, in the other case, by a nonnormative regulation of individual decisions that extends beyond the actors’ consciousnesses.]

For Habermas, the former is symptomatic of the symbolic interactions associated with the works of George Herbert Mead while the latter typifies Emile Durkheim’s account of modern forms of social integration. The two distinctive ways in which society is integrated, by means of an ‘action theorem’ as well as a ‘system theorem’, leads to a ‘corresponding differentiation in the concept of society itself’. Hence, for Habermas, societies can only be adequately grasped if they are conceived as both system and lifeworld. David Ingram sums this up well:

We are told that the system integrates diverse activities in accordance with the adaptive goals of economic and political survival by regulating the unintended consequences of strategic action through market or bureaucratic mechanisms that constrain the scope of voluntary decision. The lifeworld, on the other hand, contributes to the maintenance of individuals and social identity by organising action around shared values, so as to reach agreement over criticisable claims.

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251 Ibid.
252 Ibid., p. 117.
253 Ibid.
254 Ibid., p. 118.
255 David Ingram Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason, p.115.
Ultimately, the distinctions that Habermas had sought between a communicative form of reason that is to be distinguished from its instrumental counterpart (both strategic and purposive-rational) in his ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ model of society would prove decisive again in his articulation of the role of the liberal public sphere in anchoring modern society. Before delving into the dynamics of his liberal political sphere, it is important to highlight the extent in which Habermas has cast adrift from the moorings of Western Marxism. This is done in the next section via a discussion of his abandonment of Ideology-critique.

3.3.1 Shifting Textualities: From ‘Ideology-Critique’ to ‘Colonisation of the Lifeworld’

The new model, based on two different reproductive trajectories – systemic and social-embedded within two separate spheres – precipitated a revision of some motifs that have become synonymous with Western Marxism. One such issue was the proper place of ideology-critique in social theorisation, a legacy that Habermas inherits from Lukács by way of Adorno. For Lukács, the role of ideology-critique is to highlight the pseudo-normative power of the commodity-form in society, a power whose reifying effects transform social relations into relations between things. A relationship of this nature, for Habermas, cannot be anything other than strategic or instrumental. Read this way, reification becomes for Lukács’, an ideological obfuscation that arises out of systemic distortions as well as ‘false consciousness’. In other words, reification is caused by what Althusser sees as the ‘ideological interpellation’ that occurs as capitalism and the state seek to define (thus controlling) subjective consciousness in an attempt to perpetuate the status quo.256 As such, the prevalence of the commodity-form in all spheres of bourgeois society presupposes the notion of ideology-critique as a necessary countermeasure.

In contrast, Habermas argues that the distinctly Weberian overtones of the rationalisation process, as defined by Lukács, cannot be reduced exclusively to its reifying effects on society.257 To do this, in his view, would be to deny modernity of any rational content. Habermas relies instead on a reformulation of the idea of reification by arguing that ideology-critique is relevant only if class distinctions are as palpable as they were during the nascent years of capitalism. In fact he notes that:

In the face of a class antagonism pacified by means of welfare-state measures...

... and in the face of the growing anonymity of class structures, the theory of class consciousness loses its empirical reference. It no longer has application to a society in which we are increasingly unable to identify strictly class specific lifeworlds.258

Appealing directly to Daniel Bell’s ‘end of ideology’ thesis, Habermas points out that the fragmentation of ‘totalising conceptions of order’, or worldviews, which accompany modern processes, has in effect negated the role of ideology as an influencing force.259 For him, high modernity, exemplified by the period of late capitalism, spells amongst other things, the end of the age metaphysics. Thus with its passing goes the need for ideology-critique.

In this way reification becomes, for Habermas, a symptom of ‘distorted’ communication that would be the ultimate result of the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’. This is a key term in his theory of communicative competence. Colonisation of the lifeworld comes about as a consequence of the encroachment of systemic imperatives on the dynamics of the lifeworld. According to Habermas, the system and the lifeworld undergo rationalisation in fundamentally different ways. The former rationalises towards the attainment of high levels of institutional efficiency while the latter’s social evolution is geared towards achieving rational consensus in a context that is conducive to the free exchange of competing ideas or validity claims. Habermas calls this context that facilitates the interactive exchanges between acting subjects the ‘ideal speech situation’. For him people enter into these exchanges, or discourse, in an effort to find consensus. True consensus can only come about if communications between interlocutors are conducted within an ideal speech situation. The negation of this pure communicative state renders any form of consensus-seeking process vulnerable to the distorting influence that power and wealth may bring to any communicative interchange.260 Colonisation of the lifeworld therefore occurs when power and money start influencing what is, for Habermas, supposed to be a collective quest for true or rational consensus based on undistorted communication. By recasting reification as colonisation of the lifeworld, Habermas hopes to show that the complexities of our current epoch necessitate a change in our approach to the problems besetting our time. Indeed, for him, the post-metaphysical stage is one that renders ideology-critique redundant. With the passing of the

260 Note that the ideal speech situation plays a similar role as Weber’s ideal types. They are used as heuristic devices to evaluate concrete experiences against their conceptual ideals. Ideal speech situations, again, like ideal types have no concrete exemplifications.
old world of ideologies, concepts like reification must also be discarded if we are to alter the structure of our consciousness to suit our contemporary age.

The completion of the project of modernity, for Habermas, is directly linked to the overcoming of the conditions that inhibit undistorted communication. In other words, if we are to accept the rational content of modernity, then we must also move beyond the reification thesis (and together with it – ideology-critique) in order to show the critical impulse of modern forms of sociality.

3.4 Communicative Antecedents in Habermas’s Early Works: The centrality of the notion of public sphere in Habermas’s oeuvre.

The communicative orientation that Habermas adopts as his definitive point of departure from the specific theorisation that defines the older generation of the Frankfurt School can be discerned even as early as his contribution to the ‘positivist dispute’ as well as in the ensuing work on the historical evolution of institutions of will-formation in Europe.261 The former illuminates Habermas’s understanding of positivism as arguably more nuanced than Adorno’s. For instance, Habermas gave due credit to ‘empirical-analytical research method with gains in technical knowledge’, more so than Adorno whose position is ‘to dismiss it as false consciousness or ideology’.262 The differences in their respective positions could be explained by the fact that the former’s stance in relation to the empirical-analytical sciences is based strictly on methodological issues whereas the latter tends to subsume these same issues to their political implications. Yet, in spite of this, there seems to be more than a suggestion in Habermas’s exegesis on the subject that alludes to an alternative form of rationality based on intersubjective understanding. This is clearly evinced in a rejoinder that was part of the same dispute, where he alluded to a more comprehensive form of reason that arises out of rational consensus achieved without constraint. This reference, still in its embryonic form, was later given concrete expression in Knowledge and Human Interests where, Habermas argues, natural science depends on a communicative context susceptible to hermeneutic understanding.263

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261 Jürgen Habermas, Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. The positivist dispute took place in 1961 whereas the German edition of the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere came out in 1962.
262 Robert C Holub, Jürgen Habermas, p. 47.
263 Ibid., p. 48.
Habermas’s position on the presence of an alternative form of reason is perhaps a result of the fact that his major project around the same time was a sociological investigation of the emergence, transformation and subsequent disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere.²⁶⁴ He attributed the genesis of the bourgeois public sphere to the socio-political climate of the eighteenth century and its demise to the logic of ‘late’ capitalism around two hundred years later. As such the public sphere was, for him, a defining feature that is crucial to any understanding of the modern period.²⁶⁵ This historicisation of the concept within an epoch defined primarily by a nascent capitalist economy allowed Habermas to retrieve critical resources that could be employed later on as part of both a general critique of modernity as well as an exit strategy from the aporias of the *Dialectic*. The *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was a response to what Habermas perceived as a state of crisis in the German Federal Republic: a crisis that was engendered by a form of social neurosis afflicting West Germany’s social and political landscape. This seminal publication, as it turned out, was seen by its author as a form of practical intervention that would eventually lead to a better understanding, hence overcoming, of the factors behind the new republic’s disempowering social and political terrain in the aftermath of the Second World War.²⁶⁶ It is as early as this work that one may find the seeds that eventually led to Habermas’s later stance against the *Dialectic*. One interesting aspect is its tacit departure from the critical focus of the *Dialectic*. While the latter concerns itself with just critiquing the status quo (through its critique of the culture industry), the former is not satisfied with the ‘mere speculation’ in the cooperative efforts of Adorno and Horkheimer, ‘performative contradiction’ notwithstanding. Moreover, the synthetic element that marks out his later works is also evident at this early stage in his career. This is evinced by his engagements with diverse theoretical disciplines ranging from cultural history, legal history, mass media theory as well as empirical social sciences.²⁶⁷

*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is, in short, a theoretical excavation of the traces of public will-formation. Habermas points to the historical existence of such processes as corresponding to the movement of authority from a world of religio-feudal absolutism to one where the logic of capital was gaining in ascendancy. The public sphere thus

²⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. xi.
²⁶⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* p. xi.
²⁶⁷ Peter Hohendahl, Jürgen Habermas’, p. 45.
metamorphosed from a 'world of letters' to one where it was appropriated by the nascent bourgeois class to rein in what it saw as excesses of state power, often represented by the monarchy as well as the absolutist bureaucratic organisation.\textsuperscript{268} The first clear example of this shift in emphasis away from authoritarian political formations occurred in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century where '[F]orces endeavouring to influence the decisions of state authority appealed to the critical public in order to legitimate demands before this new forum.'\textsuperscript{269} The 'de-centering' of religio-feudal absolutism resulted in the emergence of new freedoms and accompanying institutions in areas that were formerly ruled by the medieval public sphere. This new development brought about a levelling effect, resulting in the devolvement of public institutions such as the judiciary and bureaucracy from their imperial moorings to serve the specific needs of the new order. Historically, the 'public sphere' is a social sphere whose discursive space was generated by a plethora of information outlets owned by the bourgeoisie. These included cafes, salons, literary societies, newspapers and an ever growing number of journals.\textsuperscript{270} It is in this discursive sphere, constructed by the conduits of information outlined above, that contestation of validity claims takes place. As such the 'public sphere' becomes a discursive space where opinions are formed, revised, sustained or reconstituted in light of more valid argumentation. The prominence given to the role information play even at that early phase saw newspapers evolving from mere publishing tools to important determinants of public opinion, as the public sphere metamorphosed from a 'world of letters' to an influential tool of will-formation. It is within this latter phase that Habermas locates its political potency. The public sphere generated by various information conduits became a watchdog for the bourgeoisie against perceived or real excesses of the state; that is, in occupying the interstices between the state and the 'lifeworld', Habermas proposes that, historically, the public sphere was a measure constructed by certain segments of the bourgeois to rein in the desultory effects of hierarchical forms of authority exemplified by constellations of power such as the state, the economy and religio-feudal absolutism. Indeed by the end of the eighteenth century, the medieval power-complexes had been largely negated by the structural changes spearheaded by an expansionist bourgeois mentality.

\textsuperscript{268} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, p.52.
\textsuperscript{269} ibid, p. 57.
It is at this point of delineating the origins of the public sphere that Habermas also trumpets its class linkages by examining its relation to the capitalist mode of production.\textsuperscript{271} Indeed, 

[T]he social precondition for this “developed” bourgeois public sphere was a market that, tending to be liberalized, made affairs in the sphere of social reproduction as much as possible a matter of private people left to themselves and so finally completed the privatisation of civil society.\textsuperscript{272}

Yet this class feature, which sees the emergence of public spheres as dominated by bourgeois individuals and/or property owners, is but a reflection of a new configuration of power that is being ratified as legal and rational. For it shows the shifting of power from the old guards to the new - from the pulpit and the throne to the market. Yet the most important thing, from Habermas’s perspective, is the greater degree of access that is granted to the new public sphere. In other words, bourgeois individuals notwithstanding, Habermas sees this class feature of the public sphere as a distinct improvement, in terms of inclusivity, when compared to the public sphere that preceded it. In fact Habermas argues that the specific form a public sphere takes reflects the power constellation of a particular age. For example, the particular characteristics of the bourgeois public sphere is indicative of the ‘new’ power tectonics that undergird an emerging capitalist economy, just as the medieval public sphere stood for the absolutism of church and monarch. Habermas’s attempt, therefore, to recast the bourgeois public sphere in a more positive light to that of its predecessors in different historical periods was motivated by Marx’s identification of the problem of ‘false consciousness’ as nestling within the bosom of bourgeois society.

The problem for Habermas is to match his ideal conceptualisation of the public sphere with its concrete manifestation. As Holub puts it, the dilemma confronting Habermas is that ‘[T]he notion of general accessibility and unconstrained dialogue is an obfuscation by and of bourgeois ideology, since it stands in contradiction to the empirical reality of the public sphere in capitalist societies’.\textsuperscript{273} This predominantly bourgeois construction of the ‘public sphere’ became problematic as capitalism began manifesting itself clearly along class lines. Indeed the class structure of capitalism in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century severely limited free and fair interchanges of the interlocutors in the ‘public sphere’ to members of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois origins of this social sphere meant limitations to it being able to articulate a social reality based on wide ranging consensus. This discrepancy merely mirrored the widening of

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid, pp. 57–60, also see p. 85 for a summary of the class character of the public sphere.
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{273} Robert C Holub \textit{Jürgen Habermas}, p.5.

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cleavages as monopoly capitalism developed. In other words, as the gulf between the powerful bourgeois class and those closely associated with the state on one hand and the rest of civil society on the other widened, so did the waning relevance of the ‘public sphere’ as a tool of mass oppositional politics become more obvious. Indeed, the period of ‘late capitalism’ saw an ever increasing role of a specific logic–predominant in both neo-liberal politics and the capitalist market economy – in the process of social integration.  

The bourgeois public sphere that emerged in the eighteenth century is, therefore, a consequence of the growing division between (European) states and their civil population due to the expansionist trajectories of market economies. Thus the institution of will formation associated with the bourgeois epoch was accorded the role of mediator to the often conflicting interests of the state and privately owned capital. The public sphere therefore would be a ‘realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed’. To the extent that it is a genuine site of ‘public will-formation’, the sphere operates on the protocols of language-use defined by a universal pragmatics. This ensures, in Habermas’s view, a symmetry between interlocutors in raising as well as refuting validity or truth-claims in discourse (ideal speech situation). The successor to this political sphere, associated with bourgeois society, thus becomes primarily the way in which Habermas puts forward a procedural model of democracy, one that revolves around ‘the democratic control of state activities’. 

Yet Habermas maintains that for all its weaknesses the bourgeois public sphere is a definite improvement from all the other preceding historical forms. In this way, Habermas argues, the emergence of a capitalist society becomes a defining moment in the history of will-formation as it broadens the accessibility of the sphere to the population at large. It is here, however, that the contradiction between the logic of the public sphere and that of the market is made apparent. It soon dawned on him that the practice of linking freedom in the public sphere to the emergence free market competition in capitalist modernity effectively compromises the


275 Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 57–60 & 85.

276 This assertion also marks a departure from Marx’s argument on how the state is a tool that furthers the interests of the bourgeoisie.


278 Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere’, p. 51.
welfare of society as a whole.\textsuperscript{279} For Habermas, this contradiction became apparent in the growing disparities between the interests guiding the public sphere on one hand, and the logic of the capitalist system on the other. Thus the role of the public sphere is to chart the best way forward by mediating between the requirements of the system as well as the needs of the lifeworld. In mediating between the private interests of its participants as well as recognising how these interests are contextualised within a realm influenced by the non-linguistic steering media of private capital and state bureaucratic power, the public sphere ensures that processes of integration taking place in both tiers of society – system and lifeworld – are done in a manner that is cognisant of their respective needs.

The constriction and eventual disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere can be traced to the attempts by the state to control the crises of complex market economies through greater intervention. As the administrative arm of the state began playing an increased role in social life, systemic interventions began encroaching onto our social lifeworlds, leading ultimately to the deformation of the public sphere. For Habermas these interventions are guided by purposive-rational logic - a reason that is perhaps uniquely suited to rendering systems more effective. Indeed Habermas argues that it is the indiscriminate application of this particular form of reason on areas that are defined by intersubjective actions that leads to the disintegration of the public sphere and the ‘colonisation’ of the lifeworld. Take state-welfarism as an example: one of the troubling aspects of increased intervention of the state in social life revolves around how it attempts to address inherently social problems through technical and bureaucratic procedures, as if these problems are solely technical in nature. As such, developments such as the advent of parliamentary systems, the emergence of public relations as opposed to free exchange of ideas, party politics as well as the manipulation and commercialization of the mass media are all viewed by Habermas as contributing to the ‘refeudalisation’ of this sphere – a situation where form and representation outweigh substance and rational debate.\textsuperscript{280} Using Habermas’s rather esoteric formulation of this problem, we may say that the delinguistified media consisting of both power and money came to define the social embroidery of the public sphere, rekindling the process of its refeudalisation.\textsuperscript{281} It came as no surprise then that mass media turned to purely commercial

\textsuperscript{279} See Hohendahl, ‘Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture’, pp. 79–80 for an explanation on how the logic of the market became the modus operandi of the bourgeois public sphere. This, as will be argued later in chapter 6 is a problematic part of the public sphere that Habermas could not eliminate from his populist notion of it, hence the allegation that he is becoming an apologist of the status quo in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{280} Robert C Holub \textit{Jürgen Habermas}, p.5.

\textsuperscript{281} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, p. 195.
concerns and subsequently became a tool of the ‘culture industry’. The pervasion of instrumental reason in the ‘public sphere’ and the succumbing of communicative action to ‘systemic’ embraces have led to an increase in the opinion-forming capabilities of culture industries. This gives rise to a situation where ‘rational critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode’. Roles that used to be attributed to the public sphere are now re-appropriated ‘by other institutions that reproduce the image of the public sphere in distorted guise’. By tracing the contours of a public sphere in this way - as an abstract ideal - Habermas hopes to put forward a yardstick by which social reality can be gauged.

In his articulation of the specific trajectory of the bourgeois public sphere, from inception to its final demise, Habermas remains steadfast in his conviction that critical theory must be grounded by a quest that would realise the emancipatory potentials inherent in modernity. Habermas’s relationship to Hegel becomes clearer when his oeuvre is viewed in this way. Indeed the success of Habermas’s attempt to salvage the project of modernity would also mean, in a nutshell, the fulfilment of Hegel’s dialectic between history and philosophy. Amidst all these considerations, the one thing that stands out is Habermas’s conviction that if we are to redeem the promise of the Enlightenment, we must resurrect the concept of the public sphere. For him this is the only way of safeguarding the rationalisation of the lifeworld from the encroachments of the system. Habermas sees the fate of the project of modernity and that of the public sphere as irrevocably intertwined - the establishment as well as the retention of the latter will lead to the fulfilment of the former. That is, the public sphere is the site that will adjudicate between competing validity claims put forward by humans as they chart their way through the vicissitudes of life. The concept of a liberal public sphere, therefore, is a mechanism by which equilibrium is reached within the totality of social life. It also trumpets Habermas’s attempt to retain the positive insights gained from the bourgeois public sphere while avoiding the aporias associated with its class-based features. Indeed, the liberal dynamic that guides the new public sphere is shaped by the need to transcend the shortcomings associated with its bourgeois version, prevalent in European societies after the

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282 The ‘culture industry’ was first coined by Adorno and Horkheimer in the Dialectic to denote the structural transformation of culture and mass media resulting in them being tools of indoctrination wielded by the bourgeois on the rest of society. This leads to a subtle form of social control and domination. Indeed, culture succumbing to instrumental reason has become an industry.

283 Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 161.

demise of religio-feudal absolutism. This is to say that the current attempt to realise the promise of the Enlightenment is problematic, for Habermas, because it is taking place in a terrain marked by capitalist modernity. As such modern attempts at rescuing the promise of the Enlightenment must do so in a context that is not conducive to the realisation of these goals - an atmosphere in which systemic logic gradually increases its penetration of the lifeworld. The concept of a liberal public sphere, given the vagaries of capitalist modernity, can only, therefore, be articulated in the abstract for Habermas. For him, the tendency for capitalist society to reduce everything down to their commodity forms necessitate the concept of the liberal public sphere to take on the attributes of an ideal type in the Weberian sense. This idea of the public sphere as an ideal type became a pillar in Habermas's theory of a two-tier system as evinced by his two volumes on communicative competence.

3.5 Concluding Remarks: Communicative Theory and Political Practice

The aim of the discussion so far is to throw some light on Habermas's recent thoughts on the liberal public sphere. It has already been noted above (3.4) how the examination of institutions of will-formation continues to be the centrepiece of Habermas's political philosophy. The theoretical outline of the liberal public sphere only becomes clear after his exegesis of the two tier-theory of society. Indeed it is impossible to understand his liberal public sphere without understanding his theory of communicative action. It is also obvious that the liberal public sphere straddles the grey area that acts as a buffer between the 'system' and the 'lifeworld'. Rooted in the dynamics of the lifeworld, the public sphere is also designed to sift through the systemic impulses and discursively align these interests with the

285 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 106–130. Interestingly, what becomes obvious here is that Habermas, on a certain, level agrees with the thematic arguments of the *Dialectic* on the reified effect of capitalist (or systemic) logic on human consciousness. So in actual fact, his scathing critique of the *Dialectic* was specifically directed against the sense of despair and defeatism that he attributes to its authors. This sense of melancholy, according to Habermas, drove Adorno and Horkheimer to commit the 'performative contradiction' that comes about as a consequence of (mis)reading sociality from the lenses tinted by Nietzschean motifs. This in the end had the disastrous effect, paradoxically Habermas alleges, of identifying reason with a 'will to power'.

286 For Habermas, the existence of non-linguistic steering media is attributed to the complex systemic differentiation occurring in modern societies. That is, non-linguistic media increasingly mediates between 'objective units' (read organization) within the 'system'–see *Theory of Communicative Action (II)*, p. 154.

287 There have been some ambiguities as to the exact designation of this public sphere. Peter Hohenadl, in 'Jürgen Habermas', refers to it as the post-bourgeois public sphere. Habermas himself terms it the political public sphere. Moreover he asserts that it has to be understood as an abstract. I am going to call it the 'Liberal Public Sphere' to differentiate it from the other forms of public spheres already discussed in this chapter. This designation is in view of Habermas's understanding of the thrust of Marx's ideology critique as a critique of the conditions that prevents the realisation of liberal aims and not of the aims themselves.
lifeworld's normative horizon. To be sure, the notion of public sphere has always been Habermas's way of restating the need to create a more democratic society and how this need is curtailed by the knowledge-power matrix in capitalist modernity. Habermas's discussion of the medieval public sphere, through which rulers 'represent their power “before” the people, instead of 'for the people', is, in this light, closely linked with his views on the philosophy of consciousness.288 On this reading, his turn to communication takes the form of an idealization of universal pragmatics within the public sphere. The abandonment of the historical form of the public sphere is achieved via the inherent telos that he sees as embedded within language-use. As such, he is of the view that the new public sphere does not have an empirical exemplification. Like Weber's 'ideal types', the political public sphere becomes 'real' only in the sense that it provides standards from which we can then measure the degree of democratisation in contemporary politics.289

The centrality of the liberal public sphere for Habermas's political philosophy cannot be overstated. Indeed he identifies the liberal public sphere as the last frontier from which we can philosophically and politically defend the viability of the project of modernity as well as its political manifestation: a democracy based on the ideal of undistorted communication.290 Indeed, from the very outset, the defining characteristics of the public sphere are linked to the impulses of the lifeworld; that is, to the premises that are normatively grounded in a universal pragmatics which acts as the rules of free dialogue, guiding it towards rational consensus.291 It becomes explicit to his audience very early on just how important this concept is in the examination of the dynamics of democracy in a terrain that is increasingly pervaded by the technological impulses and instrumental rationality of modern capitalism and bureaucratic power.

Epistemologically the intrusion of purposive-rational reason, whose operative site lies normally within ‘authoritarian and bureaucratic’ frameworks, into the ‘democratic and co-operative framework’ of the ‘public sphere’ defined by communicative rationality, leads to all sorts of social pathologies culminating in a crisis of legitimacy.292 This brings to light yet again the danger of conflating instrumental reason with communicative action. If we lose

288 Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere’, p.51.
290 I am by no means projecting a Utopia to Habermas’s political philosophy even though there is a definite utopian moment in his theorization.
291 Jürgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, pp. 1–5.
sight of the different logics inherent in the two modes of reasoning, we not only run the risk of adopting inappropriate criteria for discursive analysis, we also ‘neglect a valuable basis for the interpretation of historical development’. It becomes clearer, from this discussion, how the public sphere is seen as incorporating the emancipatory thrust of the lifeworld. It is also a reminder of how the lifeworld is the repertoire of processes that have not been colonised by systemic inclinations and as such becomes the basis for our hope for an emancipated society.

For Habermas, modern liberal democracy, embedded within a capitalist context, needs to retain the concept of the public sphere. Only this time, the sphere is to be revised to incorporate a more inclusive definition that takes into account the plurality of the social. As we have seen, this revision led Habermas to relocate his critical theory from the viewpoint defined by the ‘philosophy of consciousness’ onto the terrain of language itself. In so doing Habermas postulates the existence of a ‘Universal Pragmatics’ whose ethics ultimately lie in its rational orientation towards understanding and agreement. This is then to be guarded against oppressive impulses embedded within the dynamics of both neo-liberal politics and the capitalist economy, which have the potential to corrode or distort the discursive space of the public sphere. Indeed for him democracy can only be sustained if we salvage those ‘institutionally secured forms of general and public communication that deal with the practical question of how (humans) can want to live under the objective conditions of their ever expanding power of control’. By distorting communication, late capitalism contributed directly to the demise of the public sphere. In this way democracy under a capitalist setting governed by neo-liberal thinking, which is itself given impetus by positivist philosophy, has stopped listening to the voices of the ‘other’. The public sphere thus enables us to listen to alternative expressions of humanity. This is how democracy is sustained.

293 Ibid.
294 This ‘relocation’ was only done after the initial attempt to revise Critical theory highlighted the aporetic nature of subject-centred philosophy. This is easily discerned by the ‘flaws’ apparent in Knowledge and Human Interests. Habermas contends that ‘[R]eaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech’; see Theory of Communicative Action (1), p. 287.
295 The fate of democracy in a terrain defined by neo-liberalism is also examined (albeit in a way that strikes a common chord with postmodern impulses) in a combined work by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics. 2nd Edition, (London: Verso, 2001). These ‘post-Marxists’ tried to steer a path between what they see on the one hand as Habermas’ universal democratic ideal and on the other the nihilistic tendencies of Lyotard’s ‘plurality of incommensurable language games’. Norman Geras, in ‘Language, Truth and Justice’ New Left Review. No. 29 (1995) pp. 110–135, has provided a critique of this kind of relativism by noting that the absence of truth (since truth is only relative) also denotes the absence of justice.
premised in his scheme. By arguing in this vein, Habermas continues to uphold the critical role of rationality in the world.

*Between Facts and Norms* is perhaps the clearest exposition of the role of the public sphere in Habermas’s political philosophy.298 This work is an elaboration on ‘the specifically discursive aspects of [the] public sphere’.299 In this book, Habermas outlines a procedural model of democracy that is underlined by free and un-coerced deliberations. The presence of ‘procedures of discourse’ or ‘ideal speech situations’, which he regards as pivotal to the integrity of the public sphere, must be protected from the influences of non-linguistic steering mechanisms of the system. Only by protecting the public sphere can we salvage the positive gains accrued from Welfarism.300 Habermas is well aware of the problems standing in the way of an ideal speech situation devoid of power relations. To this end, he maintained that the ‘procedures of discourse’ in the lifeworld (and by extension in the public sphere) must be guarded from the encroachments of systemic impulses represented by logic of money and power. In fact he went so far as to suggest the ‘building up of restraining barriers for the exchanges between system and lifeworld and of building in sensors for the exchanges between lifeworld and system’.301 Indeed the importance of defending the autonomy of the lifeworld from being ‘colonised’ by the system underlies his belief that,

> [T]he systemic spell cast by the capitalist labour market over the life histories of those able to work, by the network of responsible, regulating, and supervising public authorities over the life forms of their clients, and by the now autonomous nuclear arms race over the life expectancy of people, cannot be broken by systems learning to function better. Rather impulses from the lifeworld must be able to enter into the self-steering of functional systems’.302

That is, the autonomy of the lifeworld from the system and, furthermore, the possibility that the systems can be ‘steered’ by decisions from the lifeworld, is a basic precondition of the realisation of the project of modernity. To paraphrase, the independence of the public sphere from the social, economic and political realities defined by state and the economy and

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300 It is apparent from here that Habermas still harbours some Marxian principles in assuming a modicum of economic equality between the interlocutors of the public sphere. In this way the Welfare State also had a positive impact on society apart from its retrogressive tendencies of trying to provide technical solutions, through its bureaucracy, to every social problem. Indeed, a deliberative model must concern itself with the ‘reflexive continuation of the welfare state’, see Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).
301 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 364.
302 ibid.
subjection of these realities to the will of the public sphere are requirements for any form of meaningful democracy. In a nutshell, what is required for undistorted communication in the lifeworld as well as in the public sphere is nothing less than the transformation of our social, economic and political status quo. His two-tier theory of society, as well as his concept of the public sphere, is both the philosophical and political expression of the conditions of possibility of the realisation of the promises of Enlightenment and the democratization of our modern capitalist societies.

This chapter has shown how Habermas's theory of communicative action is intrinsically linked to his political philosophy through the concept of the public sphere. As is noted in the last chapter, the theory of communicative action is, for him, the route out of the aporias surrounding the philosophy of consciousness. It tries to salvage the emancipatory potentials in society that it sees as being lost in the *Dialectic*’s radical critique of reason. In this way, Habermas remains loyal to the completion of the modernity project. The next chapter describes the other way out of subject-centred reason. This is the one that Adorno opts for in light of the reification inherent in capitalist modernity. For him, subject-centred reason must be undermined by the power of the subject itself. This is the underlying theme of *Negative Dialectics*. 
Chapter 4

In Defiance of the ‘aura’ of the Subject: Negative Dialectics and Transformative Praxis

4.0

This chapter lays out the main tenets of Theodor Adorno’s philosophy based on a negative dialectic and the practise of immanent critique that is associated with it. If we are to look at Adorno’s work in retrospect, one of the things that would become pertinent is the uniformity of the imperatives that inform his major works. Indeed writings like *Minima Moralia*, *Negative Dialectics*, *Against Epistemology*, *Jargon of Authenticity*, *Aesthetic Theory* as well as *Critical Models* in fact continue to grapple with the issues that were highlighted in the *Dialectic*. The collective aim of these works is to highlight the dynamics as well as the limits of identity thinking. Adorno hopes that in so doing, the outline of a more substantive reason, one that will liberate nonidentity from the yoke of conceptual thought, will finally come to light. Like the discussion of Habermas in the previous chapter, a major part of the discussion of Adorno will revolve specifically around the linkages between his philosophy of determinate negation and his political position vis-a-vis capitalist modernity.

The discussion starts with an adumbration of the contexts from which Adorno’s philosophical position emerged (4.1). This is then followed by some general remarks on the major bearings of his intellectual development and how these led to a radicalised critique of modern society (4.2). The discussion here revolves around Adorno’s critical appropriation and revision of conceptual tools of analysis, whether these are from Hegel, Marx or Lukács. The discussion will revisit some themes introduced in chapter two in order to develop a line of reasoning that will take into account the historical trajectory of his work up to the time he wrote his seminal texts. The chapter then goes on to a consideration of why Adorno failed to take the Habermasian exit - the communicative turn - from the philosophy of consciousness. This coverage is primarily by way of an analysis of Adorno’s philosophy of language (4.3). The major section of this chapter discusses the principles and dynamics of *Negative Dialectics* and the political implications that ensue from it (4.4). The next section (4.5) offers a more systematic defence of Adorno in light of Habermas’s allegation of a ‘performative contradiction’ inherent in any dialectic that espouses a radical critique of

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303 *Against Epistemology* was originally supposed to be included as part of *Negative Dialectics* but a decision was taken later against this – see Review by Gillian Rose, ‘Negative Dialectics’, pp. 598–599.

304 I am treating all his relevant works highlighted above as seminal.
reason. This is done in order to delve behind the reason(s) as to why the *Dialectic* would risk its own epistemological foundations by advocating a searing critique of reason itself. The Chapter concludes by recapping some of the main themes of Adorno's philosophy (4.6).

As a final note, all the discussions in this chapter will be oriented towards the general aspects of Adorno's oeuvre that have direct relevance to Habermas's model of the public sphere. In other words, the chapter will highlight the salient features of negative dialectics as a mode of critique that can be deployed later on as a basis from which to interrogate Habermas's political philosophy. It goes without saying that this selective appropriation of Adorno's work will necessitate omitting and glossing over other dimensions of his oeuvre.

4.1 The Development of a Radicalised Critique of Society

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno was born in 1903 of a Jewish father and Italian mother from whom, in the years of German fascism, he adopted the surname that he was to be known by for the rest of his life. He was exposed, as a child prodigy, to the Classical as well as the Idealist traditions that reigned within the German intellectual landscape of the time. By his teens, he was already immersed in a study of Immanuel Kant's first *Critique* under the tutelage of the renowned anti-idealist philosopher, Siegfried Kracauer. This initiation was to have a lifelong influence for Adorno. Indeed the works of Immanuel Kant form one of the pillars from which Adorno constructs his immanent critique of society. Kant's first *Critique* marks a defining moment in the history of Western philosophic tradition. It emerges within a context defined by the raging dispute between two schools of thought - rationalism and empiricism. According to Kant, the rationalists are quite correct in their insistence on a priori truth. However what is lacking in the rationalist argument is an adequate epistemological ground for this claim. Conversely, Kant thinks that the empiricists were correct in positing that experience is the only valid basis of knowledge, but he points out that 'empiricists neglect the 'formal' contribution which the mind makes to the empirical "content" it receives from sensation or "intuition"'.

One of the things that Adorno gleans from his study of Kant is the dissonance between real life conditions, or 'lived experiences', and the way these are articulated in scholarship. This chasm, Adorno insists, arises due to the irreducibility of a 'thing-in-itself', or 'nonidentity',

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307 Ibid.
to its concept. Indeed, it is from Kant's distinctions between \textit{phenomena} and \textit{noumena} that Adorno develops the idea of nonidentity as a substrate of thought which falls outside the process of conceptualization. It is also to the philosopher from Königsberg that Adorno turns to for an insight on the subject's role in the process of understanding.\footnote{For Kant's discussion on phenomena and noumena see \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965/1921) pp. 257–275.} For Kant, phenomena are tied to our understanding of an object through its representation by the concepts that are available to us: '[A]ppearances, so far as they are thought as objects according to the unity of the categories, are called phenomena'.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 265–266 (A 249).} Noumena on the other hand correspond to the dimension of the object that exists independently of sensibility; that is, an object as a 'thing-in-itself'.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} Knowledge then, according to this Kantian logic, becomes the product of the mediation that occurs between a (transcendental) subject and the object that lies within as well as outside of subjective consciousness. The Kantian insistence that all knowledge presupposes a concept had a crucial impact on Adorno's understanding of reason. It is Kant's conception of a thing-in-itself as the object of consciousness that becomes, for Adorno, the basis for the relations between the subject and object. Indeed Kant notes the interdependence of thought and its object in the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} when he proclaims that: 'Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind'.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 93. This maxim was to be echoed by Adorno later on in \textit{Negative Dialectics}, when critiquing Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology and the Existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard.} Even though Kant subsequently tries to resolve the antimony between subject and object by dissolving the concrete 'thing-in-itself' to its conceptual exemplification, Adorno came away with the certainty that the dignity of knowledge can only be sustained by an acute sensitivity to the respective inputs of the subject and the object in knowledge production. This sensitizing consciousness has, according to him, been missing from the philosophies of his time. In fact, how to achieve this new sensitivity became the defining inspiration of his life's work.

Like Kant, Adorno sees the subject as intrinsic to an understanding of the object. Following this line of thought, Adorno further posits the asymmetrical process that takes place in the mediation between subjective thought and its object.\footnote{Theodor Adorno, 'On Subject and Object' in \textit{Essential Frankfurt School Reader} (eds) by A. Arato, and E. Gebhardt, (New York: Continuum, 1982).} What he means by this is that in any process of mediation, the part of an object that is a thing-in-itself, or its nonidentity, is rendered superfluous (or suppressed) in an identitarian logic that seeks closure, as a matter of
principle, in the process of cognition. Like Kant, Adorno sees the presence of the nonidentity in an object as the condition of possibility of true knowledge. Without the nonidentity, ‘cognition would deteriorate into tautology; what is known would be knowledge itself’. In other words, the process of cognition, for Adorno, depends on two variables that are different yet, at the same moment, share a close affinity. That is, ‘knowledge’ is premised on the fact that there is an object that, in the process of cognition, becomes the focus of attention of a subject that is also an object at the same time. The duality of the subject allows it to ‘perceive’ the object, uneven as this perception may be. Idealism, for Adorno, does not recognize this duality and insists that the concept is a true representation of its object. In so doing, it wilfully erases the epistemological ‘distance’ between object and subjective thought and as such denies the ‘cavities between what things claim to be and what they are’. It is in this way, Adorno claims, that the object becomes a ‘prisoner’ of abstraction. Indeed, the specific way in which subjective thinking assumes total or absolute understanding of an object necessitates a process of closure, as it is in closure that the identity of the object is finally generated by the concept. For the Frankfurt Scholar, this closure epitomises what he terms identity thinking. The problem with Kant is that, in spite of his awareness of the limitations of the concept in ‘capturing’ its object, he nevertheless accords primacy to the subject in the first Critique. In this way, Kant’s transcendental idealism succumbs to identititarian logic.

As a necessary corrective to this ‘wilful’ forgetfulness on the part of the Kantian subject as to the true role of the object in knowledge production, Adorno accords ‘preponderance’ to the latter in all processes of mediation. The disjuncture between lived experiences and conceptual thought, that is, how real life conditions are made to disappear in conceptual categories, gradually became real for Adorno as he immersed himself in Kantian logic. Consequently he became acutely aware of the historicity of philosophical texts and how truth is not readily available given the distance between what is and its conceptual exemplification. This new sensitivity helped him to ‘hear’ what Martin Jay describes as:

the subtle expression of material, human suffering submerged in those writings, those irreducible cries of pain that idealist systems vainly sought, theodicy-like, to transfigure.

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313 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 184.
314 Ibid., p. 150.
316 Martin Jay Adorno, p. 25.
If the *Critique of Pure Reason* brought home, for Adorno, the realisation of the opacity of conceptual categories, then it was Hegel’s dialectical method that succinctly sums up the way in which conceptual thought ‘dissolves’ the particularistic makeup of the object. Convinced of the veracity of the insights embedded within Kantian philosophy as well as Hegelian dialectics, Adorno began developing a searing critique of society based on an ingenious appropriation of the works of the two philosophers that involves using them as counterfoils to each other’s respective positions. By this stage, he is convinced that the only valid form of critical thinking is via a dialectical method that is, in turn, sensitised to the idea of the nonidentity, that is, a dialectical thinking that is premised on the recognition of the incommensurate values that the subject and object bring into mediation. What Adorno specifically opposes in the Hegelian cognitive schemata is the way in which the dialectics accords primacy to the concept at the expense of the nonidentity of the object. Accordingly Hegel, in true idealist fashion, completely disregards the issue of the nonidentity, regarding instead that part of the object that falls outside the purview of conceptualisation as totally insignificant. In other words, Hegel sees nonidentity as an idle form of existence.\(^3\) In reply, Adorno posits, using Kant as a foil, that the Hegelian synthesis completely misses the point, that is, the World Spirit or the Absolute only emerges out of an act of ‘violence’ on the nonidentity. Hegelian dialectic, in this way, was only able to arrive at its conclusion by systematically eliminating all that would not conform to its conceptual gaze. In so doing, it posits a totality that, if interrogated by the Kantian idea of nonidentity, would show itself to be untrue.\(^4\) Hegel thus, for all his criticism of Kant, nevertheless retains a trace of Kantian idealism in his dialectics.

For Adorno, the fault ultimately lies in Hegel’s failure to follow the internal logic of his dialectical system. Adorno asserts that the logic of dialectics, that Hegel wilfully overrides, lies in its in-built imperative ‘to break the compulsion to achieve identity, and to break it by means of the energy stored up in that compulsion and congealed in its objectifications’.\(^5\)

That is, it is a system that seeks to break through the veneer of subjective thought or identititarian logic through the power of the subject itself. Hegel’s failure therefore stems from his overriding desire to achieve synthetic unity. As a result, he ‘could not admit the untruth in

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3\(^\text{18}\) Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.50.
3\(^\text{19}\) Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 157.
the compulsion to achieve identity'.\textsuperscript{320} Hegel, in other words, was not critical enough of the misrepresentation that comes about as a consequence of the inconsistencies between subjective thought and social reality. The crux of the disagreement with Hegel lies in the simple fact that Hegel’s logic generates identity at the cost of expunging nonidentity from conceptual determination. The Hegelian practise of negating a negation in the aim of reaching an ultimate reconciliation (conceptual identity) is spurious therefore. Once Hegel had critiqued the Kantian subject, substituting in its place a historical being, he failed to further analyse the ‘conditions of possibility’ of his own subject based on the subject’s own historicity. In other words the subject neither exists in a vacuum nor is it immutable but rather is conditioned by history itself. By this same token, the production of meanings takes place only within definite social parameters or normative horizons.

The legitimacy of a new critique of society must therefore rest on it eschewing any form of closure as is depicted by the Hegelian method. The Hegelian thesis of negation of the negation, leading to an affirmation (and identity), becomes in the hands of Adorno a determinate negation that always leads to further negation. In this way, the Frankfurt scholar hopes to show that the aspiration to achieve identity or harmony of perception in a social environment that is based on a misrepresentation of social reality, via a process of closure, is hollow. As Adorno himself puts it: ‘[T]o negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; it proves, rather, that the negation was not negative enough’.\textsuperscript{321} Instead of the emergence of identity, the new dialectics would remain ‘open’ in its attempt to give nonidentity its due in the course of becoming. The new knowledge that Adorno anticipates from this process is a radically different one. For instance, it is not a product of the rules and regulation of modern rationality but one that emerges in direct opposition to these rules. Yet at the same time the new understanding remains steadfast in its focus on its object of cognition, realising that without it knowledge becomes tautological. Hence a negative dialectics with a new sensibility is to be based on a:

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thinking that approaches its objects openly, rigorously, and on the basis of progressive knowledge [and] is also free towards its objects in the sense that it refuses to have rules prescribed on it by organised knowledge'.\textsuperscript{322}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{320} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{321} ibid., pp. 159–160.  
Adorno came under the influence of Marxism by way of Lukács.\(^{323}\) The publication of *History and Class Consciousness* and its adumbration of how bourgeois consciousness is rooted in the commodity principle was a watershed moment in his career as a materialist philosopher.\(^{324}\) For Adorno, Lukács' aims were similar to what Schoenberg's music sought to unveil. This is in the way the composer's musical pieces were seen as signs of his refusal to validate accepted forms of compositions based on the demands of the culture industry. Adorno is, indeed, of the view that Schoenberg's compositions are the musical equivalents of a form of analysis that is informed by socialist doctrines current in Germany at the time. Schoenberg's musical pieces, especially his controversial 'new music', were thus interpreted by Adorno as a form of resistance to 'the bourgeois principle of tonality ... exposing its claims to naturalness in the same way that dialectical thought undermined the pseudonaturalism of bourgeois economics'.\(^{325}\) This is to say that, for Adorno, Schoenberg's atonal music disrupts 'the collective continuity' of administered music.\(^{326}\) Hence it was at this early juncture that Adorno grasps the implications of the bourgeois principle of standardisation and how this presumes the exchange principle. Later on, this understanding would form the backbone of his critique of modern life-forms. In fact the interfacing of his training in philosophy and music left an indelible imprint on his major works later on.

The impact of Lukács on Adorno cannot be understated as *History and Class Consciousness* made clear, for Adorno, the affinities between objective reality and the 'commodity form' in bourgeois society. Just as the commodity form is based on an unequal and dubious exchange between labour and capital, so is objective reality dubiously constructed by the internal logic of conceptual thought itself. Harking back to a Hegelian theme, Adorno restates how identity thinking presupposes a correspondence theory of truth; that is, the logic of identitarian thought works on the supposition that the concept and its object are in total harmony. The superimposition of this principle onto the dynamics of modern exchange society, epitomised by the commodity principle, enables idealism to claim that what exists is in fact rational.\(^{327}\)

Then using Kant, again as a counterfoil, Adorno goes on to argue that, ironically, it is the

\(^{323}\) Marx had 'inverted' Hegel’s dialectical method giving it a materialist orientation.


\(^{325}\) Martin Jay, *Adorno*, p. 27.


\(^{327}\) Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 10.
way in which the commodity/exchange principle currently structures capitalist societies that renders the correspondence theorem suspect. That is, 'the concept cannot identify its true object.' This view subsequently became the basis of his argument that bourgeois society is an irrational social form that gives rise to a false reality. However it was the specific way in which Lukács equates capitalist reality with reification that enables Adorno to draw a clear link between identity thinking and reified consciousness. In other words identity thinking, rooted in the correspondence theory of truth, and reified consciousness, patterned by the commodity exchange principle, both generate the same reifying effect. The first contributes to cognitive paralysis in the field of epistemology, the second to the ossification of relations in bourgeois society. As such they share close affinity in the specific sense that they both suppress, through a process of abstraction, what they cannot account for.

Adorno's critique of Enlightenment's conceptual thought revolves around its claim that it can provide summary and true definitions of social reality. He argues that this claim, when viewed from the concept of nonidentity, is spurious. In fact, through its suppression of the nonidentity of the object -- that element that lies outside all conceptualisations -- conceptual thought, in turn, becomes totalising. It pretends, therefore, that 'nothing' lies outside its conceptual gaze. This critique in the area of epistemology finds its concrete exemplification in the capitalist order. As Jarvis pointed out, for Adorno:

\[\text{Just as the motto of 'enlightened' thought is that 'nothing shall remain outside', that nothing can be taken as a limit to thought, so the motto of what Adorno often refers to as 'exchange society' is that nothing shall remain outside it, that no value shall resist commensurability with exchange value.}\]

Identitarian logic, in other words, levels out the differences between unlike things. The levelling of incommensurate values in modern society by identity thinking is quintessentially reflected in the principle of commodity exchange. Needless to say that this was a Marxian insight, gleaned from Lukácsian lenses, on the injustice that lies at the heart of free and fair exchange in capitalist societies.

Like Hegel and Marx before him, Adorno judiciously appropriates elements of a work by an author while at the same time disregarding other parts. This he did also with History and Class Consciousness. In view of it, Adorno argues that the dialectics of Marx, as defined by Lukács, are basically sound as a critical method of comprehending societal dynamics. He

\[328\] Gillian Rose, The Melancholy Science, p. 44.


101
however qualifies this support by rejecting both Lukács’s Marxian eschatology as well as his ‘concept of the proletariat as the subject-object of that process’. Furthermore, he does not concur with Marx’s insistence that social repression is but an epiphenomenon of the conflict that is embedded within the economic structure of society. Adorno offers instead an anthropocentric account of the emergence of domination stemming from a ‘primal history of subjectivity’ itself. What Adorno means by this is that social domination emerged as a mechanism of self-preservation in light of the vagaries of nature and that this repression of ‘outer nature’ for survival necessitated the suppression of ‘inner nature’ also. This was the main theme of the first excursus in the Dialectic. Consequently, he points out, Marx and Engels went astray in fusing political power to economic conditions, as if a change in the latter will automatically usher in wholesale changes in the former. He pointed to the rise of the Soviet Union as having put paid to that erroneous perception. Indeed for him, the story of domination is as old as subjective consciousness itself.

The culmination of these various and disparate influences and insights into the nature of social reality and the specific ways in which we have come to ‘know’ about it became the cornerstone of his negative dialectics. The next section offers a more thorough discussion of this.

4.2 Negative Dialectics as a ‘Logic of Disintegration’.

It is clear from above that the notion of a negative dialectics is the culmination of Adorno’s critical engagement with disparate philosophical traditions. From Kant and Hegel, Adorno sees how the primacy of conceptual thought actually fails to do justice to the object in the sense that the identity of the object is obtained at the cost of misrepresenting it. This critical hermeneutic engagement was later extended to another tradition of thought that was in currency in Germany at the time, one that shares some basic misgivings with Adorno on the inadequacy of concepts to depict their objects accurately. This tradition is defined by the fundamental ontology of Heidegger.

330 Susan Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, p. 28.
331 Peter Dews, observed that, ‘Adorno employs his ‘primal history of subjectivity’ in order to develop searching interpretations of social, cultural, and aesthetic phenomena, showing how the dominance of identity in the form of commodity exchange, and the reification to which it gives rise, shape all aspects of modern capitalist society’ – See The Idea of Evil, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) p.194.
332 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, pp. 321–323.
Adorno’s critique of Heidegger laments how he attempts to do away with the subject altogether in favour of a direct appeal to the object. In so doing, Adorno alleges that fundamental ontology refuses to acknowledge the social nature of objects.333 Granted that, in agreement with Heidegger, there is an object that is beyond conceptualisation, this object, for Adorno, is only understood when it is brought under the prism of conceptual thought. Therefore there is no way we can bypass the mediation of the concept by a direct appeal to the object.334 By naively accepting what is given, Adorno argues, fundamental ontology engenders passivity on the part of the subject to an already a priori truth, forgetting in the process that knowledge is already mediated. As he states in Negative Dialectics:

When men are forbidden to think, their thinking sanctions what simply exists. The genuinely critical need of thought to awaken from the cultural phantasmagoria is trapped, channelled, steered into the wrong consciousness.335

The point that Adorno makes here is two-fold. Firstly, the object is incoherent without the subject. That is, it needs the subject to make itself known. Yet by enlisting the subject to its cause, the object at the same time highlights the inadequacies of subjective thought in the process of cognition. In other words, it is only in this process of giving expression to the ‘object’ that the object (specifically the nonidentity) in turn reminds the subject of its foibles.

A similar problem, Adorno notes, besets existential philosophies that owe their origins to Kierkegaard. Adorno argues that while Kierkegaard may be right in his critique of Hegel’s theory of correspondence, he nevertheless falls into the same trap as Hegel. That is, Kierkegaard’s existentialism with its emphasis on subjective particularism offers, in Jay’s words, a pseudo-reconciliation of real social contradictions by giving ontological significance only to the spiritualized subject. This unwarranted reconciliation thus also produced an identity theory despite itself, because it posited an object-less dialectic of pure subjectivity.336

Kierkegaard and Heidegger therefore occupy opposite poles of the epistemological matrix: radical subjectivism and radical objectivism respectively. One falls prey to unmediated materialism (Heidegger), the other (Kierkegaard) to idealism unbound. This, Adorno posits has been the problem besetting thinking since the Copernican revolution in philosophy. That is, rhetoric aside, there is a tendency within idealists, on one hand, and exponents of

333 ibid, p. 84.
334 Theodor Adorno, Critical Models, p. 11.
335 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 85.
ontology, on the other, to fall into an either/or divide. Both forms of thought, in Adorno’s view, are guilty of a ‘transcendental delusion’.337

In contrast, Adorno maintains that what differentiates Critical theory from ontological, existential as well as idealist philosophies is its specific warrant:

The task of criticizing ideology is to judge the subjective and objective shares and their dynamics. It is to deny the false objectivity of concept fetishism by reducing it to the social subject, and to deny false subjectivity, the sometimes unrecognizably veiled claim that all being lies in the mind.338

This argument is derived from Kant’s explication on the link between concepts and their objects.339 By doing so, Adorno highlights how the subject and its object are irrevocably tied to each other in such a way that absolute primacy can be given to neither. Following from this Adorno insists that there is a need to dismantle any form of hierarchy between subject and object in thinking processes. Adorno realises quite well that the act of bringing the object under the gaze of conceptual thought gives rise to another problem. That is, in order to render it sensible to the mind, conceptual thought (or identity thinking) subsumes the peculiarity of the object (specifically, its nonidentity) under the aegis of a cognitive matrix that only employs generalised concepts in order to understand things. The objective nature of ‘reality’, in other words, is always subsumed under its subjective or conceptual component. It is this problematic of unequal power relations between a subject and its object that was highlighted in ‘Why Still Philosophy?’ and the reason behind the Frankfurt scholar’s attempt to seek redress by probing into the possibility of disavowing the positive affirmation that is at the root of Hegelian idealist philosophy.

Adorno starts by defining his dialectic as the ‘logic of disintegration’. By this he means that negative dialectics ‘seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits’ as could be evinced from its use in the hands of Plato to the positive synthesis of contradictions found in Hegelian thought, ‘without reducing its determinacy’.340 In other words, it is to be the nemesis of all forms of idealism and identitarian logic, which presume a unity between subject and object –

338 ibid, pp. 197–198.
339 Indeed Kant observes the intrinsic nature of this relationship by noting that ‘Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’ – See *Critique of Pure reason*, p. 93.
a unity that arises out of suppressing either the subjective or objective moments of thought. In a critique of the idealism of Husserl, Adorno notes:

that the sphere of the factual and the sphere of thought are involved in such a way that any attempt to separate them altogether and to reduce the world to either of these principles is necessarily doomed to failure.

In contrast to this, 'many philosophies ... reduce subject to object or vice versa and thereby proclaim false identities'. Indeed he sardonically observed that all philosophies that engage themselves in this way come 'in some way or other into the position of Münchhausen, who tried to drag himself out of the swamp by his own pigtail'.

David Held sums this up by observing that the new order, espoused by Adorno, is one where the

subject and object are constituted by one another but are irreducible to each other – neither can be wholly subsumed by the other. They are internally related, inter-dependent structures within which the cognitive process unfolds.

Thus Adorno’s movement away from a subject-centred philosophy is to be understood in the specific way in which subject and object come together in the act of cognition. For him, the whole idea is to move beyond the idea of Critical Theory as just a distinct way of theorisation to a ‘way of knowing’ or acquiring knowledge that has within itself the conditions of its own immanent critique. This way of ‘knowing’ is opposed to science which, for Adorno, is non-reflexive in the sense that it cannot mount a critique against itself from within. The non-reflexivity of science robs it of the ability to acknowledge its own limitations, which in turns paves the way for its belief in the self-reinforcing myth that nothing is outside its ambit. This is the context from which the authors of the Dialectic alleged that myth has become enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology.

To be sure, the yearning for a new sensitivity to the object in processes of cognition is driven by the conviction that there is an incomplete or indeterminate moment in identity thinking, or to paraphrase, there is a discrepancy between the ‘object’ and its ‘concept’. This component of indeterminacy (discrepancy) is wilfully ignored in our quest for total mastery of the world.
around us. In doing so, the ‘un-conceptualised’ component of an object, the nonidentity, is undermined for the sake of understanding. The suppression of the nonidentity, for Adorno, has been the critical component of humanity’s quest for ‘self-preservation. Therein lies the problem for Adorno, for self-preservation becomes oxymoronic in the sense that it is synonymous with the dehumanisation of the species, the destructions of enclaves of sociality leading ultimately to a wrong kind of life.

In order to address this problem, Adorno advocates a way of thought that seeks to nullify the asymmetrical power relationship that takes place in any mediation between the concept and its object. This will entail a new way of cognisance that valorises the interdependence of the subject (that stands for conceptual thought) and the object. For him, as long as we maintain the integrity of both and do not reduce one to the other, we are engaging in what he terms ‘nonidentity thinking’. The salvaging of this new sensitivity towards nonidentity is at the heart of Negative Dialectics. Its novelty lies in its attempt to subvert the dynamics of organised knowledge, substituting in its stead a new polyvalence based on a constellation of ideas that surrounds the object that seeks to be recognised. Adorno hopes, in this way, to tackle the ‘fallacies of subjectivism’, which supposes that the world is produced by the subjects’ concepts; that objects more or less dissolve into their conceptual exemplifications or its antithetical mirror image, fundamental ontology.

Adorno’s negative dialectics helps to undermine the hegemonic position of conceptual thought by highlighting its inadequacy in describing the object. It is this enlightening aspect that negative dialectics, as a mode of thought, brings to reason. Ultimately negative dialectics aims to facilitate the proper realignment of the power relationship between the subject and its object giving rise to a dialectical method that will aid in, to cite Jameson’s somewhat flamboyant expression, ‘the detection of the absent presence of totality within the aporias of consciousness’.

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347 See Yvonne Sherrat Continental Philosophy of Social Science: Hermeneutics, Genealogy and Critical Theory from Greece to the Twenty First Century, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and David Held, Introduction to Critical Theory, as well as the Dialectic for this argument.

348 For an overview of Adorno’s discussion on the differences between Identity and Nonidentity thinking see Negative Dialectics, pp. 54–55.

349 ‘Fallacies of subjectivism’ is a term that I have borrowed from David Held, Introduction to Critical Theory, p. 202. The term is suggestive of the affinities that Adorno have with Nietzsche and by extension, the poststructuralists. The specific differences between Adorno and the poststructuralists are well documented by Peter Dews, Logics of Disintegration.

4.2.1 Negative Dialectics as an Ontology of the false state of affairs.

Negative Dialectics then, in a tangible sense, is an epitaph to the failures of the assumptions, both historical and epistemological, that are infused within the dialectics of Hegel and Marx. Both, for instance, are driven by a belief in the ‘historical directionality’ of progress. For the former, the culmination of this march of history is epitomized by the emergence of the world spirit or absolute, while the latter’s teleology infused within his materialistic inversion of the Hegelian dialectics meant the inevitable march of society towards a communist epoch. Indeed what enables this utopian speculative moment in both Hegel and Marx is the synthetic element embedded within their respective dialectics.

As its point of departure Negative Dialectics eschews the utopian speculative moment that arises out of a ‘forced’ synthesis. The abandonment of the synthesis, in both its idealist and materialist forms, is justified by Adorno on two grounds – epistemological and historical. Epistemologically, synthesis perpetuates the abstraction that befalls all conceptual thinking: an abstraction that glosses over the existence of what cannot be accounted for by conceptual language. What we get, consequently, is an ambivalent social reality that misconstrues the true nature of our social existence. Historically, the atrocities of the Second World War accompanied by the failures of Marxist attempts at social engineering convinced Adorno that the basic arguments of his magnum opus, first outlined in the Dialectic, are sound. Put another way, the concentration camps of the Second World War brought home to Adorno the collusion between technological progress and human barbarity. This was further underscored by the emergence of an increasingly oppressive form of government in the USSR under Stalin. Cumulatively these developments persuaded him that, in contrast to Hegelian and Marxian convictions and eschatologies, the fate of humanity is far from being decided. These failures imply that there is no guarantee that the future of society and its survival is assured. In fact social regression seems to confirm historical trends. As he laconically puts it, ‘[N]o universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb’.351

Yet it is precisely because of these failures that philosophy, he argues, must continue. In other words philosophy lives on because its philosophical realisation in history, forecast by

Marx to accompany the onset of communism, has been thwarted. To continue however this time around, philosophy must shed itself any illusions of a utopian ending. It must therefore readily accept the inescapable fact that humanity, as a whole, can as easily slide into an abyss as liberate itself. This is the ‘new’ dialectic it must embrace; a more reflective and less illusionary one. That is, negative dialectics must constantly engage with the limitation of conceptual language that it employs and, following this, forgo any pretension that utopia is a mirror image of philosophy itself. It is in this new way that negative dialectics, as a system of thought, must understand itself and its role. In eschewing all forms of synthesis, it must also offer a compelling critique of contemporary society and accompanying life-forms in light of the failure ‘to change the world’. As such, it must be considered as a modality of thought that keeps in mind the idea of the nonidentity. As a mode of thought, it says no more, ‘than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder ... It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived’. This untruth finds social expression in the bourgeois socio-economic order. The clearest example of this is the existence of the damaged life-form that seems to be a natural consequence of capitalism. The existence of bourgeois society, therefore, is a reflection of the dominant epistemological matrix in vogue today. An appraisal of one is also an evaluation of the other. A critique therefore of dominant knowledge structures is also at the same time, for Adorno, an indictment of the lives we are being forced to live within an ambivalent social reality. A dialectics that aims to be taken seriously must, in the face of this awareness, continuously strive to show the disparity between what is and what ought to be. It becomes, in this way, an ontology of the dismal state of things.

4.2.2 A hermeneutic of a failed form of Life.

The seed of Adorno’s unrelenting critique of capitalism and its reified effects on subjectivities was quite evident in his inaugural lecture at Frankfurt in 1931. On this occasion he outlined his theoretical framework as one that revolves around an analysis of capitalism as a ‘hermeneutic of a failed form of life’. Capitalism, for Adorno, gives rise to a damaged

352 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 3.
353 Ibid.
354 Ibid.
355 Ibid., p. 5
356 Ibid.
357 Axel Honneth, 'A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life', pp. 50–64.
life-form: a form that is mutilated due to the process of standardisation that ensues from the exchange principle. Indeed capitalist exchange’s relationship to ‘particularity’ is similar to the relationship that identitarian thought has with nonidentity; that is, they both posit a ‘standard’ that is only possible through a wilful suppression of what they cannot account for. For commodities, what cannot be accounted for by the principle of exchange, and is thus suppressed during trade, is the qualitative difference that is inherent within them. In a similar vein, identitarian thought glosses over what cannot be accounted for by its concepts.\textsuperscript{358} The logical consequence of this process is that ‘particularity’ is expunged from the concept of person. Adorno argues that in the face of this people are treated exactly like the commodities that they produce: the latter are reduced to their exchange values while the former becomes exclusively associated with labour power.\textsuperscript{359} The reduction of both to a point where they could be traded with impunity is enabled by the erasure of their exclusive core. Treated like the commodities that we produce means that the same market laws that ensures trade in bourgeois society become the mainstay of our thought processes and vice versa. In this way domination is entrenched in society.

It is perhaps worth repeating at this point that Adorno does not see capitalism as a novel form of domination. His ruminations on the subject can be traced back to the \textit{Dialectic} where he, together with Horkheimer, argued that the history of repression harkens back to the ‘primal history of subjectivities’. Repression, therefore, is not an exclusive feature of capitalist society but is embedded within the psyche of the human mind ever since the emergence of self-consciousness. The thing that underpins this ‘false state of affairs’ is the epistemological framework on which it is grounded. The common thread that runs through all periods of history and their corresponding forms of life is the conviction that mastering the unknown, the exotic, the particular, the nonidentity is a pre-condition to life itself. In other words, the mindset that ruled ever since humans became conscious of themselves and of their surroundings has not changed at all. What has changed is our ever increasing ability to manipulate nature (both inner and outer nature) to do our bidding. As such, capitalism signifies a new plateau in the reign of tyranny. It also becomes an explanatory schema of why there is still so much poverty in a society that has the technological expertise to wipe it away from the face of the earth. The crux of the argument put forward by Adorno in relation to the failed form of life in capitalist society is that it is but one form of historical life that has

\textsuperscript{358} This has been adequately covered in the discussions on Adorno’s Kantian heritage.

\textsuperscript{359} This is why they complained about how Marx envisioned the world to be a giant work house – for a discussion see \textit{Negative Dialectics}, p. 206.
been defined by identity thinking. This is to say that the problem is not capitalism per se but what it represents – the intertwinement of suppressive positivist and idealist tendencies.

**4.2.3 Evaluating ‘wrong’ forms of life.**

The Hegelian premises of Adorno’s dialectics allow him to offer a critique of a truncated form of reason that is simultaneously a critique of society. The precept that the critique of one is also an indictment of the other is one that resonates throughout the works of the Frankfurt School in that period. Just as reason has been colonised by identity-thinking and utilitarianism so has society succumbed to the ideological twinning of the philosophies of idealism and positivism. For Adorno, positivism harkens back to idealism in the way that it expresses its conservativism – by imagining nothing exists outside itself. Therefore the real is rational also for positivism. Adorno argues that the Hegelian identification of ‘rational’ and ‘real’ has grave consequences on the ability of immanent critique to highlight the contradictions between what ‘is’ in society and what it ‘ought’ to be. Yet if history has been marked by the long march of failed life-forms in one guise or another, how then can we differentiate between forms of life or even argue that the life we are currently living is a failure? In other words, how can we know, given that there is no distinction between is and ought, that a ‘form of life’ is failing or wrong?

The answer, for Adorno, lies in a critical evaluation of what currently ‘exists’ in society. Take for instance the implicit presence of suffering. The fact that suffering in its many forms continue to exist in a world that has at its disposal the means of eradicating most of the root causes of these phenomena, is indicative that all is not as it should be: ‘[T]he smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering’. To be sure, ‘suffering’ here is not meant to be taken literally as an empirically observable phenomenon or linguistically articulated experience, as this would mean that suffering is bound by its specific contexts. What Adorno has in mind is far more ambitious. In entwining the notion of suffering with the deformity in our capacity to reason, he posits a context-transcending concept of suffering that would be applicable everywhere at all times. As Honneth succinctly puts it, the concept of suffering, for Adorno,

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is 'transcendentally presupposed everywhere there is the justified suspicion that human beings experience a loss of their self-realisation and happiness through the restriction of their rational capacities'.

This loss is felt physically as well as mentally, since thought has a somatic character. Following Freud, Adorno thinks that the presence of suffering does not only mean that we are living in a form of life that has failed us. The existence of suffering also anticipates resistance against it: '[T]he physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different'. The question that follows in light of this is: at what level is resistance to the suffering around us possible?

Adorno is not convinced that it is possible to act autonomously in the current climate in light of the fact that at 'countless moments external – notably social – reality evade the decisions designated by the words “will” and “freedom”'. This observation is important in a number of ways. First by admitting the influence of external reality on the supposed autonomy of the subject, Adorno is in fact disputing the validity of Kant's transcendental subject. Instead he holds that the subject is an empirical as well as a historical being. This means that just as we actively set out to change the conditions of our existence, these same historical conditions, to a certain extent, determine the parameters in which this can be done. This insight can be traced back to Marx and his observation in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte to the effect that both autonomy and history are the basic ingredients of social change, his insistence that the freedom of humanity are circumscribed by the historical circumstances that it finds itself in. Secondly, the extent of historical or structural determination in bourgeois society effectively robs the concepts of 'will' and 'freedom' of any substance. It is because of the reified effects of capital and its institutions that humans have been reduced 'more and more to the status of functions'. True and meaningful resistance, therefore can only be achieved at on the level of the species. Adorno's call then is a universal call to arms, for solidarity against a failed form of life.

One of the criticisms levelled against Adorno's attempt at resisting and changing the status quo stems from his perceived lack of appreciation of the epistemological grounds from which

362 Axel Honneth, 'A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life', p. 60.
363 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 203. This is similar to Freud's insistence that a psychological neurosis is, by its very nature, also a call for 'recovery' or deliverance.
364 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 213.
366 Theodor Adorno, History and Freedom, p. 5.
367 Habermas held similar views about the need to recover from suffering in Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 214, 220. That is, before his turn to a universal pragmatics.
he makes the attempt. Habermas, for instance, deplores the way in which Adorno steadfastly held on to the philosophy of consciousness while simultaneously launching a radical critique against it. He does not agree, therefore, with Adorno that the contradictions embedded within a negative dialectics stem from the conflicts that are there in society itself. For Habermas, Adorno’s problems stem from not having an adequate appreciation of language and how this could have saved him from making the philosophical and analytical mistakes that he did. To be sure the route that was supposedly not taken by Adorno was actually one that the first generation Frankfurt scholar had travelled although not in the way Habermas had in mind. This is the theme of the next section.

4.3 ‘The Road not taken': Adorno’s conception of language

The parameters of Adorno’s theory of language can be discerned from his polemical engagement with other currents of thought in Europe (particularly in Vienna and Germany) at the turn of the last century. Hohendahl notes for instance that Lukács’ critique of linguistic reification in *History and Class Consciousness* impacted greatly on Adorno’s view on language. Benjamin’s influence on Adorno’s conception of language, moreover, cannot be overstated as he played a prominent role in sensitizing Adorno to the problems besetting philosophy and aesthetics as well as the problematic nature of language as a medium of truth. For Adorno, language, as a medium of conceptual thought, is both disabling and enabling. It is disabling in the sense that the concepts it uses to articulate reality conjures up a social ‘whole’ that is false. Yet it is also enabling due to the fact that it is exclusively through language that we are able to have an account of the nature of our social reality. The problem of a language-based reason for Adorno is intrinsic to the properties of language itself vis-à-vis the articulation of reality. Granted that without language, reason cannot be deployed, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind the way in which language and reality are dialectically entwined. Both show up the inadequacy of the other. In this paradoxical way, language enables and simultaneously limits the capacity of reason to grasp reality. Adorno maintains that language is not only poorer than the reality it strives to express but also more.

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368 See chapter 3 for an account of the ‘performative contradiction’ in Adorno’s critique.
370 Susan Buck-Mors, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 21. Buck-Mors further observes that Benjamin’s influence is such that by the close of the 1920s, Adorno’s pieces were practically littered with the lexicons developed by his friend.
Language is more in the sense that it has words that do not have empirical exemplifications such as verbs and grammar. However, it is also poorer in the sense that it inevitably reverts to generalized abstractions when seeking to represent reality. Reaffirming this lesser sense of language, Müller remarks:

"It is well known, for example, that it is possible to perceive many more colours than can be articulated in language. One must only try to give a precise description of the rich palette of the fall foliage in order to experience, in a flash, the poverty of language".  

Adorno highlights this conceptual problematic in his discussion of nonidentity. For him dialectics advances the view that abstraction is the inevitable way in which language suppresses the facticity or concreteness of the object, while in the same breath he insists on the indispensability of language itself in thought.

The dialectical way in which he approaches language is nowhere more succinct in Negative Dialectics than in the section on Heidegger. According to Adorno, fundamental ontology simplistically accords perception an unjustifiable cognitive status. Heidegger does this via a direct appeal to the 'thing' itself by means of 'intellectual intuition'. In other words, intellectual intuition as an intuitive process is supposed to be the means by which language is bypassed on our way to grasping 'being' in its immediacy. Truth, for Heidegger, is therefore self-disclosing. On the contrary, Adorno maintains that there can neither be any 'direct' appeal to things nor are things self-evident. A disingenious acceptance of what is given without accepting the mediated nature of 'being' engenders a passivity on the part of the subject to an already pre-given truth. This makes Heidegger's position closer, ironically, to the positive sciences and against speculative thought or metaphysics. Against Heidegger, Adorno insists that any form of reality is already mediated. In pointing out the disparity between language and reality, Negative Dialectics reminds us of this. For Adorno, all attempts at grasping reality that bypass language are doomed, for they assume that 'legitimate thinking is nothing other than the ability to perceive it'. As such, thinking without the use of concepts, and therefore language, cannot call itself thinking at all. Hence Adorno's philosophy of language, like thought itself, rests on the ambivalent ground

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371 Another example would be the word 'unicorn' – it depicts something in the mind without that something manifesting itself empirically.
372 Harro Müller 'Mimetic Rationality: Adorno's Project of a Language of Philosophy', New German Critique Vol. 36 No. 3 (Fall 2009) p. 95.
374 Theodor Adorno, Critical Models, pp. 8–9.
376 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 98.
that it is at the same time necessary although inadequate. This is where, nonidentity, once again, plays a crucial role.

Nonidentity, for Adorno, is a constant reminder of the asymmetrical nature of the mediation between conceptual language and reality. Language allows us to grasp things by its never ending quest ‘to express the inexpressible’. In other words, the strength and weakness of language in the grounding of understanding are inseparable. The realisation that language lends voice to the object, even though it may not be authentic, is enough to give us hope for a future where the ‘violence’ and deception that lies at the heart of the relationship between language and its object would be no more. Adorno thus argues that one cannot escape the language of subject-centred philosophy. One must rather use this language to break the hegemony of the concept over its object. This is what he means by ‘using reason to transcend itself’. It is this conviction that the utopian moment in Adorno becomes illuminated. It suggests that for language to truly reflect what it tries to represent, a total transformation of society is warranted. This kernel of truth, for Adorno, is only rendered implicit through a dialectical approach that will throw light on the shortcomings of reason and its medium, language. In light of this, Adorno puts forward the idea of a dialectical consciousness, one that uses the conceptual language of philosophy to delineate truth, whilst simultaneously realising that its own account of truth remains inadequate due to the sediment within the object that falls outside conceptualisation itself. Hohendahl aptly describes this ambivalence to language by noting that, for Adorno, language is both, ‘inadequate and indispensable’. The problem besetting language as a medium of thought is comprehensively addressed in Adorno’s various writings, although he has not written exclusively on the subject per se. But even ‘less-philosophically oriented’ works such as Aesthetic Theory contains an outline of his approach to a philosophy of language. In fact it is here that the tension between (conceptual) language and truth is worked out more substantively. For Adorno, it is in the explication of works of art that the limitation of philosophical language is thrown into sharp relief. In other words, the problematic relationship between subject and object in epistemology comes across in aesthetics as the problem of articulating the truth content of individual art works. What this means is that works of art, for Adorno, are quite pivotal to philosophy, since they serve as incessant reminders to conceptual language of its inadequacies. It is through this conviction that the utopian moment in Adorno becomes illuminated.

378 Peter Hohendahl, Prismatic Thought, p. 221.
illuminated, because it suggests that for language to truly reflect what it tries to represent, a total transformation of society is warranted. This kernel of truth, for Adorno, is only rendered explicit through a dialectical approach that will throw light on the shortcomings of reason and its medium, language. The alternative provided by Heidegger, therefore, of appealing directly to an ‘immediate access to transcendence’ would be guilty of a form of delusion that is based on an unmediated materialism.\textsuperscript{380}

Thus from an Adornian point of view, the primacy of language in communicative reason is spurious. For it connotes a subtle movement towards the search for ‘first principles’ which has been the plague of the more influential western philosophical traditions. Language-based consensus, when viewed from an Adornian perspective, exhibits the properties of a ‘first’, or founding principle, in the way it involves the adoption of rational validity claims on which consensus rests. Indeed whether this claim is an amalgamation of different validity claims put forward during contestations or otherwise is beside the point. By insisting on a language-centred reason, Habermas seems to have fallen prey to the search for first principles. This is truly ironic in the case of Habermas, since he saw language as the ‘exit’ from the aporias of subject-centred reason.\textsuperscript{381}

Given the insufficiency of conceptual language to present truth in his own account of subject-object mediation, Adorno introduces a matrix that will allow the mediation between language and reality in such a way that both the truth and falsity of language is thrown into sharp relief in the process. This he does by the idea of ‘constellational thought’ and it is to this we will turn to next.

4.4 The Dynamics of Negative Dialectics: the idea of Constellations.

Susan Buck-Morss notes that Adorno’s primary aim in constructing constellations is ‘to discover the truth of the social totality (which can never be experienced in itself) as it quite literally appeared within the object in a particular configuration’.\textsuperscript{382} In other words, constellations or what Benjamin refers to as ‘historical images’, offer a way of conceiving the nonidentity together with its conceptual other, thus, enabling a peek into a moment of an


\textsuperscript{381} Thomas McCarthy notes in his introduction to the \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity} that the key to understanding Habermas lies ‘...in his rejection of the “paradigm of consciousness” and its associated “philosophy of the subject” in favour of the through-and-through intersubjectivist paradigm of “communicative action”’—see Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, p. x.

\textsuperscript{382} Susan Buck-Morss, \textit{The Origin of Negative Dialectics}, p. 96.
ever-changing totality. This is done in the full knowledge that the construction of these
dialectical images involves the continuous ‘regrouping’ of the constitutive elements of
phenomena in the ‘renewed attempt to picture the essence of society’.\footnote{Ibid.} Constellations do
not present themselves as texts to be read but as codes (ciphers) of social reality that need to
be deciphered. In this way Adorno distinguishes himself from the philosophers of the
hermeneutic school, such as Gadamer, who work from the supposition that the meanings
behind texts are stable and need only to be uncovered.

Adorno’s thinking in terms of ‘constellations’ is specifically attributed to Benjamin’s *Origin
of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin starts this work by drawing a distinction between truth
and knowledge. For him truth is a unity of essences (or ‘ideas’) while knowledge is a product
of conceptual unity.\footnote{Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne, (New York: Verso,
1998) p. 30.} Furthermore, ‘[A]s a unity of essence rather than conceptual unity,
truth is beyond all question (sic)’.\footnote{Ibid.} The notion of truth, for him, is given form through ‘the
dance of represented ideas’ or constellations.\footnote{Ibid., p. 29.} Just as a constellation is a pattern where
individual stars can be rendered more recognisable, so do ideas come together in a way in
which objects are given true meanings.\footnote{David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory*, pp. 206–208 offers concrete evidence of the influence of
Benjamin on Adorno.} In the hands of Adorno, however, the idea of
constellations takes a different course for, unlike Benjamin, he is convinced that ideas cannot
be radically separated from concepts. Ideas, therefore, are in essence *conceptual* ideas and as
such are also open to interrogation. This is to say that ideas can only be thought through and
in fact are given coherence by their concepts.\footnote{Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 164. Also see Simon Jarvis, *Adorno*, pp. 175–176.} In the same way, for Adorno, social reality is
given meaning by the mediation between subjective thought and nature. In other words,
social reality can only be inferred from a particular constellation at any one time. That is, it
exists as a cipher. As such, negative dialectics becomes a ‘decoding process’ that provides an
access to truth using a continuous process of interpretation, which shows the multifaceted
sides of truth in its various constellations. In each instance, a ‘figure’ emerges that can be
accepted as a basis, fleeting as it may be, from which truth is grasped.\footnote{Theodor Adorno, ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, *Telos* 31 (Spring 1977) p. 120.} What this means is
that each time subjective thought sets out to decipher social reality, it is helped on its quest by a social reality that provides an image for concepts to 'grind against'.

To grasp the impetus behind the idea of constellation and what is new in this approach, one has to keep in mind a few things. The first of these is that Adorno’s constellations are constructed as antitheses to the principle of commodity exchange which, for him as for Marx before him, defines capitalist relations. Indeed, Marx in *Capital* first highlighted the abstraction that takes place in the process of commodity-exchange between different things. That is, exchange, or representation, is made possible through the elision that takes place between incommensurable values. This social process reminds Adorno of the abstraction that takes place in identitarian/conceptual undertakings in which the nonidentity is subsumed by subjective thought. In Adorno’s view, the common thread that binds identitarian thought together with commodity exchange is the misapprehension that gives priority to subjective thinking. Thus, in light of these considerations, the idea of thinking in terms of constellations seeks to reintroduce what has been glossed over in the process of identitarian thinking and concomitantly, commodity-exchange. In so doing it presupposes a transformative change both in the structure of our thought systems as well as in our society.

Susan Buck-Morss explains that constellational thinking involves three procedures: differentiation, nonidentity and active transformation. The first procedure involves an adequate articulation of 'nuances which pinpointed the concrete, qualitative differences between apparently similar phenomena'. What this means is that the idea of thinking in terms of constellations must start from a new form of dialectical consciousness that is alert to the limitations of conceptual thinking in ‘capturing’ its object. What brings about this new orientation in thought is a new ‘openness’ between conceptual thought and mimetic reaction. The ‘openness’ between two different forms of understanding culminates in the acceptance of their nonidentity, or following Buck-Morss - ‘extremes’. The second step in this process involves ‘juxtaposing extremes’. This includes ‘discovering not only the similarity of opposites but also the connecting links (the “inner logic”) between seemingly unrelated elements of a phenomenon’. Thus the beginning of constellational thinking involves differentiating between the constitutive elements that together make up a

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392 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 45.
393 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 100.
phenomenon and then mediating between these elements using a ‘key’ that is made up of a cluster of themes. In her own words:

[T]he phenomena first needed to be broken up, their relevant components isolated and conceptualised, and here philosophy depended on the humanistic and social sciences, whose task it was to research and analyse the empirical data in a way that made them accessible to philosophical deciphering.394

What remains is the questions of how objects release what is stored within them to constellational thinking. The keys to deciphering the rearranged elements of society are found, for Adorno, in the Marxist and Weberian and Freudian concepts depicting capitalism such as class, ideology, commodity structure, profit motive, market chances as well as subjective motivations to succeed.395 Using ‘ideal types’ as analogies, Adorno explains how objects are unlocked by a constellation of concepts.396 That is, just as Weber uses concepts such as profit motive, opportunity costs, free labour and a rational legal order amongst other things to assist in defining the cover concept of capitalism as an object of analysis, so are objects unlocked ‘by gathering concepts round the central one that is sought’, forming a constellation that will, ‘attempt to express what that concept aims at, (and) not to circumscribe it to operative ends’.397 These Weberian profiles are then reconfigured in the light of Marx’s insights on the fetish character of commodities as well as their exchange value and how these give rise to reification. This is further complemented by ‘Freudian concepts such as anxiety, sadomasochism and ego-weakness’.398

As a dialectical materialist Adorno demands that the preponderance (as opposed to the primacy) of the object must be the guiding light in how we use concepts to unlock objects.

This novel way of approaching knowledge, based on the preponderance of the object, is based on Adorno’s belief that all knowledge is generated by active construction and interpretation. Moreover these cognitive processes must be anchored in an appreciation of the irreducibility of the object to conceptual manipulations. Shane Phelan puts this position across clearly by noting that constellative thinking is a process where:

[I]deas do not “penetrate” to the essence of things, but illuminate them in their relations to other things; they are thus dependent upon particular historical forms of relations, as well as the internal constitution of such ideas.399

394 ibid., p. 97.
395 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, pp. 165–166.
396 ibid., pp. 164–166.
397 ibid., p. 166. For him Weber’s example shows a third way thinking beyond that of positivism and idealism
Surviving the pitfalls of a negation of negation, on one hand, and an ontological abstraction reminiscent of Heidegger, on the other, implies that the ‘unifying moment’ comes into being or derives its concretising moment not from a hierarchical ordering of concepts culminating into a classificatory system that produces an identity that is arbitrary in nature. It survives because it comes into being from a constellation of concepts – one that gives equal emphasis to all the individual concepts in the constellation. Objectivity in this way is derived from the relations between the concepts in a constellation as opposed to their hierarchical ordering at any given time.\(^{400}\) As a direct result, the dialectical usage of Weberian, Marxian and Freudian categories results in a transformative effect on the same categories, culminating in the alteration of both concepts and constitutive elements of a phenomena and so giving rise to a new representation – a novel way of experiencing what is otherwise deemed to be a pre-given truth. The resultant ‘image’, eschewing any form of synthesis, ‘illuminates contradictions rather than negating or sublating them’.\(^{401}\)

In an attempt to add more clarity to an otherwise esoteric formulation, Adorno drew an analogy between the dynamics of constellations and that of language. For him constellations, like language, provide the context in which concepts come together.\(^{402}\) The context, in this instance, is not the mind or spirit as it is for Hegel. It is a ‘force-field’ that enables each concept to come into contact with others in the act of defining or expressing things. Language supplies the vocabulary as well as the ‘rules’ (hence force field) for using conceptual words; that is, it supplies the tools and conditions under which meanings are to be generated in an authentic manner. In this way language does not determine identity in the same way that mind or spirit generates things.

Identitarian logic, on the other hand, works on the premises of conceptual progression, with the most basic of concepts subsumed by more complex ones until a generic principal identity that arises from a unity of definitions is reached.\(^{403}\) The progression of concepts from simple to complex entails a determinate negation of nonidentity from each concept concerned. Identity is achieved only when the nonidentity has been totally eliminated. The ‘closure’ that

\(^{400}\)Concepts are historical so change in concepts leads to changing relationship between them, giving rise to new meaning in the process. This is what differentiates Adorno from his friend Benjamin who harbours a transcendental notion of truth.

\(^{401}\)Susan Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, p. 102.

\(^{402}\)Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 162.

\(^{403}\)Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 162. Again, Adorno both follows and extend the work of Kant who deems this process as ‘synthetic unities’, made possible by the aid of categories, from the ‘manifold’ see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, (London: Penguin Classics, 2007) p. xliii.
ensues, for Adorno, is one where the conceptual exemplification of the object portrays itself to be at one with its object. In this way thought sustains its pseudo-claim that nothing lies outside itself and the fate of the nonidentity dissolves in the process of closure. This is how Identity is achieved within conceptual or identitarian logic. 404

A negative dialectics, by contrast, also seeks unification - only this time, '[T]he unifying moment survives without a negation of negation, but also without delivering itself to abstraction as a supreme principle'. 405 Thinking in terms of constellations thus affords us meanings minus the aporias associated with the 'conceptual closure' associated with idealism. Meaning in this instance, is generated, instead, by the union between the object and its nonidentity through a constellation of concepts. For him,

\begin{quote}
Constellations represent from without what the concept has cut from within: the 'more' which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking. 406
\end{quote}

To put it simply, the arrangement of concepts in a constellation, for Adorno, is an attempt to erase the deformities of understanding that comes via conceptual thought. In this vein, a constellation fashions meanings out of the specific ways it arranges concepts around a thing to be defined without defining the concepts themselves. The concepts, in turn, would highlight the nature of the nonidentity not through a classificatory process, but rather, through the specific ways in which a language or constellation places them in relation to the object in order to generate 'unifying moments'. 407 Phelan, once again, succinctly sums up this process of understanding based on constellations by noting that:

\begin{quote}
The constellation thus provides order without system. Without order, without patterns, riddles could not be solved, for there would be no meaningful juxtapositions of elements. Systems, however, imply and express not simply juxtapositions but Laws, causality, hierarchy of being. 408
\end{quote}

The implications from this are worth considering. Firstly, Adorno is of the view that it is only through the deployment of a constellation of concepts that the 'power of the subject' can survive without succumbing to identity or classificatory thinking. The constellation, in other words, prevents the process whereby the concepts superimpose themselves on the object of

\begin{footnotes}
404 Adorno observes that ‘When thinking follows its law of motion unconsciously, it turns against its own sense, against what has been thought, against that which calls a halt to the flight of subjective intentions. The dictates of autarky condemn our thinking to emptiness’ – see Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 149.
405 Ibid.
406 Ibid.
407 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 162.
\end{footnotes}
study. Instead the concepts are made to constantly rearrange themselves around the object in ways that would allow for the totality – the interdependence of identity and its other – to emerge. Secondly, the idea of thinking in terms of constellations preserves the dignity of both subjective thought and the object of cognition. That is, thinking manages to evade the pitfalls of abstraction associated with either materialism or idealism, or between existentialism (Kierkegaard), phenomenology (Husserl) and fundamental ontology (Heidegger) on one side and idealism epitomised by Hegelian dialectics on the other. Indeed the causes of abstractions in these systems stem from according primacy (as in first principle) to either the object or the subject. The former is exemplified by reified consciousness which, erroneously, perceives the status quo as pre-given or natural. This kind of consciousness is prevalent in societies where the principle of commodity-exchange has a predominant sway over other forms of social relationships. The latter, on the other hand, is represented by positivist thought and, as portrayed in the *Dialectic*, leads to the domination of both outer and inner natures. Politically both forms of abstraction justify the perpetuation of the status quo. They either cultivate passivity and acquiescence on the part of the subject by denying ‘power to its reason’, or use the ‘power of reason’ to erect an ideological smokescreen that would effectively curtail resistance to the status quo.

Yet despite the problems associated with identitarian thinking, Adorno does not advocate a simple substitution of classificatory thinking (where a thing is known by the category it comes under and not by what it is in-itself) by a nonidentitarian reason. This is because of two interrelated reasons: first, for all his criticism of Hegel, Adorno still subscribes to a dialectics whose truth is generated within the mediation of subject and the object. Analysis of one, for him, is nonsensical without the other. Second is the fact that nonidentity on its own is incoherent. In other words, it cannot be directly known: ‘[T]he nonidentical is not to be obtained directly’. What he means by this is that it cannot be obtained in the same way identity is attained in Hegelian dialectics; that is, by a simple process of ‘closure’ that denotes the positive synthesis of two opposing forces. As such nonidentity thinking cannot be used to positively construct a qualitatively different society in the way that Habermas’s model can. To do so, for Adorno, converts nonidentitarian logic back to identity thinking. As he puts it, ‘[T]o equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in its purest form’. For Hegel to insist on the

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409 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.
410 *ibid.*
soundness of his classificatory schemata is, in Adorno’s views, to succumb to the same logic that his dialectical method finds problematic: the same logic that undergirds identitarian thought. Adorno’s disagreement with Hegel therefore, is not over the dialectical method per se, but rather over its synthetic orientation in the hands of its master. As he points out, in Hegel’s dialectics, identity ‘springs from the method – not from the thing’.411 This one-sidedness, according to the Frankfurt scholar, is the link that idealism shares with positivism.

If we are to gain a true knowledge of the object, then we must give it the opportunity to unlock itself to us. This can only happen if the subject allows the object to animate the subject’s understanding about the nature of the object. Adorno notes that this entails the subject trying to comprehend the object of analysis via the classificatory way in which concepts are deployed, while the object (material substance) becomes the basis of ‘resistance which otherness offers to identity’.412 We are to ‘think’ our way through to a non-identitarian comprehension by pushing subjective thought towards its own limits as these are defined by the rules and systems of reasoning. It is at the limits of the classificatory system that the condition of possibility for nonidentity thinking is enabled – one that arranges concepts in a constellation so that each concept is accounted for and not subsumed by other concepts. This constellational arrangement ensures that the totality of each concept’s contribution to the whole is duly noted.413 Thinking in terms of constellations, therefore, requires the role of the subject in arranging the constitutive elements of a phenomenon in an order that will facilitate meaning via an interpretive, rather than a reductive process. Understanding of the object is achieved via a ‘unifying moment’ that arrives, in contradistinction to Hegel, ‘without a negation of negation’: a moment that also, in the process, refrains from succumbing, ‘to abstraction as a first principle’.414 The dual features of this ‘unifying moment’ serve to highlight the distance between Hegel and Adorno on one hand and that between the latter and Heidegger on the other.415 The one thing that the other two share in common, Adorno argues, is that both presupposes the primacy of the subject and identitarian thought: one overtly and in direct opposition to the logic of his own dialectic, while the other does so covertly. This Heidegerian stance is succinctly summarised in Adorno’s critique of Husserl’s attempt to

411 ibid, p. 159.
412 ibid, pp. 160–161.
413 ibid, p. 163.
414 ibid, p. 162.
415 For all his attempts to bypass conceptual thought by appealing directly to the thing (immediacy), Heidegger forgets the mediated nature of the thing.
overcome the problem of subject-object relations.\textsuperscript{416} For Adorno, the only valid stance, in the face of all these, is a philosophy that ensures the preponderance of the object in its analysis and a materialism that recognises the need for the subject to articulate its (material) reality.

The discussion above shows at some length the kernel of Adorno’s thoughts pertaining to society and the need to transform it. Unlike Habermas, Adorno persists in deploying the power of the subject to break the ‘veneer of subjectivity’ present in all identitarian systems of thought. Ironically this position lies at the very heart of the perception that Adorno’s radical critique of society entraps him within an epistemological paradox. The next sub-section takes us back to this contentious issue and attempts to (re)present Adorno’s position in a way that follows the trajectories of constellational thinking closely.

4.5 The Idea of Determinate Negation as Disclosing Critique: A defence against Performative contradiction.

There is no doubt that contemporary interrogations of the relevancy of the type of analysis inherent in the \textit{Dialectic} have been influenced heavily by what Habermas has to say on the matter.\textsuperscript{417} Indeed his claim that the \textit{Dialectic} suffers from a performative contradiction in the way it offers a totalised critique of the rational potentials of the Enlightenment has been a kind of a touchstone for subsequent social theorists’s opinion of the seminal text produced by Horkheimer and Adorno. We now turn to a more detailed account of Habermas’s claim of an epistemological paradox inherent in the \textit{Dialectic} in order to have better appreciation of the issues at stake.

Habermas’s \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity} contains a series of lectures that together makes a compelling case against the aporias of the French poststructuralist school of thought. Reading the book, one begins to sense that there is more to the chronological order in which the chapters are arranged. It is as if the author, in attacking poststructuralism, also wants to indict Adorno in the process. A close reading, however, of the \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity} throws up some interesting insights into Habermas’s critique against his mentor, the most interesting being that the \textit{Dialectic} was re-read through the genealogical lenses provided by Foucault. Consequently, this seminal text was brought closer to

\textsuperscript{416} Theodor Adorno, ‘Husserl and the Problem of Idealism’, pp. 5–18.
\textsuperscript{417} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Theory of Communicative Action (I)}, pp. 77–86. Also see Jürgen Habermas \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, pp. 106–130.
poststructuralism than it otherwise would have been. In the preface of the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas admits that the lectures on the different strands of poststructuralism and their antecedents were delivered between 1983 and 1984 while ‘The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment’, the chapter that contains his critique of the *Dialectic*, was written a year earlier and was included because of what he saw as affinities between this work and the arguments of poststructuralism. Peter Hohendahl makes the same point in suggesting that what transforms Habermas’s stance on the legacy of Adorno and Horkheimer from sympathetic yet critical to acrimonious is the elective affinity between the Nietzschean-inspired analyses of poststructuralism and the critique of society propagated by the *Dialectic*. According to Habermas, both suffer from performative contradictions. In view of the fact that the 1980s and the decade preceding it were periods marked by the ascendancy of poststructuralist thought, it was not surprising that this was also the point that Habermas made the ‘break’ with his theoretical forebears.418

But is Habermas justified in conflating the impulses of the *Dialectic* (namely its negative dialectics) with poststructuralist texts whose analyses were also exposed to withering criticism? This question is pertinent in light of the agreement by poststructuralist and Frankfurt theorists on the fundamental difference that separates Adorno from poststructuralism. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, Adorno is anything but a poststructuralist. In a highly polemical publication, the French postmodernist, who announced to the world the ‘death’ of the subject of history by proclaiming that we are living in an age that is marked by an incredulity towards metanarratives, stated that the ‘dissipation of subjectivity in and by capitalism’ is perceived as a setback by the Frankfurt Scholar.419

The difference between negative dialectics and poststructuralism, as noted by Peter Dews, is that the former offers:

> some of the conceptual tools with which to move beyond what is increasingly coming to appear, not least in France itself, as a self-destructively indiscriminate and politically ambiguous assault on the structures of rationality and modernity in toto.420

418 For an account of the evolution of Habermas’s views on the *Dialectic*, see Peter Hohendahl, ‘The Dialectic of Enlightenment Revisited’, p. 5.


If anything, Adorno is actually an anathema to the Nietzschean inspired tradition. To be sure, Habermas’s view towards Adorno has not always been ambivalent. In 1969 for instance, in an obituary, Habermas made known his full appreciation of the emotive dimension that is inherent in Adorno’s work. In fact he attributed this emotive dimension, which is linked to early experiences of growing up, as the propelling impulse of Adorno’s critical theory. This lends credence to the view that Habermas’s shifting positions in relation to Adorno reflect his growing concern at the impact of poststructuralist discourses on society. As such, it would be wrong to regard the critique directed against Adorno by the _Philosophical Discourse of Modernity_ as Habermas’s last word on the subject. This is despite the tone of finality that could be discerned from it. In fact, Habermas, in an interview four years later, admits that the utopian dimension of _Negative Dialectics_, which strives for a non-violent reconciliation between the subject and the object, or, between conceptual thought and nonidentity, is indispensable to his theory of communicative action. This utopian element, which suggests a counter image to what is, becomes the signature imprint that distinguishes a critical theory of society from other forms of analyses.

Be that as it may, one of the implicit assumptions made by Habermas in his diatribe against the _Dialectic_ is that the critique of perceived society has to be immanently generated. An immanent critique derives its normative force from the social fabric of a society. It then uses this as the basis from which it puts forward a validity claim that something is amiss, that some form of social injustice has emerged. In other words, immanent critique directs itself against the facticity of what ‘is’ by throwing it into sharp relief with what ‘ought’ to be in its place. The standard that it uses to do this is derived internally. The problem, however, with this kind of criticism, in Habermas’s view, starts when the normative horizon that makes immanent critique possible is rendered suspect. This, he alleges, is the premise from which Adorno and Horkheimer started. The answer to this allegation lies in the conviction of the _Dialectic_ that the first half of the twentieth century has seen a social reality that has successfully co-opted the powers of immanent critique to its cause. As a consequence Enlightenment thought has turned against the Enlightenment itself, giving rise to a new and terrifying age where the boundaries of emancipation and tyranny have imploded. In the

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1944/1947 preface, the authors of the *Dialectic* extrapolated on their joint project as ‘nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’. 424 They were tackling a world where regression seems to be the natural order of the day and where critique metamorphoses into an affirmation of the status quo. 425 In 1951, a few years after the *Dialectic* began circulation, Adorno again raises the spectre of an immanent critique losing its critical edge through its affirmation of the present. This time it was in a book of aphorisms reminiscent in style and content to the writings of Nietzsche. Adorno laconically proclaimed that,

> the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared. The former resigns itself to conformation of reality by its mere duplication ... There is no crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail.426

In other words, the disappearance of any difference between ideology and reality means, for Adorno, that ideology critique has been rendered superfluous by its social environment. This would in turn suggest that the normative horizon that makes such critique possible is complicit in the disempowerment of critique. Thus the question that confronts them is: How is critique to be enabled if its normative sources are deemed to be part of the problem itself? Or put another way, what happens when the values that inform critique are complicit in the problem that is to be critiqued?

The first inkling of an answer can be discerned the preface of the *Dialectic* itself:

> If public life has reached a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into a celebration of the commodity, the attempt to trace the sources of this degradation must refuse obedience to the current linguistic and intellectual demand before it is rendered entirely futile of those demands for world history.427

From the passage above, a few things clearly emerge. Firstly, the authors of the *Dialectic* are aware that there is a problem in society. Secondly, the nature and scope of this problem necessitates a different approach, one that would require a refusal to adhere to the prevailing orthodoxy governing the use of language and thought. Third, the project that they are embarking on is more ambitious in its intentions than any form of immanent criticism. In other words Adorno and Horkheimer were not going to settle for anything less than a world-disclosing critique – a critique that is bold enough to derive its standards from outside. A
world-disclosing critique averts the fate that immanent critique finds itself in as a handmaiden of the status quo. If this is so, what then should be the normative standard upon which a disclosing critique relies and is to be measured against? This is the backdrop from which the analysis of the *Dialectic* needs to be understood.

Axel Honneth, in an insightful essay, insists that because of its context-transcendent nature, disclosing critique should align itself to a vision of social perfection or ‘ideal values’ problematic as this may be. His insistence is based on two interrelated views. Firstly, in his opinion, there is a need in all liberal societies for a form of social self-criticism that he calls a ‘therapeutic self-critique’. This is because there are no institutional guarantees that would always render the development of ‘value preferences’ in the socialisation process compatible with the assumptions undergirding the notion of the ‘good life’. As such, members of a society need, from time to time, to engage in ‘therapeutic self-critique’ in order to gauge how far their prevailing values are from the idea of what a good life entails. A second reason is that there is always a possibility that we may, due to factors such as our psychological make-up, reject the specific ways in which institutional dynamics influence our own interests. If this is the case then a disclosing critique will always suffer from an epistemological paradox, since it views the normative fabric of society as tainted. In Adorno’s case, society suffers from the commodity principle. Adorno, in fact, seems to have realised this when he points out: ‘[T]he limit of immanent critique is that the law of the immanent context is ultimately one with the delusion that has to be overcome’. The realisation of the inherent epistemological paradox of his critique of society does not stop him from arguing in this vein. In fact he suggests, by his insistence on a context-transcending critique, that allegation of a performative contradiction is a price he is prepared to pay since, for him, the potential to imagine a transformed society lies *outside* the purview of immanent dialectics at that point in time.

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428 He puts the problem in this way: ‘On the one hand, epistemological arguments against objectivist assumptions about human nature prevent us from speaking carelessly of universal conditions of the good life; on the other, insight into increasing value pluralism excludes the hermeneutic possibility of assuming socially shared beliefs of the good’ – see Axel Honneth, ‘The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society’, p. 122.

429 This is reminiscent of Habermas’s use of psychoanalysis in *Knowledge and Human Interests*.


431 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 182.

Yet by insisting on a disclosing critique, he is presented with a paradox himself. This stems from the fact that he is seemingly bereft of any rational way in which he can ground his disclosing critique of society. Be that as it may, Honneth points out that there still seems to be a need for such critical diagnoses because it is only by means of these that the chance of a therapeutic self-critique is kept open—a self-critique, that is, within whose horizons we can reach agreement on the appropriateness of our way of life.\footnote{Ibid.}

In light of this, Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument that we must sever ties with the rules that govern the validity of ‘linguistic and intellectual demands’ is highly suggestive of the point that they were fully aware that their critique cannot be validated on any rational grounds. In fact, give what they were faced with in the aftermath of the Second World War, meeting any demands of rational justification will, in their eyes, only nullify the thrust of their searing critique. As Adorno himself says, ‘[N]o immanent critique can serve its purpose wholly without outside knowledge’.\footnote{Theodor Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, p. 182.} That is, for immanent critique to faithfully do its task it must risk moving outside its own moorings. Despite this, however, the authors of the \textit{Dialectic} were mindful of the consequences of their actions. Hence their depiction of the enlightenment as a dialectical process suggests, at least for Wiggershaus, that ‘Horkheimer and Adorno did not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, that they only wanted to demonstrate the ambiguity of the idea of enlightenment’.\footnote{Rolf Wiggershaus, \textit{The Frankfurt School}, p. 327. For a defence of Adorno against the allegations made by Habermas see Espen Hammer, ‘Minding the World: ‘Minding the World: Adorno’s critique of Idealism’, \textit{Philosophy and Social Criticism}, Vol. 26, No.1, (2000) pp. 71–92.} What they intended instead, through a disclosing critique, was to evoke new ways of thinking and perceiving, ways that would transform our consciousness by providing insights that otherwise would have been unavailable. This is the same idea behind the use of constellations in \textit{Negative Dialectics}. Habermas it seems may have been too hasty in lumping disparate analyses together in the \textit{Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}.

\subsection*{4.6 Concluding Remarks: Defying the aura of the Subject}

There is no clear roadmap in Adorno’s oeuvre as to the specific way(s) we can overcome the circumstances that have contributed to our current life forms. He instead offers an index of what is wrong in our society. Instead of offering a way to a better future, his negative
dialectics casts its discerning gaze on what is wrong with the present. In other words, *Negative Dialectics*, in the words of Jarvis, is ‘an attempt to criticise the obstacles – real and conceptual – impeding our possible access to the absolute, rather than a claim to have achieved such a success’.436 As such Adorno’s critique is not in any way claiming to have all the answers as to how we are going to transcend our present circumstances. His critique of conceptual or identitarian thought and how it is manifested in society exhorts us to critically examine the cost of our becoming. The failure to posit a better future does not in any sense take away the utopian longing in his works. *Negative Dialectics* will retain, in this way, its relevance as long as there is inhumanity amongst us. He sums this succinctly by observing that, ‘[T]he undiminished persistence of suffering, fear, and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realised should not be discarded’.437

A dialectics that thrives on negativity does not in any way understate the functional utility (or dimension) of identity thinking. What it rejects is the claim of this thought can faithfully represent the ‘whole’. The defiance in *Minima Moralia* epitomised in the words ‘the whole is the untrue’ has two functions438. The first is to raise the bogus nature of the positivist claim while the second, arising directly from the first, is a clarion call for a reason whose contours, apart from its mimetic quality, are defined by an awareness of its own limitations; a reason that is not afraid to break the invincible aura of all forms of subjectivity. For it is only in this way that reason will gain a more comprehensive understanding of itself and the reality that awaits its voice.

This chapter critically interrogates Habermas’s theory of communicative action and its contemporary relevance as a theoretical model. The basic thrust of this chapter is to effectively gauge how the problematic features of communicative action find expression in Habermas’s model of ethico-political practise. This is done by rereading the theoretical works of the preeminent social philosopher through the cognitive lens of *Negative Dialectics*. The chapter therefore is the first phase of a two-stage critique. This initial phase outlines some of the problematic features of his communicative action theory. The second phase, directly following the current phase, consists of drawing out the implications of the aporias of his discourse ethics in his political philosophy. This latter stage is addressed in the next chapter. It must be emphasised from the outset that this is not an ill-founded attempt to consign Habermas to the ‘dustbin of history’. That is neither warranted nor feasible in our current context. Indeed the works of Habermas are unsurpassable in coverage, analysis and application. The aim of this chapter therefore is to tease out ways in which the theory of communicative action and by extension the procedural logic of the deliberative model of democracy can be reworked so it fully encompasses the broad plurality that has become the hallmark of modernity.

In a commentary on the salient thematic aspects arising out of Habermas’s critical engagements with poststructuralist thought, the philosopher Richard Rorty explained that one crucial difference between the two schools of thought is that poststructuralists such as Lyotard would ‘abandon liberal politics in order to avoid universalistic philosophy’ whereas Habermas would ‘hang on to universalistic philosophy, with all its problems, in order to support liberal politics’. The chapter provides a critique of Habermas from within the ambit of the Frankfurt School itself with the aim of sketching the parameters of a new form of emancipatory politics. In that way, it is not a scathing derision of all that Habermas stands for but a critical engagement with what needs to be addressed in his political philosophy in light of our contemporary needs.

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To do this, the essay starts with a problematisation of the basic division of the social that Habermas introduces into his theory of society. The essay argues that this basic division has its concomitant impacts on Habermas’s theory of democracy, where the problems that arise from the decoupling of the ‘lifeworld’ and ‘system’ are evinced in the structural weaknesses of Habermas’s political public sphere. The chapter, therefore, begins with a discussion of the difficulties inherent in the decoupling of systems and lifeworld and, as a corollary, in the separation of arts from science and morality in Habermas’s two tier theory of society (5.1).

The section will also deal with some of the new issues that arise due to this basic separation, such as the fundamental alteration to the classic understanding of freedom and how the notion of autonomy is problematic when viewed against the work of Adorno on totalitarian society. The chapter continues by critically interrogating Habermas’s universal pragmatics. This it does by analysing the affinities between Habermas’s and Kant’s idea of the subject and the problems the former inherited from the latter’s notion of the transcendental subject (5.2).

Section 5.3 critiques Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’ and, by extension, the public sphere. The argument here is that the way in which intersubjective symmetries are presupposed in a ‘universal pragmatics’ leads inevitably to asymmetrical forms of deliberation as well as exclusionary politics within the discourses of the public sphere. The next section continues this discussion by delving into the elective affinities between intersubjective symmetries and capitalist exchange relations – a theme that seeks to problematise Habermas’s approach to language by juxtaposing it to Adorno’s critique of capitalist relations (5.4). This is followed by subsection 5.4.1 which looks closely at how continuities established in section 5.4 leads to a reaffirmation of the neo-liberal order. To be sure, the main point here is that Habermas, through his conception of the public sphere, simply re-traces the cognitive footprints established by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* and the problems associated with equating the *real* with the *rational* and vice versa. The discussion then goes from here to a problematisation of the intersubjective consensus that Habermas insists must underpin deliberations within lifeworld discourses as well as the public sphere (5.4.2). This is done by looking at some seminal lessons derived from Adorno’s critique of Heidegger’s ontology and how these can be deployed once again against Habermas. Section 5.4.3 reasserts the somatic character of thought in the works of Adorno in

440 The way in which the delinking process gives rise to problems in the dynamics of the public sphere is discussed in the next chapter.
441 GWF Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p.10.
light of Habermas’s ‘Kantian’ subject. The point here is that the absence of corporeality simply turns knowledge back to a singular subjective plane devoid of any consideration of the *object*. This section leads to the next chapter; which considers how Habermas’s notion of the public sphere will benefit immensely if it takes on board the notion of corporeality that animates Adorno’s work on knowledge. The discussion here is animated by the critique mounted by Hegel against the vacuous character of the Kantian transcendental subject. The last section (5.5) brings out the different threads of arguments in the chapter and charts out the way in these interrelated arguments form an axis from which a coherent critical examination of contemporary society is to be launched. The chapter ends with some concluding remarks on the thematic points raised and how these are to be developed in chapter 6.

5.1 Problematising the System and Lifeworld distinction.

The driving impetus behind Habermas’s development of a two-tier theory of society stems from a number of considerations.\(^4^{42}\) The first of these lies in his conviction that the ‘project of modernity’ can be salvaged only through a paradigm shift. For the second generation Frankfurt scholar, this shift is from the philosophy of consciousness to language or ‘universal pragmatics’: a turn that will, in his view, redeem Critical Theory’s emancipatory potentials. Hitherto, the theorizations of the Frankfurt School, especially those of Adorno and Horkheimer, have led to a philosophical impasse. This stalemate, in Habermas’s view, forced the authors of the *Dialectic* to embrace a nihilistic form of radicalism espoused by Nietzsche and filtered down through the works of Bataille, and is evinced by the stringent tone found in the *Dialectic*.\(^4^{43}\) Habermas proposes, in lieu of this, that the path taken by the *Dialectic* betrays the legacy of the Enlightenment. What is needed, in the face of this duplicitous relationship with the Enlightenment legacy, is a model that, while accepting the ossified atmosphere of capitalist modernity, at the same time, delineates a path that would lead to greater human autonomy. The way forward thus, for him, is the decoupling of the system and lifeworld. The former is characterised by the dominance of functionalist logic (purposive-rational reason) and strategic actions while the latter becomes the focal point of consensus based on a communicative form of rationality. For the second generation Frankfurt scholar, it

\(^{42}\) See chapter 3 for an account of Habermas’s two-tier theory of society.

\(^{43}\) For an account of the genealogical roots of a radicalised critique of reason that began with Nietzsche – see Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.
is only by splitting the social into two distinct spheres, with specific concomitant rationalisation processes, that we can hold out the hope of emancipation.

The theorization of society as system as well as lifeworld allows Habermas to reclaim the Enlightenment’s positive potentials which, in his view, have been rendered problematic in their fusion with the Nietzschean ‘will to power’. However, in so doing, Habermas had to revise some fundamental concepts within the purview of Western Marxism, chief among them is the concept of freedom as presupposed in the writings of Marx and his heirs in Western Europe. By reinterpreting freedom, or the lack of it, in terms of the ‘distortions’ in ideal speech situations, Habermas is able to subsequently dispute the extent to which the reification thesis, a leitmotif that guides Western Marxism’s critique against capitalist modernity, continues to be relevant in contemporary society. This new sensitivity to how society engenders two qualitatively different forms of integration is brought home, for Habermas, by the works of the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim. Adopting this model enables Habermas to defend the project of modernity on two fronts. The first is against the allegation that society is hopelessly entangled within a dialectic that has resulted in the emergence of totalitarian tendencies within a reified social environment. The second is from the criticisms levelled against him by systems theorists, such as Niklas Luhmann, who points out that the increasing complexities of modern society must mean that any form of normativity must be hopelessly inadequate to regulate life. For Habermas, giving in to either of these attacks would amount to a fatalistic view that equates progress with dehumanisation. In fact he sees the intersection of the two schools of thought – counter-enlightenment radicalism and systems theory – as basically the site where strands of theorising that come under the umbrella of Western Marxism are found wanting. For him, the:

confusion of system rationality and action rationality prevented Horkheimer and Adorno, as did Weber before them, from adequately separating the rationalisation of action orientations within the framework of a structurally differentiated lifeworld from the expansion of the steering capacities of differentiated social systems.

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445 See chapter 3.
446 Deborah Cook, ‘The Sundered Totality of System and Lifeworld’, p.56. Also see Thomas McCarthy, ‘Complexity and Democracy or the Seductions of Systems Theory’.
447 Thomas McCarthy, ‘Complexity and Democracy or the Seductions of Systems Theory’, p.29.
448 Jürgen Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action (II), p.333.
Habermas, as the above suggests, sees the decoupling of the two spheres as a positive development on many fronts. For him, this move enables us to raise a critique against instrumental reason without getting entangled in the 'performative contradiction' that is symptomatic of the \textit{Dialectic}, as well as other forms of Nietzschean inspired critique. Reification is now couched in terms of the 'colonisation of the lifeworld' and happens only when systemic impulses start altering the dynamics of discourse leading to distortions in the communicative process. Apart from this, the delinking also frees up the members of the lifeworld 'to devote themselves exclusively to the symbolic reproduction of their culture, society, and personality'. The system, on the other hand is controlled by the norm-free steering media of the economy and the state. This sphere ensures that the material conditions of life are reproduced.

The system and lifeworld model that Habermas based his theory of society on has been problematised by some of his closest sympathisers. Thomas McCarthy, for instance, has questioned some of the guiding premises of Habermas’s two-tier theory of society. In a revealing analysis of how system and lifeworld logics are enmeshed in social life, McCarthy concludes that the two levels are more porous than Habermas would have us believe. In his judgement, Habermas is too optimistic in maintaining that the guiding mechanisms for the different spheres in his model can be clearly distinguished from each other: that they are mutually exclusive in terms of logic and domains of application. It is worth quoting McCarthy at some length concerning this point:

\begin{quote}
The action-theoretic accounts ... suggest that the “buffer zone” of organisational "indifference" to personality and individual life history, to culture and tradition, to morality and convention is frequently no more effective than the military barrier erected by the American Armed Forces between North and South Vietnam – much of what is to be kept out is already within, and much of the rest can enter as the need arises.\textsuperscript{431}
\end{quote}

In other words, Habermas’s argument on the need to uphold the distinct boundaries that separate the system from the lifeworld is rather weak, given the ways that individuals traverse the distance in their dual roles as functionalists (labourers) looking for material advantage and as communicative actors or reflective beings seeking consensus. As such Habermas should be more circumspect in ‘conceptualising administrative organisation in

\textsuperscript{449}Deborah Cook, ‘The Sundered Totality of System and Lifeworld’, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{450}Thomas McCarthy, ‘Complexity and Democracy or the Seducements of Systems Theory’, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{451}ibid, p. 34.
Deborah Cook expresses similar sentiments to McCarthy on the aporias surrounding the division between lifeworld and system. For Cook, the conceptual delinking of the system from the lifeworld pits Habermas directly against the understanding of 'freedom' (or the loss of it) that is entrenched within the discourse of Western Marxism as seen in the works of Lukács, Marx as well as Adorno. The three theorists, in her view, would have eschewed the path taken by Habermas since, in their collective view, the logic of market forces, whether it is in the form of alienation, reification or ratio, is immanent in society. As such they cannot be wilfully theorised away into conceptual enclaves. The prevalence of reified moments in modern socialities is, for Adorno, symptomatic of what lies behind 'damaged' forms of life in contemporary society. The separation of lifeworld and system, with their corresponding modes of thought and action, also raises another problem. As Cook argues, the division implicitly suggests that there is a distinction between mental and manual labour in the Habermasian model – the former occurs only in deliberative processes within the lifeworld while the latter is confined to the labour processes that are regulated by the norm-free subsystems. This renders asunder the conventional relationship between theory and praxis that Western Marxism as a tradition epitomised.

Adorno would have agreed with the misgivings expressed by McCarthy as well as Cook for a number of reasons. Firstly, he sees the principle of exchange as immanent in capitalist modernity – there is no subverting it. Thus the only way forward is to work through it by way of a radical critique of what it stands for. In a ringing passage that seems to have anticipated Habermas’s delinking process, Adorno reminds us that:

> Ever since mental and physical labour were separated in the sign of the dominant mind, the sign of justified privilege, the separated mind has been obliged ... to vindicate the very claim to dominate which it derives from the thesis that it is primary and original – and to make every effort to forget the source of its claim.

In other words, Adorno would have not supported the decoupling of society into two conceptually distinct spheres, because he sees an intrinsic relationship between mental and

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452 ibid, p. 40.
453 Deborah Cook, 'The Sundered Totality of System and Lifeworld', p. 60.
454 Ratio is the term used by Adorno to denote the exchange principle that undergirds modern capitalist societies.
455 ibid., p. 69.
456 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 177.
manual labour: one that completely disappears in the works of his student. The very
insistence that thought has a somatic component is a powerful reminder of the futility of
divorcing the two. Thought, for Adorno, is always animated by a felt need. By
conceptually separating the two, Habermas exposes his theory to the aporias associated with
a form of subjective knowledge that is not tempered by a self-reflective moment. Adorno
insists that this moment of self-reflection in thought only comes about when concepts admit
to their own insufficiencies in representing objective reality. The concomitant effect of this
on rational consensus that arises out of intersubjective deliberations cannot be overstated.
Freedom, in the way that Habermas defines the term, in this way becomes a highly
controversial concept.

Given the discussion above, Habermas seems to be advocating a truncated form of freedom
that accrues from the diametrical opposition between the system-theoretic and action-
thetic processes of the social world. The naturalistic slant to his social theorisation is hard
to ignore here. As Cook points out:

Habermas uncritically describes and endorses a completely sundered society
where individuals are simultaneously free and unfree, unconstrained by material
concerns in their leisure activities and denatured by the struggle to survive in the
workplace, fully human in their social intercourse and dehumanised in their
labour.

Habermas's position, when analysed from an Adornian point of view, is also problematic. It
propagates a reduced notion of freedom as well as an ambivalent conception of the fate of
human agency and its link to the emancipation of the species. Indeed, Habermas sees
freedom as belonging exclusively to the domain of the lifeworld. This is to say that the
system, the sphere entrusted with the material production of life cannot, by necessity, operate
under conditions that prioritise the autonomy of 'labour power'. People then are, from this
vantage point, necessarily enslaved by the conditions generated by the material conditions of
life. Given the distinct spheres of action and the differing logics that prevail within these
spheres, Habermas propagates the fatalistic view that people are destined to be
simultaneously free and unfree: free to the extent that they live and socially reproduce
themselves in the lifeworld and unfree because of the way labour is organised along
instrumental and strategic lines in the system. This, for Adorno, is what a 'damaged life' is –
a life that has learnt to make do with what it is, because it cannot envision something 'better'

457 This is discussed later on in section 5.4.
458 See section 5.4 for a detailed discussion on this.
than what is. In other words, ‘rational’ has become in this way a euphemism for the ‘real’. This is to say that Habermas has fallen into the Hegelian trap of a forced reconciliation between *is* and *ought*. It also brings to mind the warning Adorno gave about the need to base knowledge on the object, otherwise what we will be faced with is a tautology where what is known becomes knowledge itself. The problematic nature of this separation of system-theoretic from action theoretic models in Habermas’s two-tier theory of society finds its way into the dynamics of his discourse ethics in the public sphere. This is analysed in some detail in Chapter 6.

The next section aims to throw into sharper relief the problems associated with Habermas’s model of society. This it does by problematising his notion of universal pragmatics and the role this has on linguistic interchanges between interlocutors within the public sphere. Habermas envisions his interlocutors in terms of the Kantian subject, admittedly with some qualifications. Yet despite these qualifications, the Kantian influence in Habermas’s linguistic subject is apparent in his adumbration of universal pragmatics. Adorno, on the other hand, has always insisted on the problematic nature of language even as he recognises its indispensable nature. The subject’s use of conceptual language needs to be re-examined in light of the tendency of language to reduce everything it explains to conceptual approximations. It is to this rereading of Habermas from Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* that we now turn to.

### 5.2 The ‘Kantian’ Subject in Habermas’s Universal Pragmatics.

One of the clearest indications of the Kantian legacy in Habermas’s philosophy of language is the latter’s adoption of the Kantian subject in his theorisation of the dynamics of the lifeworld and its political manifestation – the public sphere. It is here that the Kantian autonomous subject, adhering only to generalised principles of conduct called categorical imperatives, makes its appearance once again. Kant uses the concept of the categorical imperative as a way of putting forward the argument that the autonomy of the subject is embedded within a universal moral order. Accordingly, all sense of moral worth is determined by actions that are motivated by none other than a sense of duty – duties that are ‘naturally’ binding in all circumstances where they can be willed into universal laws. These unconditional or categorical imperatives are, in Kant’s view, different from technical imperatives which are utilitarian in nature; that is, technical imperatives are actions driven

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460 GWF Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 10.
toward a desired end. Indeed Kant makes it clear that the condition of possibility for categorical imperatives is that they must ‘refer to no other property of choice (by which some purpose can be ascribed to it) than simply to its freedom’. What this means is that these commands or imperatives to act in a certain way are moral, because actions ensuing from them are ‘necessary’ as they increase and reaffirm the autonomy of the transcendental subject. The autonomy of the subject, therefore, lies in the subject’s strict observance of these imperatives; that is, the freedom of the subject is achieved if it acts according to these commands. The existence of the autonomous subject therefore hinges on a voluntary subjection to an existing general moral order.

Habermas, in a like manner, incorporates the Kantian subject into the dynamics of the lifeworld and, by extension, the public sphere, albeit, with a few major revisions. Like Kant, he posits the need for generalised principles of contestation to be observed, though this time, in relation to validity claims within the lifeworld. He also sees the conduct of interlocutors of the public sphere as governed by strict adherence to generalised laws of intersubjective mediation. However unlike his theoretical forebear, these principles, for Habermas, do not arise out of a universal moral order but from a context-transcendent universal pragmatics whose specific orientation is geared towards understanding. In other words, rationality (or morality for that matter) is not anchored in a universal moral order but in intersubjective dialogue guided by the rules regulating all speech acts. As such, what is open to the Kantian subject – the ability to autonomously determine universal moral tenets via self-reflection – is rendered problematic by Habermas. Indeed, for Habermas, universality of moral tenets can only come about by means of discourse between subjects. This signals the move away from the ‘philosophy of consciousness’ towards an intersubjective paradigm that, for him, transcends the problems surrounding the subject-centred philosophy of Kant. It becomes clear that the Kantian subject of the moral order becomes, with a few modifications, the autonomous interlocutor within Habermas’s universal pragmatics. For the latter, the adjudication of validity-claims is not a matter of critical self-reflection but is determined through discourse. Yet despite this important alteration, the subjects, in both cases, are ironically similar to each other. That is, both are shorn of any passion or desire and are driven only by rational considerations and the conviction that he/she is amongst equals in a process

462 *ibid*, p. 49  
138
whose rules are understood in exactly the same way by all. In short, both view their subject primarily as an epistemological subject bereft of any feeling that would interfere with the rational faculty that is embedded within. This is to say that the difference between Kant and Habermas, from the vantage point of *Negative Dialectics*, is one based solely on the way the subject acts in ascertaining truth; the former espousing transcendental reflection while the latter advocates discourse between subjects.

The Habermasian characterisations of the subject, when analysed from an Adornian viewpoint, have significant ramifications as far as consensus is concerned. For Adorno, a consensus between subjects (or intersubjective agreement) is one that does not recognise the 'object' in all subjects. In other words, all agreements in the public sphere are based on a wilful suppression of the 'concrete particularities' of the interlocutors. Habermas himself acknowledges the possibility of distortion in the discursive process within the ideal speech situation by highlighting the ideological, psychological or neurotic barriers that may distort the process of will-formation. To compound this, there have been some convincing arguments about Habermas's prejudice against non-European societies that are embedded within his communicative ethics. In fact, the German philosopher notes that the assumption that the people from the Euro zone would, as a rule, have more rational resources to tap into when contesting validity claims is inbuilt within universal pragmatics. This ominous state of things suggests that the public sphere needs to be radicalised in order for it to take into account the irreducible concreteness of the 'other'.

In the discussion of 'concepts and categories' in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno continuously reiterates the need to be mindful of the particularity of the object. The particularity of the object can be attributed to its historical and social nature. The gist of his line of reasoning is that one must always be aware of the 'violence' perpetrated by conceptual reason on the object in the name of order. This 'violence' comes predominantly in the form of repressive tendencies of identity thinking against that part of the object (nonidentity) that escapes conceptualisation. When viewed from Adorno's Kantian reading of the distance that lies between a thing-in-itself and our understanding of that thing, the idealistic element in Habermas's conception of intersubjectivity becomes apparent. The actions of Habermas's

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464 See chapter 3.
467 See chapter 4.
interlocutors are guided only by the rules of engagement evinced by the generalised principles of argumentation within the public sphere. They do not meet Adorno’s standards of rationality. The problem becomes acutely clear when we take a closer look. First, Habermas’s conception of his discursive subjects as having the same set of rational attributes runs in the face of modern plural sensibilities. In other words, it lacks historical depth. Secondly and intrinsically bound to the first, the heir to the first generation of Frankfurt scholars is totally silent on the corporeal dimension of the subject and how this corporeality drives the cognitive processes of the public sphere. This silence is, perhaps, inevitable in light of the way that, in spite of his best intentions, he has delinked theory from praxis: a relationship that animates fundamental premises of Western Marxism. To be sure, Habermas’s awareness of the dilemma surrounding the deliberative process is obvious in his insistence that there has to be a modicum of economic equality between the interlocutors. Yet he does not extend this awareness to an outright acceptance of the somatic character of thought. This glaring omission simply accentuates the problem that is associated with what a commentator has termed as ‘intersubjective symmetry’. What follows is a critique of Habermas’s position based on this notion of ‘intersubjective symmetry’.

5.3 Intersubjective Symmetries.

One of the persistent features of Habermas’s oeuvre is the striking continuity between his philosophical attempt at articulating a coherent account of social and system integration in society with his political convictions. The former culminated in a two tier theory of society while the latter manifests itself in his concept of the public sphere. The lines of continuity that link his theory of communicative action with his political philosophy are evinced in the pragmatic suppositions that undergird the discourse in both the lifeworld and the public sphere. These pragmatic suppositions, or rules of discursive engagement, in turn, enforce a form of equivalence between the interlocutors of the public sphere that provides the criteria of a just, equitable and rational consensus. In so doing Habermas sees, intersubjective

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468 This is related to the argument on how he distinguishes between mental and manual labour (see p. 137 above)
470 See chapter 3
symmetry as an intrinsic part of his concept of public sphere.\footnote{Nancy S Love, ‘Epistemology and Exchange’, pp. 92–94.} Let us briefly examine what this would entail in Habermas’s communicative theory.

Intersubjective symmetry, in Habermas’s framework, is a pre-condition for discursive parity and is derived directly from the premises of his universal pragmatics.\footnote{Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Communication and the Evolution of Society}, pp. 1–68. Also see Jürgen Habermas, ‘Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence’ \textit{Inquiry} 13 (1970) p. 372.} In an attempt to ensure that all outcomes from the deliberative procedure in the public sphere reflect the basic equivalence between all the interlocutors, Habermas makes a further claim on the transcendental status of the rules of discourse inherent in his universal pragmatics. That is, the rules of discourse are context-transcendent in the way that each speech act makes three substantive claims to the objective, social and subjective worlds – no matter the context in which the utterance takes place in. These rules, furthermore, are oriented towards consensus. In order for this consensus to be a true reflection of fair and free deliberation, Habermas posits that these rules of linguistic engagement ensure that all interlocutors are equal. By this, he means that within the ‘ideal speech situation’, all are free to initiate discussions, questions the validity claims of others as well as putting forward their own.\footnote{Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Communication and the Evolution of Society}, p. 68. Also see Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Theory of Communicative Action}, p. 119–126 (especially p.121).} To be sure, these validity claims and their corresponding domains of reality amount to a reworking of Habermas’s model of cognitive interests and the types of knowledge they produce, as was first outlined in \textit{Knowledge and Human Interest}. The difference this time is that these validity claims are linked to the rules embedded within language-use rather than being aligned to cognitive interests in the field of epistemology. This reworking marks the shift of the grounding of his critical theory.

The problem, however, lies in how the notion of intersubjective symmetry glosses over the peculiarities of the interlocutors.\footnote{Nancy S Love, ‘Epistemology and Exchange’, pp. 92–94.} That is, it suppresses the fact that the interlocutors are sensual beings whose feelings, temperaments and contexts all come into play in their thought processes. As Seyla Benhabib observes:

\begin{quote}
In assuming this perspective, we abstract from the individuality and concrete identity of the other. We assume that the other, like ourselves, is a being who has concrete needs, desires and affects, but what constitutes her moral dignity is
\end{quote}
not what differentiates us from each other, but rather what we, as speaking and acting rational agents, have in common. 475

For Habermas, issues of morality can only be justified when they are validated through a consensus that comes about as a result of an argumentation process that is guided by the rules of discourse. This, according to Habermas, is the ‘universalisation principle’ that undergirds all communicative dialogues. 476 Moral validity, as such, is a product of a ‘cooperative search for truth’ that culminates in the distillation of the best argument that everyone adheres to: a consensus devoid of any coercion. For him, consensus generated this way has to be rational and binding to all participants since:

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\text{a contested norm cannot meet with the consent of the participants in a practical discourse unless ... all affected can freely accept the consequences and the side effects that the general observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of each individual.} 477
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As such, \textit{difference} acquires an ambivalent status in the works of Habermas. For instance, it cannot be the basis from which issues of morality are sustained in society. This dilemma is not only recognised within the ambit of Frankfurt theorisation but in other philosophic traditions as well. Poststructuralists, for instance, have long argued that Habermas’s conception of the public sphere leaves no room for irreconcilable differences. In fact they argue that Habermas sees \textit{difference} as a symptom of a lack of reasoning. The specific way in which this critique is framed according to Habermas’s framework is that any form of ‘difference’ can, and should be, (dis)solved through rational deliberations. For Habermas, therefore, difference has no epistemological basis. Consequently, his concept of the public sphere cannot give an adequate account of the pluralities of the social, despite the argumentations over validity-claims that take place within it. To be sure, from the vantage point of poststructuralism, all consensus models have the same effect of throttling the effective articulation of ‘difference’. Read this way, Habermas’s discourse pragmatics, far from being oriented towards real consensus and rational outcomes, in effect generate asymmetrical outcomes in discourse. The fact that the ‘levelling effect’ of the rules of discourse gives rise to intersubjective symmetries ironically makes any consensus arising out of lifeworld deliberations dubious. However this form of critique against Habermas, by poststructuralists, has been mainly a red herring as Richard Bernstein made clear in a rejoinder to Dallmayr’s critique of Habermas:

\footnote{475 Seyla Benhabib, ‘The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics’, \textit{New German Critique}, No. 35 (Spring–Summer, 1985) p. 93.}
\footnote{476 Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action}, pp. 120–121.}
\footnote{477 \textit{ibid}, p. 93 (emphasis in the original).}
As there are dangers in appeals to rational consensus, there are also dangers in the new celebration of fragmentation, différance and plurality. Indeed when we pursue the dialectic of such thinkers as Derrida, Lyotard and Rorty who are suspicious of all appeals to universal principles, we discover a ‘hidden’ form of universality. For when Lyotard calls for a playful agonistics of incommensurable language-games, he presupposes a universal principle in which we will be genuinely tolerant of the new forms of plurality and will not resort to terror.  

It is apparent from this discussion that the critique launched by poststructuralism against Habermas is fraught with its own problems. It seems that poststructuralists are engaged in a duplicitous form of appraisal where, on one hand, they lament the transcendental claims of universal pragmatics while on the other, introducing a claim of universal proportion of their own. The question as to which is the better claim, given the poststructuralist de-legitimation of all master narratives from which criteria to judge could be sought, is thus rendered superfluous. The poststructuralists have simply asked us to trust them on faith.

On this point, Adorno offers a basis for a more compelling critique of the intersubjective symmetries in Habermas’s public sphere – one that, in my view, manages to evade the pitfalls in which poststructuralist critiques sooner or later find themselves in. Again in the section on ‘Concepts and Categories’ in Negative Dialectics, Adorno highlights the need to be conscious of the ‘violence’ perpetrated by a generalized reason on the particular in the name of systemic order. This need arises from an awareness that order is a conceptual status that comes at the expense of recognising what lies outside rational cognition. The need to be mindful of the particularity of an object has always been a primary consideration of Adorno and is reflective of his status as a materialist philosopher in the Marxian tradition. It also differentiates him from those who would imagine meaning to emerge from the playful gestures of free-floating signifiers. Indeed a major point of difference between Adorno and poststructuralists is how he eschews any solution that lies in a simple reversal of the hierarchical system that governs the subject and object in idealist philosophy. By the same token he does not advocate a complete jettisoning of conceptual thought. In words that harkens back to Kant, the Frankfurt scholar proclaims that, ‘it is not the purpose of critical

479 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, pp. 134–207.  
480 Ibid, p. 136. According to Peter Dews, this has been a poststructuralist tendency. For a discussion on Derrida and Adorno see Peter Dews, Logics of Disintegration, pp. 46–54.
thought to place the object on the orphaned throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol'.

The object, for him, is the substrate indispensable to any form of conceptual thinking. It follows therefore that the object must be given preponderance in thought processes. Following Kant, Adorno posits that the object, as a rule, can never be fully comprehended or 'captured' by its concept. That is, there is always a leftover surplus; a nonidentity that lies 'outside' the cognitive matrix of classifying categories. As a consequence, all forms of knowledge that lay claim to a 'total' comprehension of reality are spurious; that is these knowledge-bases can only give an account of a 'false state of affairs'. Politically this can be interpreted as a call for a new politics based on the awareness or recognition of the idea of 'nonidentity'. As Adorno noted, '[T]he object's preponderance is solely attainable for subjective reflection, and for reflection on the subject'. This reflexivity on the nature of conceptual thought and its limitations in articulating the 'concrete particulars' of the other could be the perfect foil to the omissions generated by the concept of intersubjective symmetry. The existence of difference, therefore, signifies the limitations of reason in its current form and not the lack of it as Habermas claims. Thus to let identitarian, classificatory, or even communicative reason (dis)solve difference is, in fact, to perpetuate the status quo which, in turn, gives rise to a wrong kind of life. The point, according to Adorno, is not to dissolve differences but to teach reason to fully appreciate the other.

5.4 From Epistemology to Society: Intersubjective Symmetries as Exchange Relations.

The social counterpart to the hegemonic forms of modern knowledge is, for Adorno, exemplified by the principle of exchange in late capitalism. Just as reason suppresses difference in the form of nonidentity, to generate a pseudo-identity, so does the principle of exchange, in a bid to generate 'sameness', engender false perceptions. This it does by enforcing a pseudo form of equivalence between qualitatively different things. In this social scheme, money as an approximation of the exchange value of commodities is used to mediate between objects. This process renders the use-value associated with the intrinsic

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482 ibid, p. 135.
484 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 185.
485 See chapter 4.
properties of a commodity subservient to the exchange value the same commodity brings in market relations. Hence the value of a commodity is severed from its fundamental characteristics as a result of the power of market relations in contemporary societies. That is, the particularities of the object, in this case, are arbitrarily eliminated as a precondition for exchange.486 This dilemma, according to Adorno, lies at the core of what he sees as the 'problem of value' - a historical problem that has taken an emphatic form in modern exchange society.

This line of thought is not so much a peculiarly Adornian one as it is a derivation of Marx's argument, in a different context to be sure, encapsulated by his 'Critique of the Gotha Program'. For Marx, the problem of capitalist social reality (read 'false state of affairs') is best understood in terms of 'incommensurable equivalences'. This is to say that Marx views capitalist modernity, like its epistemological counterpart, as founded on a set of fundamental contradictions. He points out that in order to transcend these contradictions, capitalism as a system of commodity-exchange has to 'level off' all forms of incommensurability by a process of standardisation. This process abstracts from the particularity of each commodity by conjuring up a generalised and therefore non-representational notion of the thing in question. This generalised concept of the commodity, bereft of any references to the concrete specificity of the object, then allows for an arbitrary value of equivalence (exchange value) to be placed on the commodity so that exchange may take place. Marx uses this analysis to argue about the fundamental inequality between labour and capital in capitalist modernity. He extends this argument by insisting that the notion of 'equal rights', that emerges from this context would necessarily be bourgeois in nature.487 That is, 'equality' demanded by commodities (including labour power) succumbs to a law of averages that erases the concrete particulars of individual objects of trade. This argument points to the erasure of 'value differences' as the underlying principle of commodity-exchange. Marx recognises that commodity-exchange can only be activated through an exchange of equivalents which is, in turn, determined by a principle of averages. This, in turn, necessitates the elimination of particularities. Hence equal rights in the process of commodity exchange do not recognise 'class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else'.488 What is

486 The historical trajectory of this process as ratio is mapped out in the Dialectic – see chapter 2 of this essay.
488 Ibid.
recognised instead is 'unequal individual endowment' which is then used to explain away individual peculiarities such as 'productive capacity' as 'natural privileges'. As such, the concept of equality in capitalist modernity is essentially 'a right of inequality, in its content, like every other right'.

The affinities between the exchange principle, or ratio, and Habermas's intersubjective symmetry are quite obvious in the lines of reasoning above. Indeed if we relate the logic of the principle of exchange to the intersubjective symmetry of the public sphere, we will be faced with some fundamental similarities. For instance, we would be exposed to how Habermas's language-use follows the same law of the market in the sense that universal pragmatics recognizes no communicative differences between the interlocutors due to its levelling effect on the process of dialogue. Universal pragmatics becomes a mechanism that specifically generates equivalence between the interlocutors of the public sphere. This highlights the subterranean link between the logic of the commodity structure and universal pragmatics. It also renders obvious the fact that Habermas may have averted a problem – namely the performative contradiction that he alleges against the *Dialectic* – but only to be caught in another. His search for a new alternative which culminates in his theory of communicative reason makes him vulnerable to the problem besetting the principle of exchange as highlighted by Marx. In other words Habermas has basically redeployed the Marxian problematic of commodity exchange (exchange of equivalences) in the lifeworld under the guise of 'intersubjective symmetry'. Just as equivalences by necessity operate on a level of abstraction that undermines all other qualitative 'values' (such as use value) intrinsic to a commodity, so too does intersubjective symmetry iron out the concrete peculiarity of an individual. Individual needs and capacities are, in this way, glossed over as a condition for rational consensus in real discourse. In this way, the Habermasian designation of money as a 'steering mechanism' becomes, in Adornian parlance, a euphemism for totalitarian tendencies.

Commentators more sympathetic to Habermas have already pointed to the lacuna in Habermas's notion of universal pragmatics. Benhabib for instance encourages a 'radical

\[489\] Ibid.

\[490\] The affinities between Habermas's model here and the works on of Adam Smith on the 'invisible hand' of the market has been noted by commentators such as Deborah Cook – see Deborah Cook, 'A Response to Finlayson', *Historical Materialism*, Volume 11: 2 (2003) p. 190.

\[491\] Nancy S Love, 'Epistemology and Exchange', p. 93.
intersubjective symmetry' to take the place of intersubjective symmetry in the public sphere. This adoption of a radicalised notion of intersubjective symmetry is aimed at transcending the aporia associated with the 'exchange of equivalence' implicit in Habermas's universal pragmatics. For example, universal pragmatics require all interlocutors to leave behind experiences, emotions and standpoints that are peculiar to each of them, whereas Benhabib aims to come up with a communicative ethics that takes into account the 'standpoint of the concrete other'. In so doing, she reverses the 'levelling' telos of speech acts to allow for the re-articulation of difference in a way that will take into account some of the criticism levelled against the Habermasian communicative philosophy. In her own words '[O]ur differences ... must complement rather than exclude one another'.492 She does not, however, intend this new development to supplant the 'generalised other' of the public sphere that thrives only in universal principles. For her, the new radicalised notion of intersubjective symmetry is a corrective mechanism to the principle of universalisation inbuilt within language pragmatics.493

Marion Young, while generally agreeing with the broad contours of Benhabib's position in relation to Habermas, nevertheless, disputes the efficacy of a radicalised intersubjective symmetry that Benhabib employs to address certain shortcomings that the latter sees in Habermas's 'linguistic turn'.494 Young maintains that the usage of 'intersubjective symmetry' by Benhabib, however radicalised, can never achieve its expressed goals: an adequate account of 'difference' and a more 'authentic' form of political practice. This is because any form of deliberation based on 'intersubjective symmetry', by its own internal logic, would de-emphasise the 'concrete particulars' or personal endowments of individuals. Intersubjective symmetry would also gloss over the real differences that emerge between individuals as a result of living in a socially structured environment. This, for her, has grave implications in the quest for consensus.495 In a nutshell, consensus in such scenarios cannot really mean respect for difference. What she espouses in place of 'intersubjective symmetry' instead is 'asymmetrical reciprocity'. Let us briefly summarise what she means by this.

492 Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, p. 341.
495 *ibid.*, p. 343.
In an engrossing discussion, Iris Marion Young, points out that, rhetoric aside, the aporias associated with ‘symmetrical reciprocity’ in Habermas’s philosophy of language cannot be obviated by resorting to a radicalised version of the same thing. This, in her view, is what Benhabib does. Benhabib agrees wholeheartedly with Habermas on how ‘modern universalist norms of egalitarian reciprocity make explicit norms embedded in everyday speech’ but in recognition of the weaknesses of this stance ‘wishes to supplement it with activities of judgement that preserve the “standpoint of the concrete other”’. 496 Young, however, argues that this path cannot be fully followed if you share, together with Habermas, his basic precept of symmetry. What is needed, instead, is the development of an account of, ‘moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity that depends less on unity and consensus and attends more to the specific differences among people’. 497 This new way of relating to each other is unavoidably asymmetrical because of the specific history that each individual has and how this affects their worldviews. What she seems to indicate here echoes what has been raised before: that any form of consensus would, by necessity, undermine differences that are underpinned by alternative forms of cognition. In such a situation, a consensus is not so much rational as contrived. A contrived consensus, for Young, would be based on a form of understanding between all concerned as to how differences simultaneously animate and mediate between their respective positions. What both agreed on, though, is that the problem of ‘intersubjective symmetry’ in the public sphere can only be averted by undermining the subterranean links between the principle of exchange and intersubjective symmetry. This can only be done by transcending the concept of capitalist exchange as the exclusive basis from which a public sphere is theorised. 498 In this way, deliberation in the public sphere will, instead of seeing differences as a hurdle to equitable deliberation, positively consider the unique insights and strengths ‘difference’ brings into public deliberations. Needless to say, these revisionist attempts at Habermas’s communicative theory, through their emphasis on the corporeal being with distinct needs, capacities and temperaments, have a distinct Adornian ring to them.

In a related development, Jay Bernstein, in a search for an ethics to combat the moral morass of the contemporary age, has turned back to what he terms the ‘ethic of nonidentity’ in Adorno’s philosophy. 499 The whole exercise is enabled by an ingenious blending of Weber’s

496 *ibid*, p. 341.
497 *ibid*, p. 343.
498 *ibid*. Young refers to the dynamics of gift-giving as an instance of this transcendence.
499 Jay M Bernstein, *Adorno*. 

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notion of disenchantment with Adorno’s concept of the ‘damaged life’. This re-appropriation stems from Bernstein’s Adornian conviction that even though Habermas has clearly identified the root of the moral problems besetting the modern age as revolving around the ‘colonisation of the life-world’, this aporetic situation cannot be countered by universal pragmatics. This is because of the natural tendency of reason to devalue meaning as well as truth and, hence, to usher in a sense of disenchantment. This disenchantment in turn removes the motivation that is needed to pursue certain ethical goals that are deemed important in society. Indeed, as Bernstein puts it, ‘[B]ecause what is undermined is the worth of our highest values, their meaningfulness for us, there arises the question of why we should pursue these values – what conceivably could motivate us to do so’. Habermas’s theory of communicative action, viewed from this vantage point, is helpless in the face of reification. By excluding, ‘ethical substance, affects, and sensual appearances,’ communicative reason, with its emphasis on moral rationalism, obfuscates the conditions that would give rise to the emergence of motivations that will, in turn, spur people to break through the reified screen of capitalist logic. This aporia necessitates, amongst other things, a revision of the current Habermasian conception of philosophy as a modest endeavour in mediating between ‘the logics of expert cultures and the lifeworld’. Adorno explicates this need by alluding to a new categorical imperative that comes into effect after the holocaust of the Second World War: an imperative that dictates that the aporias of capitalist modernity can only be legitimately critiqued from the vantage point of autonomy or freedom of the species being. This argument has been echoed by Axel Honneth who is of the view that Habermas’s theory of communication is restricted by its overriding concern with the linguistic rules governing the ‘ideal speech situation’. These rules suppress the individuality, or personal endowment, of the interlocutors leading them to:

experience an impairment of what we can call their moral experiences, that is, their “moral point of view”, not as a restriction of intuitively mastered rules of language, but as a violation of identity claims acquired in socialisation.

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500 This view is also shared by other sympathisers such as Albrecht Wellmer and others like Agnes Heller. For an account see Bent Flyvberg, ‘Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers of Civil Society? The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Jun., 1998) p. 218.
503 Dieter Freundlieb, ‘Rethinking Critical Theory’, p. 81.
504 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 365.
Hence the problems of the concept of intersubjective symmetries that Habermas presupposes in his ‘ideal speech situation’ have grave implications to the way in which we may attempt to rectify deficiencies in contemporary democratic societies.

Adorno is aptly sensitised to Marx’s insight into the problematical nature of exchange, or ratio, in bourgeois society. Where he differs is in his insistence that the problem besetting value is not exclusively a characteristic of modern society. Its origin, in fact, can be traced back to the emergence of identity-thinking as a means to the successful mastery of nature by humans.506 As such, the problem is as old as humanity itself:

[W]hat has become known as the value problem became constituted in a phase in which means and ends were torn asunder in order to dominate nature without difficulty; in which rationality of means progressed by unreduced or where possible increasing irrationality of ends.507

For him the problem of value lies in its defacement by the principle of exchange that undergirds conceptual thought itself. Indeed Adorno sees modern exchange as the secularisation of sacrificial worship symptomatic of pre-modern society: a form of worship that is at the same time a mechanism that humans use to control the deities.508 That is, exchange, as sacrifice before it, is enabled by a forced symmetry between unlike values. They both stand, as a result, for the ‘false state of affairs’ that links the mythical mindset of the past with the bourgeois consciousness of the present.

Adorno would, thus, attempt to address the anomalies associated with intersubjective symmetries by pointing to a similar dilemma arising out of the pretensions of a ‘correspondence theory of truth’. For him, all articulations of truth that equate conceptual validity with the absolute suffer from a form of moral blindness. This is because they all fail to respect the uniqueness of concrete beings. Modern exchange society epitomises this lack of moral respect. The subversion of this state of affairs, for Adorno, means an emphatic acknowledgement of nonidentity although this must not be at the expense of conceptual reason.509 Preserving the dignity of the object would mean keeping track of all the insights about the object that are generated from its concept by means of a constellation.510 The whole point however is to continuously show the inadequacy of our concepts to capture their

506 See chapter 2.
508 Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, ‘Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment’ p. 122. Also see chapter 2 for a fuller account.
509 The reasons for this are covered in chapter 4.
510 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 149.
objects — our social reality. This realisation will, in turn, become the basis of a new and more honest relation between the concept and its object. As he puts it ‘[L]iving in the rebuke that the thing is not identical with the concept is the concept’s longing to become identical with the thing’. In other words, a new categorical imperative bordering on a moral respect for difference becomes the way in which Adorno hopes to subvert the status quo. The absence of this appreciation for difference in Habermas’s theory renders its claims for a more rational society dubious. In fact, far from subverting the status quo, Habermas ends up defending a truncated version of modernity.

5.4.1 Reaffirming the Neo-Liberal Order.

The incorporation of the exchange principle by Habermas, under the rubric of an intersubjective symmetry within the lifeworld, also brings to the fore an accusation often levelled at him as being an apologist of the status quo. This allegation came about as analysts became conversant with the methodological affinities that lie between the concept of ‘free market’ and Habermas’s notion of the lifeworld. The way that Habermas defines the dynamics of the lifeworld — that is, as a site of open and rational debate between participants well grounded in the intricacies of universal pragmatics — bears an uncanny resemblance to the ideology that grounds the concept of ‘free market’. Universal pragmatics guides the debate in the same way that the ‘Invisible Hand’ ensures that everything is at equilibrium in the market at all times. In fact Habermas has never denied the historical links between the liberal public sphere and the market. The reason for this may lie in Gestrich’s observation of the specific way in which the subterranean link between the public sphere and economy is fashioned by the way Habermas ‘reduces the underlying forces of historical change to economic development’. This runs in direct contrast to the way Habermas explains the system as being anchored in the lifeworld. In light of the links established between the public sphere and the economy, Habermas’s designation of the lifeworld as a site of social reproduction based on fair and free exchanges becomes quite problematic. As Young puts it

511 Ibid.
512 This is a reference to the ‘parallels’ (strictly on a methodological level) that is apparent between the two concepts.
514 Jürgen Habermas, Structural transformation of the Public Sphere, p. 74.
516 See chapter 3.
Many contexts of moral interaction and political conflicts involve members of socially and culturally differentiated groups that also stand in specific relations to privilege and oppression with respect to one another.  

This is to say that what happens outside the public sphere often determines the kinds of outcome that are generated from within. The link, established by Habermas, between the system and the lifeworld means that the colonisation of the latter is a given. His method of curbing the vagaries of systemic logic on the lifeworld is, in light of this, akin to closing the paddock gates after the horses have bolted. The capitalist system and its reifying effects cannot be undone by a theoretical sleight of hand in the hope of establishing an enclave of 'freedom' that is more or less detached from the vicissitudes of modern life. The implications of this are worth considering: first and foremost is the glaring fact that universal pragmatics cannot achieve the goals that Habermas has set for it – the emergence of equitable outcomes based on intersubjective consensus. Second is that the social environment under which universal pragmatics operates has the capacity, albeit one that Habermas does not recognise, to negate its emancipatory aims. This suggests that Habermas may have misread the historical trajectory of the development of capitalist modernity. Indeed his analysis of the evolution of modern society runs in the face of current orthodoxies. For instance, in the field of economics, reputable experts have long realised that the 'free market' model is based on the untenable assumption of the availability of perfect information in the market. Joseph E Stiglitz, the former chief economist of the World Bank, in an insightful foreword to Karl Polanyi's classic, *The Great Transformation*, observes that,

> [T]oday there is no respectable intellectual support for the proposition that markets, by themselves, lead to efficient, let alone equitable outcomes. Whenever information is imperfect or markets are incomplete - that is, essentially always - interventions exist in principle [to] improve the efficiency of resource allocation.

This is the economic context in which deliberations within the lifeworld (or for that matter the public sphere) take place. Perfect information does not arise exclusively from market processes – in fact the opposite occurs much more often. The corollary to this is that, given the intrinsic links established above between the economy and the lifeworld, one would conclude that the dynamics of universal pragmatics is not enough to create perfect symmetries within the lifeworld, and by extension, the public sphere. This critique is not limited to economics alone. Poststructuralist philosophers, as well as those sympathetic to

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517 Iris Marion Young, 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity', p. 349.
Habermas's communicative ethics, have problematised the dynamics of the 'lifeworld', governed as they are by universal pragmatics, as too truncated. For both, intersubjective symmetry cannot adequately account for the polyvalent nature of sociality. As a consequence any consensus in the public sphere would always be an incomplete one. This is to say that far from its stated intention of symmetrical contestations between interlocutors, any consensus is a form of coercion as 'incommensurable language games', shorn of any relation to grand discourses, fight for their place in the sun. Either way, distorted communication, far from being averted, is the order of the day.\textsuperscript{519} The 'ideal speech situation', in fact, misrepresents intersubjective interaction in the lifeworld by erroneously assuming that given the telos of universal pragmatics, the lifeworld can be safeguarded from communicative distortion. Just as the economic differences between classes lead to hegemonic worldviews, the socially structured differences between interlocutors, given their particularities, mean that any consensus arising out of the public sphere will be a lopsided one. In other words rational consensus, given the above, may potentially be a euphemism for the perpetuation of the status quo.

As is made clear from his discussion of the object and its nonidentity, Adorno would have accused any model premised on intersubjective symmetry of dismissing as inconsequential what it cannot account for. By assuming that the levelling of all particularities associated with the interlocutors in the public sphere is a desirable outcome, universal pragmatics renders itself blind to the way in which historical circumstances, patterned by capitalist forces, are complicit in the production of uneven outcomes. To be fair, Habermas might respond, in a Kantian vein, that the intersubjective symmetry of an ideal discourse allows the particularities of different individuals to be expressed and ultimately incorporated into general norms that are acceptable to all parties. If this is the case, then it seems that the power of reflection over contingency, or mind over matter, that both Frankfurt scholars found problematic in the dialectic of Hegel has been reinstated by default through the notion of universal pragmatics. For Habermas, this reflection is presupposed in the actual discourse within the public sphere.\textsuperscript{520} The fundamental differences between these Frankfurt scholars are, perhaps, better illuminated by viewing them through the lens of another debate that took place before this: the polemical exchanges between Adorno and Heidegger on the aporias of subject-centred reason.

\textsuperscript{519} David West, \textit{Introduction to Continental Philosophy}, p. 199.

\textsuperscript{520} In this way he differs from Kant who posits that his transcendental subject can identify universal moral principles through solitary reflection.
5.4.2 The problem of 'pure' Subjectivity: The Dilemmas of Fundamental Ontology.

The fault-lines between the accounts of Adorno and Habermas on the nature of contemporary realities can be illuminated by the dispute between critical theory of the Frankfurt School and fundamental ontology on the problems surrounding true understanding. To be sure, the dilemma that is at the heart of our (mis)understanding is quite well known in western philosophical traditions. This is nowhere more apparent than in the problems of idealism and positivism: one valorises the subject while the other glorifies the object (empiricism). It is in light of this polarised, hence one dimensional, nature of understanding that Heidegger tries to ‘escape’ from the subject-object relations of our knowing. Indeed, faced with the antimonies of subject-centred knowledge, Heidegger felt that it is only through a process of transcendence that we can approach truth. In other words, authentic understanding, for him, comes only via the bypassing of subject-object dynamics. This is made possible by means of appealing directly to the ‘object’. Adorno, however, vehemently denies the legitimacy of fundamental ontology, pointing out in the process that the only compelling way out is to work your way through this difficulty. For him, bypassing the subject-object problematic is at the same time turning a blind eye on the dialectical ways in which the two poles engage with each other. Appealing directly to the ‘thing’ or ‘being in the world’ is to forget that the ‘thing’ is already mediated. Therefore uncritical acceptance of it is a reversion to unmediated consciousness (philosophy of consciousness). This is to say that Heidegger’s ‘escape’ from subject-object relations is a flight directly into ‘pure’ subjectivity. As Adorno ironically observed, the Heideggerian ‘escape’ was simply one that leads him back ‘into the mirror’. Brian O’Connor sums this up succinctly:

the failure to work within dialectical epistemology means that it will be impossible to recognize the real role of the object as prior to the subject. Consequently, implicit rejection of Adorno’s epistemology means reverting to a ‘pre-dialectical’ position ... For Adorno, quite simply, a pre-mediaational position amounts to an unmediated subjectivity: a subject that is not explained by reference to objects.

In other words, Heidegger’s attempt to circumvent subject-object relations in the cognitive process lands him squarely within the aporias associated with rampant idealism.

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522 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 84.
This critique can also be applied in the case of the linguistic turn as this paradigm shift was seen by Habermas as the ‘exit’ out of the aporias associated with the philosophy of consciousness. For Habermas, one of the major revisions of his new critical theory was the jettisoning of dialectics. The major impetus that drove him to this was the conviction that we are no longer living in an age where universal ideologies reign. Instead we are living in a post-ideological age where people are increasingly determining through dialogue the issues that were once the domain of world-views. Thus the adoption of a philosophy of language based on universal pragmatics simply removed the need for ideology critique. Indeed the presence of symmetrical inter-subjectivities in the Habermasian schema means that all validity claims are based on non-dialectical discourse between subjects.

As Adorno points out to Heidegger, a non-dialectical approach to reasoning blinds us to the way in which the subject and object interact in processes of understanding. The epistemological subject in the Habermasian public sphere is therefore a subject that is severed from its somatic nature. The severing of the subject from its corporeal dimension is, in Habermas’s view, the precondition to symmetry in discourse. As such all validity claims would reflect the unmediated subjectivities in the public sphere. This is to say that, when counter-posing Habermas’s model of communicative competence with the polemics mounted by Adorno against fundamental ontology, it becomes clear that the so-called exit out of subject-centred philosophy directly leads to a form of pure subjectivity in lifeworld processes. Discourse, under the guise of rational deliberation, in this way becomes a ‘will to power’.

5.4.3 The Invisible hence ‘Invincible’ subject: The absence of corporeality.
The problem of severing subjective thought from its somatic character exposes the Kantian legacy in Habermas’s interlocutor. The ‘sensuous being’ with all its passions and idiosyncrasies seems to have been erased to make way for subjective symmetries. Agnes Heller describes this condition by cynically pointing out that the interlocutor in Habermas’s public sphere is bereft of feelings, let alone a body. The Habermasian subject is the mind or spirit, since its personality structure ‘is identified with cognition (and) language’. Furthermore, Heller continues, the Aristotelian idea of the ‘good life’ becomes, for Habermas, something that ‘consists solely of rational communication’. In putting forward a

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conception of the subject with neither body nor passion, Habermas seems to be arguing ‘that needs can be argued without being felt’.\textsuperscript{525} The subject, in not feeling any pain, loss, grief or ecstatic moments of joy, love and happiness becomes rationally invincible. The price of this invincibility is well accounted for in the \textit{Dialectic}.

Adorno, on the other hand, views human needs, such as freedom, as grounded in the corporeal dimension of subjectivity. That is, Adorno’s subject is an embodied one. The insistence on the intertwinement of thought with its somatic dimension has been a constant theme in the works of both Adorno and Horkheimer. In an earlier essay, the authors of the \textit{Dialectic} attempt to demonstrate the intertwinement of abstract thought and emotional responses arising out of the existential experiences of being, by noting how emotions, such as suffering, have given impetus to the emancipatory character of subjective thought. Indeed it was Horkheimer who, in a move reminiscent of Marx, first mooted the connection behind suffering and emancipation by insisting that ‘[P]ain has always been the most reliable teacher of reasoning’.\textsuperscript{526} What he means by this is that the experience of physical pain compels our consciousness to seek ways of alleviating it. This became a thematic statement for Adorno’s subsequent work as is encapsulated in his dialectical intertwinement of hope and despair.

In a recent publication, Lambert Zuidervaart pointed out the centrality of passion in Adorno’s philosophical pursuit of truth.\textsuperscript{527} Citing from \textit{Negative Dialectics}, Zuidervaart argued that for Adorno, ‘the key to avoiding philosophy’s avoidance of societal evil is also a key to philosophy’s pursuit of truth’.\textsuperscript{528} Moreover, this key to truth can only be realised if we give a voice to suffering so that it may express itself.\textsuperscript{529} As Zuidervaart explains:

\begin{quote}
[T]he need to express suffering is a primary motivation for Adorno’s critique of identitarian thought, his insistence on nonidentity, his emphasis on conceptualising the nonconceptual, and the stress his philosophy places on linguistic presentation and conceptual constellations.\textsuperscript{530}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{525} Agnes Heller, ‘Habermas and Marxism’ in \textit{Habermas: Critical Debates}, edited by John B Thompson and David Held (London: Macmillan Press, 1982) p. 22. This argument is reminiscent of Aristotle who, in some of his writings, asserts that the ideal life seems to be one of rational contemplation.

\textsuperscript{526} Cited in Ben Morgan, ‘The Project of the Frankfurt School’, p. 82.

\textsuperscript{527} Lambert Zuidervaart, \textit{Social Philosophy after Adorno}, pp. 61–64.

\textsuperscript{528} \textit{ibid}, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{529} \textit{ibid}. For the original quotation see Theodor Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, pp. 17–18.

\textsuperscript{530} Lambert Zuidervaart, \textit{Social Philosophy after Adorno}, p. 61.
Adorno's insistence on the twin notions of 'suffering' and 'hope' is a distillation of his belief in the efficacy of human passions to subvert the status quo and transform society. Adorno himself expounded on this theme in *Negative Dialectics*, noting that the 'physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, (and) that things should be different'. Suffering in this context is to be understood in both its existential as well as metaphorical sense. Existentially, it stands for the forced separation of the mind from the body giving rise to melancholy of both body and spirit. This, for Adorno, is exemplified by the existence of damaged life-forms in capitalist societies. Metaphorically it points to an identitarian logic wreaking havoc on epistemological categories through its suppression of nonidentity. Both meanings, because of their common premise, are a call for a wholesale transformation of society. In this way the dialectical intertwining of suffering and hope becomes a mainstay of Adorno's political philosophy, with the former becoming the condition of possibility for the latter. The importance of this guiding principle cannot be overstated as far as Adorno is concerned. For him, letting 'suffering' express itself first (through feelings of unhappiness) before trying to understand it conceptually makes philosophy capable of averting the twin dangers of 'forgetting and perpetuating suffering'. Resistance to suffering is then 'occasioned by a corporeal feeling of abhorrence towards suffering'. The fundamental supposition that animates Adorno's oeuvre therefore is that: it is only through experiencing suffering and anguish that we can reinstate our hope in the emergence of a better society where mindless misery has no place.

This passion is not at all obvious in Habermas's rules of language-use. In fact Habermas tends to view passions as aporetic and self-defeating. The absence of passion renders Habermas's normative grounding of critical theory in universal pragmatics inadequate. This is especially so in the face of the vicissitudes of living in a secular world, whose framework of rationality tends to be self-undermining. Will 'rational agreement' in the public sphere have the same impetus or motivation as the corporeal abhorrence of suffering in changing the status quo? This is a question that we need to grapple with in light of the challenges that face us.

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531 This duality of 'suffering' and 'hope' is also a central thesis of Marx. Marx in fact saw progression as a derivative of 'suffering' — see Agnes Heller, 'Habermas and Marxism', pp. 22–23.
532 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 203.
535 This is a feature that separates Habermas from Adorno and Marx. Marx has always been concerned with the plight of the species being. For an account of this, see Agnes Heller, 'Habermas and Marxism', p. 22.
5.5 Conclusion.

A number of problems are associated with the theory of communicative competence. The first one relates to how the political dimension of Habermas’s communicative theory is based on the view that the pragmatic suppositions of the lifeworld are the same ones that regulate the discourse ethics of his public sphere. The objective of these rules of discursive engagement is to ensure a symmetrical equivalence between the interlocutors of the public sphere. This leads to a condition of ‘symmetrical intersubjectivity’. The importance of establishing this condition cannot be overstated for Habermas. Yet we have seen how this condition has been problematised even by authors who are sympathetic to Habermas’s philosophy. The basic argument, posed by protagonists and antagonists alike, is that Habermas’s delineation of universal pragmatics fails, in a nutshell, to give an adequate account of the pluralities of the social. It follows, therefore, that any such consensual outcomes arising out of symmetrical deliberations are suspect. This raises an urgent question: do all consensus models, like the one that Habermas advocates, have the effect of throttling the effective articulation of ‘difference’?

Secondly, the difference between the Adorno’s and Habermas’s exegeses on the problematic of the ‘Enlightenment project’ boils down to their conception of the nature, texture and nuances of reason itself. What Adorno deems as a deformity of reason, reflected in the capitalist commodity structure, Habermas sees as a legitimate form of reason (purposive rational) that in his two tier theory of society is intrinsic only to the ‘system’. The principle of exchange, that Adorno critically castigates, is therefore viewed as unproblematic by Habermas, since he associates its drives with processes that are linked to the survival of the species. What this means is that the model of the commodity structure, for Habermas, is not at all symptomatic of a social pathology. Yet if the commodity structure erases the particularity of the commodity for exchange, in the way that universal pragmatics generate intersubjective symmetries for consensus, then Habermas’s lifeworld and, by extension, the public sphere can no longer be the site of rational agreement. In light of this, nothing short of a radicalisation of the public sphere can salvage it for contemporary needs. This radicalisation, of course, presupposes the transformation of the status quo.

It is the contention of the next chapter that if we are to reanimate the public sphere along Adornian lines, this will first and foremost entail paying careful attention to how intersubjective symmetries, like Hegel’s dialectic, dismiss what they cannot account for as inconsequential: namely, the somatic dimension of thought. The unproblematic way that intersubjective symmetries negate all particularities brought by the interlocutors into the public sphere is a cause for concern. Indeed, if we are to allow this, then it seems the power of reflection over contingency that Habermas and Adorno find problematic in the dialectics of Hegel has been reinstated by default through the notion of universal pragmatics. This ultimately brings to mind Adorno’s point about the relationship between society and knowledge and his view that a critique of one is also a critique of the other. In fact, as we shall see in the next chapter, the elision of particularity in intersubjective discourse proves to be problematic for Habermas’s moral philosophy as well as his concept of freedom.
Chapter 6

Negative Dialectics and the idea of Autonomy.

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This chapter outlines the main ways in which a public sphere, predicated on a negative dialectic, illuminates some of the more ostensible weaknesses of Habermas’s model of deliberative democracy. As has been shown in the previous chapters, the concept of the public sphere undergirds Habermas’s theory of democracy. Thus a revision of the dynamics of the public sphere would entail a corresponding reconsideration of the main motifs of his procedural model concerning the democratisation of society. The chapter continues from the last in the sense that it reworks the aporias surrounding his theory of communicative action to problematise his concept of the public sphere. Hence the chapter, in delineating the difficulties surrounding Habermas’s political philosophy, suggests that the second generation scholar from Frankfurt must turn back to Adorno if his theory of democracy is to be more relevant given our contemporary realities. The way the chapter goes about this is through a critical examination of Habermas’s notion of freedom and how this concept, generated by the public sphere, is rendered problematic from an Adornian viewpoint. In other words, the weaknesses apparent in Habermas’s model of democracy are embedded in his conception of freedom arising out of the public sphere. The chapter, therefore, delineates ways in which the deliberative model of democracy, espoused by Habermas, can be improved: improvements that would go some way to circumventing the debilitating effects of contestations guided by discourse ethics.538

This chapter, therefore, begins by identifying the epistemological markers, from which a negative dialectic articulates a politics of freedom and emancipation. Apart from this being a corrective to the weaknesses associated with the failure of discourse ethics to transform society, this section also aims to correct the erroneous claim that Adorno’s political philosophy is tainted with nihilistic tendencies, thus, unable to sustain an emancipatory theory of society (6.1). Needless to say, this section is the culmination of a defence as well as a restatement of the political saliency of Adorno’s negative dialectic and its insistence on a politics based on the concept of nonidentity: a defence that was first sketched out in chapter 2 and continued in chapter 4 of the dissertation. The next section (6.2) seeks to further

538 See chapter 5.
consolidate Adorno’s contemporary relevance through a discussion of how the somatic character of thought provides a warrant for the search of a better society. This section is important as it suggests how a stronger notion of truth is open to Adorno as a result of his linking of thoughts to their somatic origins. The ultimate presupposition of this section stems from the conviction that a weak notion of truth gives rise to a corresponding notion of freedom in the public sphere. This does not augur well for the fate of the already truncated notion of freedom that Habermas offers. The overall aim is to tease out how the absence of corporeality in Habermas’s theory of communicative competence blinds it to the world of realpolitik. This further underpins the difficulties inherent in Habermas’s linguistic turn. Section 6.3 argues that the incorporation of the dialectical method into Habermas’s public sphere would ensure its continued relevance in a world marked by radical forms of pluralism. The guiding principles of the discussion in this section revolve around the attempt to rectify some of the deficiencies pertaining to Habermas’s political philosophy, hence making the public sphere more relevant to contemporary forms of sociality. This is then followed by some concluding remarks (6.4).

6.1 Nonidentity as Transformative Political Praxis: From Theory to Practice.

Some commentators argue that Adorno’s political oeuvre is bereft of any political commitments.539 The views that Adorno’s politics have been completely overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding bordering on defeatism have relied mostly on two unrelated developments. The first emerged as a backlash on the part of Frankfurt University students on what they saw as Adorno’s conservatism during the 1968 student revolt in Germany. The crisis, which was initially aimed at the university as a learning institution, took an ugly turn when Adorno, the author of a radical form of criticism based on a negative dialectic, which, by then, was widely appropriated by various groups, refused to be a mentor for the student dissidents. The series of disruptions to his classes as well as on his personal well-being took its toll on the Frankfurt philosopher.540 His presumed failure to live up to the callings of his own theory led to the dubious allegations that negative dialectic was a mere shell, lacking in substance.

540 This is quite clear in his correspondence with Herbert Marcuse around the time – see Theodor Adorno ‘Correspondence on the German Student Movement’, New Left Review, No.1 (Jan–Feb, 1999) pp. 123–124.
The second development came about as a consequence of the heated debate between Habermas and the French poststructuralists. In order to highlight that the nihilistic tendencies embedded within poststructuralism have always been known to German critical scholarship, Habermas argued that the philosophical weaknesses inherent in poststructuralist thought are the same as those that afflict the Dialectic. For Habermas, the radical critique of society is both irrational and defeatist: irrational in the sense that it has no remaining normative yardstick to gauge itself on while, defeatist because it revolves around the fact that critique turns in on itself thus becoming a radical strain of, to use Ricoeur’s term, the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. How, Habermas wonders, can emancipation be realised if the tools of its realization are rendered complicit in the suppression of emancipatory potentials? This so-called sceptical outlook in relation to transformative practice is well documented and is why Adorno’s Negative Dialectics has also been castigated as sterile and incoherent.

The irony of these accusations becomes obvious when one takes into account what a negative dialectic stands for in terms of transformative politics. Indeed, if one evaluates the philosophical and political saliency of the concept of nonidentity, one would not fail to conclude that allegations of defeatism against Adorno are spurious. A closer perusal of this concept will help us understand the utopian moment embedded within negative dialectics and, by extension, Adorno’s political commitments to a better society. A ‘better society’, for Adorno, would be one that is qualitatively different to the one currently existing under the aegis of positivism, idealism and capitalism. Admittedly Adorno does not allow the contours of this new society to be defined in positive terms. This however is not a result of any political inhibitions on his part but rather the consequence of him being a dialectician: ‘[T]hose schooled in dialectical theory are reluctant to indulge in positive images of the proper society’, since history has shown that ‘all social utopias since Plato’s merge in a dismal resemblance of what they were devised against’. The call for a better society, in this way, turns out to be a lament against the existing state of affairs. As such, nonidentity becomes a reminder that the social totality conjured up by identity-thinking is necessarily false. The pseudo-nature of freedom in contemporary society is, thus, revealed.

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To fully appreciate the philosophical as well as the political valences of Adorno’s concept of nonidentity, one has to grasp his account of the dynamics of what he terms ‘identity thinking’ and how this entails the wilful suppression of difference. By reminding us of the limitations of identitarian thought, nonidentity serves as a clarion call for the recognition of the structural limitations embedded within the status quo and the need to transform them. That is, only a knowledge that seeks to faithfully and truthfully represent its object would free humanity from the mental dyspepsia that has blinded it to the real need of modern society – the attainment of a right form of life. A right kind of life will be, for him, one that is based on freedom.

Adorno indeed observes that, as a method, negative dialectics espouses knowledge ‘coinciding with the object’. In other words, he sees the quest for truth and the emergence of the right kind of life as being inextricably linked. Truth, in this way becomes the basis of all transformative praxis. Its absence leads to a sociality devoid of real freedom, hence the emergence of a modern society that perverts the idea of truth by making it subservient to reigning social interests. The contradictions inherent in this kind of society are summed up by Marcuse’s concept of ‘repressive tolerance’ – a condition that subverts all possible forms of resistance against it by means of an ideological smokescreen that falsely assures everyone that their real needs are being met. Adorno’s position is consistent with the stance he took against Sir Karl Popper, in the ‘Positivist Dispute’. It is here that Adorno maintains, contra Popper, that the idea of truth cannot be treated in isolation from the revolutionary practice that will lead to a true society. In fact any analysis of society that is content with the status quo reveals its conservative bias in imagining that nothing can be better than what currently exists. For Adorno, a true reconciliation between truth and society necessitates the transformations of contemporary ‘guidelines’ that regulate human relations and actions. In other words, what Habermas took for granted – the steering media of bureaucratic power and money (for the system), as well as the universal pragmatics that regulates the lifeworld – Adorno problematises and, subsequently, demands their transformation. In this way the

544 See chapter 4.
545 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p.160.
547 In an interview in 1978, Marcuse insists that the essay that goes by the same name, ‘already presupposes, at least politically, a very different society’ – see Myriam Malinovich, ‘Marcuse in 1978’, p. 363.
548 See chapter 4.
continuity between Adorno’s philosophical writings and his political philosophy is made apparent.

It is, thus, obvious that despite the sense of melancholy that informs Adorno’s political writings, his theory of negative dialectics remains fused to a vision of a better society – a warrant that animates the Frankfurt School. Indeed Adorno uses melancholy to remind us of the historical nature of social change and how, in our historical development, we have come to valorise a certain logic that has removed us further and further away from the ability to discern things as they really are. The main crux of Habermas critique of Adorno as that of defeat is, therefore, misplaced.


A related problem that arises from the discussion above concerns the notion of autonomy, because freedom, as a concept, is irrevocably linked to ideas of truth. In other words, without a notion of truth, the concept of autonomy becomes an empty signifier. This is not to argue that Habermas’s theory of communicative action evades the issue of truth – far from it in fact. Habermas’s claim of the context-transcending moment inherent in speech acts in itself as a truth-claim. The issue is not so much the existence of truth in Habermas’s work per se but how it is derived in his paradigmatic framework. Truth, for Habermas, cannot be separated from the raising of validity-claims within the public sphere. That is, truth can only be derived from a situation that is defined as that of a rational consensus: a situation that is governed by the ideals of speech pragmatics. Since Habermas is of the view that there is a context-transcending moment in all speech acts, it therefore follows that the truth that arises out of rational consensus is also assumed to transcend the contexts of each individual truth-claim raised within the public sphere. Indeed Habermas himself has succinctly endorsed the linkage between his discourse theory of truth and the formal characteristics of the ‘ideal speech situation’.

Albrecht Wellmer, however, has pointed out the provisional nature of this truth. By insisting on the contingent nature of all rational agreements, Habermas in effect puts forward a weak notion of truth. Indeed the provisional nature of rational consensus in the public sphere renders it inadequate as a theory of truth at the same time. When you combine this weak

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550 See chapter 3.
notion of the truth with his view about the asymmetries in rational stocks that are the bases for parity in deliberations, then what comes out is a concept of freedom that is quite controversial. This is to say that the concept of autonomy, arising out of the context regulated by a weak notion of truth and the universalisation of a notion of truth that strategically favours a specific geographical space, is robbed of its own semantic potentials and runs contrary to what Habermas has in mind.

Wellmer notes that the solution to this problem lies in the development of a more adequate notion of consensus-based truth. To do this however would entail supplementing the existing mechanisms of the public sphere with an additional 'standard' or criterion that would result in a 'stronger' notion of truth. This is to say that, for him, discourse ethics do not have any other means of ensuring rational outcomes in discourse other than by appealing to reason. In relation to this difficulty he argues that:

this problem can only be circumvented in Habermas’s version of consensus theory by including among the structural characteristics of an ideal speech situation a sufficient competence to judge on the part of all participants.

In other words, rationality as the primary arbitrator in the public sphere is inadequate for the purpose Habermas has in mind. The reason is that a weak notion of truth empties rational consensus of its juridical and emancipatory potentials. This, in hindsight, is one of the latent reasons behind the reconceptualisation of freedom in Habermas’s discourse ethics: that autonomy is an outcome of a truth that is decided by the universalisation principle. Habermas’s notion of truth is thus inseparable from the contestation of competing validity claims within the public sphere. In order to make truth include all truth-claims that are laid out within the arena of deliberation, a rational consensus has to be achieved. This form of consensus in turn is premised on the idea of universal equality, or what Benhabib terms symmetrical reciprocity between the interlocutors. The is problematic, as is highlighted by the German social commentator Matthias Fritsch, who observes that:

553 See footnote 466 above for an account of the unequal rational resources available to people from different regions in the world.
554 Peter Dews also recognises this problem when he argues that ‘Habermas’s whole conception of a discourse ethics ultimately rests on specific, albeit culturally deep-rooted, commitments to freedom and autonomy’ which in their turn ‘cannot be derived from the normative structure of the speech-situation as such’ — see Peter Dews, The Limits of Disenchantment, p. 274.
556 Jürgen Habermas, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, pp. 120–121.
Modern egalitarianism is characterized by the double claim that first, equality is fundamental in that it is not itself grounded in, and thus limited by, other norms, but rather grounds and conditions all others. And, secondly, equality enjoys priority over non-egalitarian norms of singularity, such as solidarity, loyalty, friendship, love, pity, compassion, care and so forth.558

Furthermore he agrees with the argument that according a ‘fundamental priority’ to equality, in this way, at the expense of ‘non-egalitarian norms of singularity’ is erroneous since what is to be justified (i.e. equality’s fundamental priority) ‘is already presupposed in the very concept of normative justification’.559 In fact the assertion of priority that is bestowed on equality neglects the fact that in order to realise its objective, equality needs to engage with other ‘non-egalitarian norms of singularity’ in a way that will not render these norms redundant. That is, equality has to take on each specific norm of singularity using the very yardstick of that particular norm. Yet by doing so, equality engages in a non-egalitarian process itself.560

Adorno, on the other hand, is fully aware of the asymmetrical nature of modern forms of mediation. He puts this down to the different natures of the subject and object themselves. The difference, in his observation, lies in that the subject has a substrate and in this way is also an object while ‘[A]n object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains other than the subject’.561 These fundamentally different natures of subject and object mean that in any form of mediation ‘the subject enters into the object altogether differently from the way the object enters into the subject’.562 The point that he is trying to convey is that concepts such as universal equality cannot realize their true form unless they are open to the particular and contingent. As such, any form of positive universal truth can only come about through the suppression of particularity. This robs truths of their content, rendering them provisional in the process. A provisional concept of truth arising out of free and equal deliberations within a public sphere may have an adverse impact on the idea of freedom. This difficulty is related to the problematic nature of language-use in a social context defined by the principle of exchange. Indeed, given this context, communication succumbs to identity thinking and hence deviates from its ideal presuppositions by ‘falsifying truth and selling it

559 Ibid.
560 Ibid.
561 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 183.
562 Ibid, p. 183. He further explains on page 186 that ‘Mediation of the object means that it must not be statically, dogmatically hypostatized but can only be known as it entwines with subjectivity; mediation of the subject means that without the object it would be literally nil’.

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From an Adornian standpoint, when truth is robbed of its semantic potentials to critique social reality an apotheosis of the status quo immediately ensues. This occurs in two ways; either through an abstraction process (as in liberal political philosophies) or via a process of deconstruction (as in poststructuralism especially in Derrida). Habermas’s deontological discourse ethics, as a result of the severance of questions of validity and legitimacy from those of the good life, is only possible via a process of abstraction. This is linked directly to the actual dynamics of exclusion at work in a public sphere moored in universal pragmatics. Given this, any form of insistence on an abstract equality between interlocutors in a deliberative setting serves only to prop up all reigning interests in society.

In light of this, Adorno puts forward a notion of truth that comes about through an authentic reconciliation between subject and object. To be sure, he does not offer a positive conception of truth outright but reworks it in a negative dialectical fashion taking into consideration both the historicity of conceptual language and the somatic character of thought. In other words, the existence of nonidentity is, for him, the condition of possibility of the ‘concreteness’ of historical truth. However one needs to approach this negatively; that is, by showing the untruth that resides in a thought that claims to know the whole truth. Indeed a positive affirmation of truth, for him, presupposes a radically different social reality than the one in which we currently live. This version of truth, as opposed to the provisional nature of the one arising out of Habermas’s discourse ethics, is premised on how thought itself is a sensuous activity; that is, it cannot avoid, and indeed is derived from, human drives and temperaments (read ‘inner nature’) which even though they are socially conditioned, nevertheless do exert their particular character on thought. Truth therefore, for him, is not only epistemological but a practical condition for a right kind of life.

The search for truth, in this way, becomes inseparable from the quest for the right form of life. Implicit in this project is the pursuit of a more substantive and ‘enlightened’ form of reason: a reason that has freed itself from the spell of subjective thought. The task of a negative dialectics then is to infer the truth through a relentless critique that seeks to illuminate the conditions of a ‘damaged’ form of life. An admission of truth in this way must also be, from Adorno’s viewpoint, an acknowledgement of the existence of the ‘particular’ by the ‘universal’. At face value, Adorno seems, like Habermas, to be also advocating a weak notion of truth. However there is an important qualification – and this is where Adorno’s

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563 ibid, p. 41.  
564 Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia, p. 50.
concept of truth finds firmer epistemological grounding. Whereas both Adorno and Habermas advance an idea of truth in terms of a philosophy of language, the former supplements this notion by attributing a somatic character to thought. In so doing, a stronger notion of truth emerges: one that derives its character from the specificity of the object itself. It is to this we are turning to next, since the somatic character of thought and its relation to ‘truth’ is clearly suppressed in Habermas’s concept of intersubjective symmetries. \(^{565}\) The next section, which follows logically from the discussion above, argues for a return to Adorno if Habermas is to develop a ‘stronger’ and more stable concept of truth that is linked to the transformation of social reality.

6.2 The Somatic Character of Thought.

The epistemological hurdle that obscures the link between thought and its somatic origins is quintessentially captured by the coercive estrangement of the subject and the object in modern discourses. This tension between subject and object, universal and particular; identity and nonidentity; lies at the core of Adorno’s dialectical philosophy of negativity. In fact, their decoupling leads to a tautology in subjective thought, which robs it of any insight into the nature of its own nonidentity. In other words, what has been left on the wayside in the dynamics that subjective thought employs in the construction of identity or meaning is the mediation that takes place between subject and object in the generation of knowledge. Knowledge, in this way, becomes simply what is known. \(^{566}\) The problem relating to the composition of identity in a cognitive framework that is premised on the active estrangement of the subject and object is that:

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\text{[A]s soon as it is fixed without mediation, the separation becomes ideology, its}
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\text{normal form. Mind then arrogates to itself the status of being absolutely independent - which it is not: mind’s claim to independence announces its claim}
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\text{to domination.}^{567}\]

To him, Hegel, although right in his dialectical approach to knowledge and reality, was too impatient to painstakingly unfold the fixed meanings of the different trajectories highlighted by his dialectics. This led, as a consequence, to him subordinating the object to conceptual thought in the construction of meaning. By announcing that ‘what is rational is actual and

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\(^{565}\) See chapter 5.

\(^{566}\) Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 184.

\(^{567}\) Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 246.
what is actual is rational’, Hegel illegitimately allows subjective thought the power to suppress its nonidentity for the sake of achieving the absolute.\(^{568}\) External reality becomes once more, in this way, a handmaiden of the realm of ideas.

By way of contrast, Marx, in his haste to salvage the insights of the dialectical approach for a materialistic reinterpretation of social reality, paid scant attention to the epistemological moorings of thought and, as a result, is indicted by Adorno as akin to a raging bull in a china shop.\(^{569}\) This is to say that Marx was also oblivious of the necessity of mediation between subject and object in fixing identity. By proclaiming in his 11\(^{th}\) thesis against Feuerbach that ‘[T]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point however is to change it’, Marx was simply shifting the semiotic register pertaining to the construction of meaning from its idealistic moorings to one based on materialism.\(^{570}\) In this way subjective thought became an epiphenomenon of objective reality, hence the reduction of theory to praxis.

Both approaches, for Adorno, unduly suppress the tension between subject and object that in turn obfuscates the truth that lies at the core of any society. The call therefore is to reopen the dialectical mediation between the two without falling victim to the temptation of ‘closure’. This means that the mediation has to be an open-ended one in which meaning is continuously enabled and redefined by the concept as the object simultaneously attempts to fulfil its concept. In a compelling account, Susan Buck-Morss notes that, against the grain of all objectivist as well as subjectivist accounts, the Frankfurt scholar posits that knowledge accumulation must not be

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\text{at the cost of giving up the non-identity between subject and object. Instead, he saw them as necessary co-determinates: neither mind nor matter could dominate the other as a philosophical first principle. Truth resided in the object, but it did not lie ready at hand; the material object needed the rational subject in order to release the truth which it contained}.\text{.}\(^{571}\)
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Given the above, one could easily fall into the erroneous perception that the same aporetic concept of truth propagated by poststructuralists finds similar expression in Adorno. Peter Dews, however, argues that there is a seminal difference and that this difference lies in Adorno’s insistence on how historical truth is generated by the mediation between its own concept and the concrete experiences arising out of an antagonistic social reality at any given

\(^{568}\) Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p.10.
\(^{569}\) Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 206.
\(^{571}\) Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.81.
moment in time.\textsuperscript{572} As such truth is not at all chimerical, not based on the playful gestures of free-floating signifiers as the deconstructionists would have us believe.\textsuperscript{573} Max Pensky puts this process of truth-making in Adorno’s work succinctly when he observes that:

The constellation, the centerpiece of Adorno’s historiography was to have been non-arbitrary; its point was the representation of historical truth from within the shattered material of used up textualities, and not the spectacle of the free play of liberated textual elements.\textsuperscript{574}

This suggests that, unlike the radicalism of poststructuralism, there is, for Adorno, a \textit{material} (object) ‘point of reference’ for all subjective processes of comprehension. As such, thought cannot be true to itself if it excludes the material basis of its origins. This materialist disposition enables Adorno to adopt a pragmatic approach to the problems of modern society. Whereas poststructuralist thought approaches and critiques social reality in terms of a philosophy of language, Adorno talks about a transformative knowledge of society borne out of the sufferings of the concrete individual in a bourgeois setting. Indeed in his own words, ‘[T]he smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering’.\textsuperscript{575} This misery is a perpetual reminder that thought has not reconciled itself with its somatic origins and continues to wilfully (mis)represent social reality. A turn to Adorno, in this way, would mean reuniting thought with its somatic character. It would mean a more reflective approach to rational agreements based on the realisation of the inability of language to define our authentic needs. This will prevent discourse ethics from drowning out the voice of the oppressed. Adorno, on this particular point, sardonically remarks that ‘instead of splashing around in the linguistic cascade, a philosopher reflects on it’.\textsuperscript{576}

Adorno himself explains the somatic origins of thought in various accounts, the most explicit being through an examination of art forms. It is worth quoting at some length his description of the ability of art to retain the emancipatory potentials that has been lost in modern society:

\begin{quote}
The authentic cultural object must retain and preserve whatever goes by the wayside in that process of increasing domination over nature which is reflected in expanding rationality and ever more rational forms of domination. Culture is
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{572} Peter Dews, \textit{Logics of Disintegration}, pp. 46–54.
\textsuperscript{574} Max Pensky, ‘Editor’s Introduction: Adorno’s Actuality’ p. 11. Indeed the gulf that separates the two groups has already been established in Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘Adorno as the Devil’.
\textsuperscript{575} Theodor Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, p. 203.
\textsuperscript{576} Ibid, p. 56.
The point here for Adorno is that cultural objects are the repositories of the emancipatory potential that has been lost in the process of rationalisation. What this means is that, contrary to Habermas's allegation that Adorno's dialectics have nothing to stand on, the author of *Negative Dialectics* sees culture as a necessary means of resisting the encroachment of the universal. The problem, for him, is that classificatory reason has deeply suppressed culture's truth claims, hence suppressing the emancipatory potential of Art as a cultural object. It is quite apparent from this view that, apart from acknowledging the emancipatory element that is present in society, Adorno was also alluding to the demented nature of the modern subject. Since the subject is both a subject and an object, living in a bourgeois society causes an unbridgeable tension between the subject and its nonidentity. The only way, therefore, of stabilizing this pathological state of being is through the suppression of the object, or in other words the concrete part of the subject which generates the somatic origins of subjective thought. In this way, the cool, poised and collected modern subject emerges — devoid of passion, desires and spontaneity — as it strives to control its own uncertainties in the face of an ever changing, fluid, and rationalized world. Suppressed as the nonidentity may be, it nevertheless cannot be totally extinguished as it is an irrevocable part of the subject itself. The tension this creates within the subject tears it apart. In this way the modern subject's life in a society premised on the principle of exchange is a 'damaged' one, deformed beyond recognition. Implicit in this account of the subject's damaged form is the argument that the unity between the subjective and objective dimensions of the subject presupposes the transformation of 'outer' nature; that is, life in its bourgeois manifestation.

It is Adorno's contention that this process of demystification, between the exchange principle as a way of life and positivism as a way of knowing, can only be negated by a relentless negative dialectical critique of society. In other words, the ideological veneer that shields the truth from the subject can be destabilized, by the merest suggestion of a truth that is generated by a constellation that accords preponderance to the somatic nature of thought.

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577 Cited in Andreas Huyssen 'Introduction to Adorno', *New German Critique* No.6 (Autumn 1975) p. 6.
578 Habermas's conception of art is, comparatively, more ambivalent. On one hand he acknowledges the critical potentials embedded within art works. For instance, the avant-garde of the last century, is a reflection of deep seated reactions against the process of societal modernization. Under the pressure of the dynamics of economic growth and the organisational accomplishments of the state, this social modernization penetrates deeper and deeper into previous forms of human existence — Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity,' *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter 1981) p. 7.

171
This is possible only if identitarian thought sheds its pretensions to totalizing knowledge and liberates itself from the positivistic yoke that enslaves its inner nature and blinds it to the price it is paying as an exchange for its mastery of the world. In so arguing, the link between the somatic character of thought and the transformation of the status quo is rendered explicit. These differences in how each theorist approach language as a tool of cognition are carried over into their competing claims as to the ability of the public sphere to address the needs of a plural social world. This is the theme that is discussed in the next section.

6.3 Towards a New Public Sphere: Redeeming Adorno’s Dialectical Philosophy of Language.

Habermas’s conceptualization of the political public sphere is an attempt to retain the ideals of the bourgeois public sphere without assuming its historical form.\(^{579}\) The location of this public sphere in the ‘lifeworld’ directly ensues from his conviction that the conditions that give rise to the ‘ideal speech situation’ are exclusively present in this social domain. It is here that the institutional dynamics of the public sphere are combined with the philosophical requirements of speech, epitomised by discourse ethics. Yet much remains unsaid of just how different is the new ‘ideal type’ apart from the explicit shift to language.\(^{580}\) In fact the ‘linguistic turn’, remains the most distinctive feature of the political public sphere. By contrast, Adorno does not see the ‘linguistic turn’ as a legitimate exit out of the aporias of the philosophy of consciousness: he is, in fact, ambivalent about the capability of language to delineate truth. What this means is that, for Adorno, any form of communicative reason is tainted by the problematic nature of language. Granted that they both posit the existence of a mimetic quality in conceptual thought, Adorno however goes further in raising the problem of language-use in communicative reason. This is the other side to language-use that Habermas fails to examine.

From this standpoint, it is possible to make an argument that the problematic of language-use is transferred by means of intersubjective contestations to rational consensus. Rational consensus, in effect, becomes a guise for the search of ‘first principles’ in the sphere of language. Thus, according to Adorno, we simply slip back into the aporias of subjectivity.

\(^{579}\) For instance, membership is limited only to the bourgeois class.

\(^{580}\) Habermas’s concept of the public sphere actually predates his philosophical move to language as the basis of his critical theory of society.
that we were trying to escape from. In this way, the Habermasian method of using universal pragmatics, to guide language towards consensus, is problematised by Adorno. Hence the problem of a language-based reason, for Adorno, is intrinsic to the properties of language itself vis-à-vis the articulation of reality. Granted that without language, reason cannot be deployed, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind the way in which language and reality are dialectically entwined. Both show up the inadequacy of the other. Adorno maintains that language is not only poorer than the reality it strives to express, it is also more. This conviction is implicit in his observation on the indispensability of language despite its shortcomings. In this paradoxical way, language enables and simultaneously limits the capability of reason to grasp reality. Reaffirming this latter sense of language, Müller remarks:

[I]t is well known, for example, that it is possible to perceive many more colours than can be articulated in language. One must only try to give a precise description of the rich palette of the fall foliage in order to experience, in a flash, the poverty of language.

Adorno highlights this conceptual problematic in his discussion of the nonidentity; that is, *Negative Dialectics*, as the ontology of the dismal state of things (wrong state of things), advances the view that abstraction is the inevitable way in which language suppresses the facticity or concreteness of the object while in the same breath insists on the indispensability of language itself in thought.

The advantages that a dialectical method brings to the public sphere cannot be understated. Contrary to the current orthodoxy that views Habermas’s and Adorno’s works as mutually exclusive, a close examination of the dynamics of Adorno’s negative dialectics helps to reinforce Habermas’s central premises concerning the public sphere. For instance, Adorno’s dialectics, in pointing out the dialectical nature of language and thought, puts an undeniable emphasis on the need as well as the limitation of classificatory logic. The other side of the dialectic, however, suggests the need to break through the power of conceptual thought by means of the concepts themselves. That is, the incorporation of a dialectics in the public sphere means a revision of discourse ethics in light of the fact that language itself has become ideological. This is evinced by the way it maintains that truth resides in the subject and not in its object of representation. For Adorno, breaking the power of subjectivity is achieved by a

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581 Heidegger, according to Adorno, tried to do this by appealing directly to the object. Little did he know that the object is already mediated. By accepting object in its supposed *immediacy*, Heidegger breaks right back into a ‘transcendental delusion’ associated with the subject. See chapter 4.

582 Harro Müller, ‘Mimetic Rationality’, p. 95.
mimetic condition that is generated by constellational thinking. This has been, in recent times, highlighted by Wellmer and indeed Habermas himself as sharing close affinity with communicative reason and the ideal speech situation. The difference lies in the fact that Adorno uses this power to harness the necessary moral imperatives for an assault on the forces that seek to colonise the lifeworld. What *Negative Dialectics*, therefore, also brings to Habermas’s two-tier model of society are the normative grounds for a relentless critique of contemporary life under the aegis of bourgeois society. This admittedly is not as succinct in Habermas’s formulation.

It is quite clear from above that Habermas’s jettisoning of the dialectic has blunted the critical edge of his concept of the political public sphere. In fact the ambiguity surrounding Habermas’s conception follows directly from his separation of deontological issues of justice and morality from notions of ‘the good life’ or ethics. Lacking a normative impetus for discourse ethics, Habermas relies on ‘boundary maintenance’ as the way to prevent the colonization of the lifeworld and by extension the public sphere. This seems to be a poor way of nurturing social life in light of the encroachments of capitalism to virtually all spheres of contemporary society.

6.3.1 Introducing Dialectics: Reanimating the Public Sphere.

Applied to the Habermasian public sphere, a dialectics that offers nothing but negativity would highlight the need to recognize the costs of a capitalist form of life. This searing critique, admittedly, is missing from Habermas’s formulations. However the critique must also, at the same time, maintain the distinctions made by Habermas between purposive-rational and communicative-rational reason. A close examination of the works of these Frankfurt philosophers would show, *prima facie*, that there are a lot of commonalities in this quarter at the very least. What for Habermas are the distinctions between purposive-rational reason and communicative-rational reason are described in Adornian parlance as the differences between conceptual and constellational thinking. Wellmer reinforces this view by pointing to the elective affinities between mimetic reason and Habermas’s communicative rationality, noting that mimesis for Adorno is that ‘realm of communicative behaviour that

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584 Jay Bernstein, *Adorno*.
exists outside the territory of conceptual thought. Yet the fundamental differences must also be taken into consideration if we are to radicalise the public sphere.

What distinguishes the works of the two authors from each other is their respective stances as to the fate of mimesis in the conceptual articulation of the object. For Habermas, the two forms of reason, although linked to each other on one level, nevertheless are confined to different spheres of integration in society. Purposive-rational reason operates within the 'system' and guides systemic integration via non-normative steering media of money and administrative power, while communicative reason is embedded within the dynamics of the lifeworld and becomes the impetus for social integration. The link between the two spheres of integration, however tenuous it may be in his formulation, lies in the 'system' and its purposive-rational reason finding anchorage in the lifeworld and communicative-rational reason. This does not in any way imply that the two forms of reason can access each other's operational area with complete impunity. Indeed for Habermas, system-driven impulses in the lifeworld increase the likelihood of the latter's colonisation. Implicit in Habermas's model is the view that the colonisation process can only occur in the lifeworld. That is, it is a one way process. So while he thinks that our current predicament can be averted by a balancing of the two forms of rationality, this 'balancing', in effect, is a call for a strict demarcation between the two spheres. This is why 'boundary maintenance' is so pivotal in his theory of society. On the other hand, however unlikely a scenario it may be in our current context, colonisation of the system by lifeworld compulsions spells danger of a different kind – the stultification of the material production of societal needs. In other words, the first scenario gives rise to a condition that Durkheim equates with 'normlessness', the second ends up in material destitution. This simply highlights Habermas's insistence on the need to have both of these reasons in society.

In contrast Adorno sees no need for a strict demarcation, since conceptual thought has all but suppressed the emancipatory potential that lies in the condition of mimesis. In this way the attempt by Habermas to assiduously keep the two forms of reason separate reeks for him of naivety. These ambiguities surrounding the separation between two interrelated spheres, with concomitant logics, further compound Habermas's theory. Why would Habermas insist on keeping them separate when he already admits to the existence of a mimetic moment in conceptual thought and insists that the system is anchored in the lifeworld? For Adorno, the

problem lies in a different direction. It is not so much, as Habermas would have it, the interpenetration of different impulses that leads to regression. The philosophical quandary lies squarely in the primacy that Habermas accords to language as exemplified by the lifeworld and its communicative reason. This is to say that for Habermas, the telos of universal pragmatics provides impetus to the rationalisation of communicative reason just as purposive-rational reason is honed by system differentiation. That is just as communicative reason, on one hand, is regulated by the normative steering media that are defined through the rules of discourse, purposive-rational reason, on the other, is regulated by the ‘de-linguistified media’ of money and power. As a matter of form, the non-normative de-linguistified media, as steering mechanisms, bypass ‘processes of consensus-oriented communication’ that are so central to the lifeworld. That is, ‘they do not merely simplify linguistic communication, but replace it with a symbolic generalization of rewards and punishment.\textsuperscript{587} In this way communicative processes of attaining agreements are suppressed by the dynamics of de-linguistified media.

Habermas’s two-tier theory of society thus downplays the dangers that Adorno sees lurking in the horizon. Perhaps this ambivalence can be put down to the specific way in which the former articulates conceptual logic or purposive-rational reason. For him, purposive rationality has a legitimate place in society and is, therefore, indispensable. Adorno thinks so too as, for him, purposive rationality would be subjective reason. Contrary to Adorno, however, Habermas does not see the shortcomings of instrumental reason as inherent within itself. For him, pathological effects of this reason can only be determined at the level of application. That is, the overwhelming of the lifeworld by instrumental reason is the only thing we have to be vigilant against. We cannot afford to adopt a nihilistic form of ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ against reason itself, for this would entail a performative contradiction. There can only be a failure in application, not in reason itself. In fact his two-tier model is built around this. Communicative reason, therefore, is not derived from the weakness of purposive-rational reason – in the same way as mimesis is linked to the failure of conceptual thought for Adorno – but is a reflection of the two levels on which societal integration occurs. This suggests that Habermas’s formulation of the democratisation process is bereft of any dialectical mediation between subjective thought and the mimetic element of everyday life. This is a controversial omission in light of the many ways in which the

\textsuperscript{587} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Theory of Communicative Action (II)}, p. 183.
democratisation agenda embedded within the public sphere can be rejuvenated by Adorno's dialectics.

The linking of democratisation, as a process, with deliberative engagements in the public sphere is highly suggestive of Habermas's attempt to make rationality the chief standard against which the concept of autonomy is measured. In other words, the degree of democratization is to be determined by the rational content of validity-claims that undergirds consensus. This, to be sure, is an example of an ideal that he has salvaged from the bourgeois public sphere. In fact the concept of the 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere is a reminder of the dangers associated with a time when de-linguistified politics, rather than rational considerations, held sway in the public sphere.\(^{588}\) The call for a shift from the political to the rational was first mooted in the bourgeois public sphere as a way to make power more accountable to the generalized interests of society. In this way, the principle of universalisation, which was the impetus behind such a move, would 'then be guaranteed, according to the presuppositions of a society of free commodity exchange'.\(^{589}\)

In an attempt to redeem the principle of universalisation embedded in the bourgeois public sphere, the new political public sphere further shifts the semiotics of the rationalisation process from its market underpinnings to discourse ethics. It is the specific way that the principles of universalisation, rationalisation and democratisation are uncritically assembled in Habermas's 'modernity project' that is proving to be problematic. For instance the emphasis placed on democracy and rationality is quite revealing in its congruence with Eurocentric development discourses.\(^{590}\) Just as the subtexts of these development discourses highlight the dichotomous nature of the development process, Habermas in a similar vein assumes that the biggest obstacle to democracy lies in the uneven development of rational potentials between different lifeworlds. In other words he attributes the unevenness of the democratization process to the existence of cultures that are 'lagging' behind. As a consequence interlocutors hailing from these cultures may not be as well equipped, compared to others, in raising validity claims.\(^{591}\) What this means is that non-European societies have a 'comparative disadvantage' when it comes to raising validity claims in the public sphere.

\(^{588}\) This is a direct reference to the dynamics of the medieval public sphere.

\(^{589}\) Jürgen Habermas, 'The Public Sphere', p.53. The subterranean link between Exchange principles and universal pragmatics is explored in chapter 5.

\(^{590}\) Barry Hindess, 'Men Behaving Badly'. See also the discussion in the previous chapter on intersubjective symmetries.

This is because the relative backwardness of their respective cultures stunts their abilities in ‘making explicit ... the potential grounds on which their yes/no positions are based’. Implicit in this position is the assumption that the ‘rational stocks’ that enable one to participate meaningfully in the public sphere are high in the Anglo-US axis. As such Habermas unwittingly lets into the deliberation of the public sphere the historical sediments of a logo-centric reason. This becomes problematic as far as the realisation of autonomy is concerned.

The Adornian thesis about how the subject gives voice to the object is an appropriate rejoinder to Habermas’s discourse ethics. When viewed from Adorno’s subject-object constellative matrix, the Habermasian guiding principles for deliberation in the political public sphere can be seen as fraught with problems. In his delineation of the characteristics of the ideal participant in discourse, Habermas establishes a clear rule: ‘[E]very subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in discourse’. This qualification, tied to membership, hides, in other words, a discriminatory procedure that lies at the heart of discourse ethics. That is, apart from shunning the linguistically incompetent, the criterion also discriminates against those whose lifeworlds are not rational in the way modern discourses understand the term. Discourse ethics, therefore, precludes disparate groups that include people suffering from mental disabilities, senility, coma and brain injuries. The perverse effects of this weakness in Habermas’s conception of the public sphere are highlighted by Meriwether in his problematisation of discourse ethics in relation to the plight of unborn babies. In a nutshell, unborn babies cannot plead for their lives, hence a pregnant woman’s right to abortion is decided by the fact that she can justify this right linguistically in discourse. In limiting the membership, Habermas assumes that the interests of the other can be raised via ‘proxy advocacy’. This allows, for instance, the representation of the ‘disabled’ by rational interlocutors in the public sphere. In fact discourse ethics is premised on the ability of interlocutors to ‘exchange’ positions with others. However, what often happens is that real ‘exchange’ is thwarted by the fact that, when asked to do so, interlocutors

593 See discussion on this in chapters 4 and 5.
594 This is a reference to Adorno’s attempt in using the power of the subject to break through the veil of subjectivity.
595 Jürgen Habermas, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, p. 89.
596 Nicholas Meriwether, ‘Discourse Ethics and the Problem of Oppression’, Telos (Spring 2001) p. 102. He further adds (p.103) that even if we allow those who are not competent linguistically to take part in discourse, it does not mean the integration and ‘recognition of their desires into discourse’.
‘do not imagine the point of view of others; rather they project onto those others their own fears and fantasies about themselves’. This raises the real possibility that those who may represent us through proxy may not have our interest at heart. The worst case scenario is highlighted by Meriwether, who raises the historical spectre of atrocities being ‘perpetrated on the weak and defenceless by those who fail to take their needs into consideration’. In fact discourse ethics allows instances of injustice due to the insistence on a positive affirmation of what constitutes validity. Its appeal to reason is rendered impotent in the absence of checks and balances against atrocities committed in the name of reason itself.

This raises the question whether Habermas’s dialogical communicative process allows for moral imperatives. That is, since the primary and only yardstick in the public sphere is rationality, the question one may ask is whether there is a moral imperative for discourse. Judging by the above, it is obvious that Habermas thinks so. Yet he would insist, in the same vein, that any moral imperative can only be a product of discourse itself. The appeal for moral validity arising out of contestation also raises the question of how to ascertain the validity of any moral imperative for discourse. This circularity of reasoning prompts Wellmer to appeal for a competent standard to supplement discourse ethics in the process of adjudication. Indeed, it seems highly feasible that we have to go outside discourse to justify the moral imperatives for it; that is we need to rely on non-discursively validated reflection. In other words, it is possible to decide what is valid outside discourse, as Kant would have us believe. More importantly, however, this move opens up avenues of reasoning outside the rational parameters of the lifeworld, contrary to the deontological procedures that Habermas rigidly adheres to. That is, it runs contrary to Habermas’s insistence that normative validity must be adjudicated within the public sphere. This emphasises the difficulties pertaining to Habermas’s answer as to what motivates people to come together to seek rational consensus and indeed whether this consensus is possible at all.

598 Iris Marion Young, ‘Asymmetrical Reciprocity’, p. 344.
600 By appealing to discourse, Habermas’s moral theory comes close to mirroring Kant’s position on the subject. The difference lies in the fact that for the former, normative validity arises out of a consensus via a deliberative process whereas the latter would locate normative validity within a single reflective process that is guided by the categorical imperative.
601 Jürgen Habermas offers a detailed formulation of his position in his Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, p. 65.
603 Moral intuition and Adorno’s concept of mimesis can be part of this.
6.4 Concluding Remarks.

In light the foregoing discussion it becomes apparent that there is a need to strengthen the concept of public sphere that Habermas currently advocates. It is the contention of this thesis that Habermas needs to have recourse to Adorno to make his public sphere more robust. Specifically the public sphere needs to incorporate a form of dialectics that would preclude the excesses emerging from intersubjectivity. This would mean that we are to go beyond Hegel and acquire a dialectic that resists Hegelian ‘closure’. Adorno offers a negative dialectic as an alternative to the Hegelian one. Because of the specific aims of this negative dialectic, a public sphere premised on it would be more effective in tackling the plural nature of sociality in contemporary societies. To be sure, Hegelian dialectics is anything but simplistic. Solomon notes that it consists of:

- a complex interplay of conceptions, some of which are simply improvements on others, some of which are indeed opposites demanding synthetic resolution, (while) others simply represent dead ends, which indicate a need to start over. Indeed ... Hegel’s dialectic is ... a phenomenological tapestry in which a great many ... of the forms of human experience and philosophy jostle against one another and compete for adequacy.605

The complexity shown here and the way concepts mediate between human experience and understanding represents, for Adorno, the kernel of truth in Hegel’s system.606 Hence, in a similar manner, Adorno argues that the dialectics between the universal and the particular would mean the engagement of these two variables on a number of levels. For him, this level highlights the two basic axes on which thought revolves. The dialectical method, thus, manages to simultaneously appeal to universality while protecting its historical, or particular, truth-content. The appeal to universality is propelled by the rational character of thought itself while the orientation towards the particular is done with an eye towards establishing objectivity. The concept of a historical truth-content draws attention to the contingent nature of rational consensus, not only because of the rules embedded in discourse ethics but also because of the historical character of truth itself. In other words, the context dependency of thought has to be taken into account. This allows and creates the space in which the somatic dimension of reason can be recognised and accounted for. Indeed the public sphere in this way becomes not only a site for rational consensus but simultaneously becomes the crucible

606 The problem, for Adorno, is located in Hegel’s idealism thus ensuring that, for all its multifaceted impulses that mediate between universal and particular or the subject and object, ‘closure’ or identity remains its ultimate objective.
in which the reconciliation between *is* and *ought* can be meaningfully imagined. Only conceived in this way can the public sphere provide the basis for an emancipatory transformation of society.
Chapter 7

Writing Poetry after Auschwitz: Radicalising the Public Sphere.

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The Greek philosopher Plato, in his ruminations on the subject of the 'philosopher-king' manages to bring to the forefront the matrix in which notions of truth and power are irrevocably intertwined (the fate of one is dependent on the other) in society. His insistence that social problems can only be addressed if philosophers become kings or if kings practice true philosophy is an attempt to create a positive synergy between the intertwining of thought and society, or between historical beings and the contexts in which they live. For him, these two concepts are inseparable. As 'seers of the truth' philosophers are engaged in a search for a totality.

Adorno approaches power and truth in a somewhat similar fashion. This is evinced in his discussion of the ways in which subject and object come together to produce knowledge. However he differs from Plato in his insistence that knowledge and meanings are created from a cognitive matrix that is vulnerable to historical as well as interpretive contingencies. What this means is that 'truth' is not a totality but a product of an 'unsutured moment', as the postmarxist Chantal Mouffe puts it, arising out of the historical, hence fleeting constellation that positions concepts around their object to procure meaning. In this way knowledge or truth can only be understood in terms of a dialectical critique that seeks to uncover the veil imposed by ideological fallacies. As Adorno puts it:

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\text{[T]he difference between the dialectical view of totality and the positivist one rests primarily on the fact that in the dialectical concept of totality 'objective' is intended actually to produce an understanding of each and everyone of its individual manifestations whilst the positivistic system of theories would like, solely by choosing, categories which are as general as possible, to include determinations in as uncontradicting (sic) manner as possible in a single logical continuum without recognising the highest concept of structure as a precondition of the facts which are subsumed under them.}^{609}
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Each constitutive element, as illuminated by its concept, can only be understood in a totality that emerges from a constellation of the concepts that owes its genesis to individual moments. In this way the power of the subject is made to acknowledge the truth residing in

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607 Plato, Republic, translated by Robin Waterfield, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) pp. 190–226. This critical insight acts as the bedrock to schools of thought such as Critical Theory as well as Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics.

608 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.

the corporeal dimensions of life. Truth, therefore, cannot be divorced from the power of the subject. Without the latter, the former becomes mute hence not accorded its due recognition. By the same token, however, power without its object of mediation becomes synonymous with identitarian logic. In lieu of this Adorno redirects the power of subjective thought against the idealistic veil that suppresses the truth from seeing the light of day. This is to say that for the co-author of the *Dialectic*, the power of the subject can be used to unlock the truth via a dialectical process of unveiling the facade of subjectivity. The new understanding that ensues from this is built on the absence of the conventional systemic rules that govern the process of knowledge production in contemporary society. *Negative Dialectics* ensures that the specific contribution of subject and object are reflected in the kind of knowledge that emerges. As power unlocks the truth, the latter reminds the former of the inadequacies of its system of representations. This is the dialectic that must be preserved and incorporated by Habermas, if we are to have any chance in redeeming contemporary life-forms in capitalist modernity.

7.1 The spectre of an ‘objectless’ universality and the ‘turn’ to Adorno.

As stated from the outset, this thesis is an attempt to rectify some of the inherent weaknesses in the work of Jürgen Habermas. The aim, as mentioned in the introduction, is to aide in the realisation of the course set out by his two-tier theory of society. It continues the grand tradition of the Enlightenment in this particular sense. In the course of my research, the suspicion that the programme designed by Habermas will definitely benefit from the insights offered by negative dialectics became a conviction. This conviction stems from the belief that Adorno provides a better platform from which to account for difference in contemporary society. The intertwining of suffering and hope provides a normative warrant from which to reanimate a critical theory of society in our time. This will entail empowering contemporary knowledge from its, arguably, emasculated position so that it becomes relevant to contemporary needs. One of the underlying reasons behind our current predicament, despite our best efforts at ameliorating the human condition, is basically the loss of motivation to envision something ‘better’ than the present. It is the contention of this thesis that to do this, one has to feel the suffering that results from a life conditioned by capitalist modernity. In this way the dialectical axis on which suffering and hope continue to turn is the best guarantee of keeping alive the search for a better horizon.
To be sure, Habermas is aware of the problem of life under contemporary conditions. His notion of the public sphere is designed to protect that sphere of symbolic reproduction that gives meaning to our humanness. He introduces the ‘ideal speech situation’ in order to remind us that there is an alternative to the social predicament that has been tied to the rationalised processes of reification and bureaucratisation. Yet in his haste to extrapolate on a universal pragmatics and the intersubjectivity that is assumed to be the basis of a rational consensus, Habermas glosses over the instinctual means that drive people to think and act in a way that would transform the status quo. It is argued in this dissertation that the turn to language and discourse ethics cannot by itself correct this anomaly. That is, the deliberations in the public sphere and the claims inherent in all speech acts are not enough to counter the totalitarian pretensions of conceptual thought. As Wellmer reminds us, there has to be another standard that can act in conjunction with discourse ethics in making the public sphere a truly democratizing influence in a world that is becoming all too singular again in its essence.

This is especially so in view of the challenge that faces democracy at the turn of the new millennium. Democratisation, as well as what it means to be democratic, is becoming a conceptual minefield. This ensues directly from two sources. The first is the emphasis on the subjective component of the concept at the expense of the object of the concept: freedom. As a consequence, the ‘objectless’ dimension of such concepts highlights the fact that democracy can easily become a conceptual portmanteau for a lot of things. Indeed, without an ‘object’ to guide the discussions, the resulting agreement becomes a consensus amongst subjectivities; that is, the power of the subject to think can become an end in itself in the Habermasian paradigm. This makes the model of the public sphere vulnerable to the philosophy of consciousness it was meant to have averted in the first place. It seems, in this way, that the power of subjective thought, with all its aporias, is reintroduced in an intersubjective agreement that lacks the mediating influence of the object of that engagement. This is probably why we can safely imagine a democratic arrangement where atrocities against segments of the population may legitimately take place.\[610\] This, from the vantage point of Adorno, is the natural consequence of an ‘objectless’ universality. In such a world, any consensus in the public sphere is an outcome generated intersubjectively – between

\[610\] Habermas himself would see these divergences of interpretations as symptomatic of the ‘open’ processes embedded within discourse ethics. True democracy is, in other words, the inevitable result of rationally engaging within a public sphere.
subjects whose capacities to reason have been diminished in bourgeois society. Any true reconciliation taking place, therefore, between damaged life-forms cannot be authentic. Albrecht Wellmer succinctly sums up this contradiction by sardonically noting that, '[T]he presence of a reconciling spirit in an unreconciled word is something that can only be conceived in terms of an aporia'.

In this matter, Habermas may usefully learn, once again, from his erstwhile mentor. In fact the searing dialectical critique that Adorno offers can rectify some debilitating weaknesses within the Habermasian scheme. Reintroducing a dialectic actually imposes on the impartial deontological procedures of the public sphere a new 'openness' to the other: an openness that extends beyond the scope of the ideal speech situation. In this way the public sphere would allow for direct intervention to stand against the grain of 'fair and equitable contestations' based on a context defined by capitalist modernity. It means that those whose lifeworlds lag in terms of rationalisation do not have to be perpetually at a disadvantage in their quest for autonomy until such time as they gain equality with others in the public sphere. This suggests independence from all sorts of imperial and neo-imperial yokes under the aegis of capital. A thinking based on these premises would allow greater recognition of the moral claims of the disadvantaged. Currently these claims can easily be circumvented by the deontological procedures of the public sphere. A turn to Adorno would, therefore, usher in an extra standard where practices such as the recognition of pluralities are rooted in the awareness of their innate dignity. The dialectic in the public sphere would, thus, generate a yearning for unity: a call to unite what is with what ought to be. It assumes, in other words, a measured anticipation for a total transformation of social reality.

7.2 From Habermas to Adorno.

The problems surrounding the concept of the public sphere are not exclusive only to the priority accorded to language-based agreement in its processes. The other spectre afflicting this model revolves around the jettisoning of Ideology Critique from the theory of communicative action. This came about as a result of Habermas's uncritically endorsing a two-tier model of society with corresponding systems of integration. The specific way in

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611 Wellmer, The Persistence of Modernity, p.5.
612 These were raised in the last three chapters.
which the model is theorised left Habermas with no choice but to unhinge notions of freedom and autonomy from their epistemological bedrock as understood by Marx, Lukács and the first generation of Critical theorists. By reconceptualising freedom in terms of linguistic distortions, Habermas is unable to provide a philosophical critique of capitalist intrusion within and over the structure of our consciousness. For him, this state of affairs amounts to a 'colonisation of the lifeworld' – the point where we lay down arms against the impersonal forces arrayed against our collective fate. In doing so, the fate of human beings becomes more ambivalent in his model. The best that he can come up with given this lamentable situation is to acknowledge that the contemporary age is marked by both human freedom and unfreedom at the same time. Within this social matrix, as Deborah Cook succinctly eloquently puts it,

individuals are simultaneously free and unfree, unconstrained by material concerns in their leisure activities and denatured by the struggle to survive in the workplace, fully human in their social intercourse and dehumanised in their labour.614

This is to say that the distinction between freedom and unfreedom becomes obscure. As a consequence, we become more accepting of our social conditions. Freedom, given this, becomes a silhouette of its old self. Instead of it becoming a barometer attuned to the fate of humanity as a whole, it is now reduced to gauging distortions within the public sphere, as a symptom of coercive structural forces at play.

In the 'master-slave' narrative, Hegel points out that the dialectic between the two presupposes a mutual recognition of the other.615 For him, the intricacies surrounding the mediation within the narrative become the basis of a 'better' truth. Adorno points out that this mutual recognition expresses a yearning to be one with the other – a yearning that is thwarted constantly by the vagaries of modern life and identitarian thought. Following Hegel, Adorno is of the view that the dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular clearly shows the irrevocable nature of their intertwinement – one cannot be itself without the other. In other words, the universal needs the remedial effect of the particular in order for it to own up to its complicity with the world, while the particular needs the universal for the protection and dissemination of its truth content. In this way historicity and rationality become the axes from which notions of autonomy are perpetually interpreted and decoded. Just as the master lords over the slave, it is the slave who allows the master to be what he is. This, again,

615 Robert C Solomon, The Age of German Idealism, p. 203.
reminds us that thought is dependent on the material of life and not coeval with it. It sums up, in a nutshell, Adorno’s position as a materialist philosopher.

7.3 Concluding Remarks.

The radicalisation of the public sphere and the concomitant transformation in society is a theme that is suffused with Adornian motifs. By insisting on the preponderance of the object, Adorno suggests that idealist thought is unable to account for nonidentity and, as a result, is unable to uncover what is amiss in society. In other words, a radical critique of our thought system and the overhauling of our social system presuppose each other. This recognition can rejuvenate the Habermasian public sphere in ways that are not possible on the basis of the limitations imposed upon it by discourse ethics. Adorno’s negative dialectics is instructive if we are to purge these debilitating characteristics of the public sphere. Critical theory’s primary warrant, for Adorno, is the search for the conditions that would engender the ‘right form’ of life. To be sure this ‘right form’ of life can only be understood negatively within our current context. The determinate negation that, unlike Hegel, leads to more negativity holds the key to this. The right form of life cannot be posited in any actual sense; however, a determinate negation of the current form of life can give us an outline of its essence. This is the implicit impulse behind works such Minima Moralia. To do this does not entail a call, as some argue, for a wholesale abandonment of reason as incoherent. Indeed incoherence can only come about from a denial of the emancipatory potentials in society. Adorno’s warning against going down this path is worth quoting:

> to act radically in accordance with this principle would be to extirpate with the false, all that was true also, all that, however impotently, strives to escape the confines of universal practice, every chimerical anticipation of a nobler condition, and so to bring about directly the barbarism that culture is reproached with furthering indirectly.\(^{617}\)

In other words, Adorno is fully aware that to deny the truth-potential in society is to disable the very conditions that would allow us to transcend the present and conceive of a better future.

\(^{616}\) Wellmer eloquently describes this process as the elimination of non-sense rather than the affirmation of sense.

\(^{617}\) Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia, p.44.
The deployment of a negative dialectics is essential, therefore, not because of the absence of emancipatory potentials in society but because these potentials are so embedded within a distorted reality. This is to say that the aporetic nature of truth in modern society means that it cannot be accessed in a direct fashion: any exaltation of its presence runs the risk of regressing into an apotheosis of the status quo. Claims to a direct access would, whether by way of a Hegelian dialectical format, hermeneutics or a consensus model, necessarily entail some form of abstraction. In the first and second instances, it would be an abstraction that subsumes the particular (nonidentity) to the universal, while this would mean, in the last example, that the opacity of language and by extension, conceptual thought, is glossed over for the sake of rational consensus.

7.3.1 Enabling Continuities.

The aim of this dissertation to incorporate Adornian insights into the theory of communicative action stems from the conviction that the arguments espoused by Adorno and Habermas, despite some fundamental divergences, do share a common concern for a better society. For instance, Habermas’s communicative model is an attempt to hold action and system paradigms together in a two-tier theory of society. This for him has been the main preoccupation of the classical sociologists in their quest to come up with a model of sociality that would be faithful to society as well as the future aspirations of its members. The failure of these different attempts to reconcile the two models of integration has resulted in exercises in reductionism; Marx, Weber and Durkheim have all been guilty of gravitating towards either pole – the society or self. *Negative Dialectics* addresses a similar problem within the area of epistemology. This attempt is guided by an interest in the symmetrical mediation between the subject and the object in the production of knowledge. The problem, for Adorno, is that philosophies such as existentialism, fundamental ontology as well as idealism reduce this dialectical mediation to a simplistic correspondence between understanding and social reality.

Constellation works in much of the same way, for Adorno, as universal pragmatics would later for Habermas; that is, as a guide to truth or validity. Unlike Habermas however, Adorno

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618 Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity*, p. 88.
insists that language is subjectively created, whereas the former assumed that it is coeval with society. Habermas sees language as a proper mediator of competing validity claims whereas Adorno would remind us of its problematic nature; that is conceptual language suppresses the material content of it cognitive processes leading to deformities in our understanding. The answer, for both, however lies not outside language but in the way language is deployed to aid in the object’s attempt to illuminate itself. The specific way they approach language is what sets them apart. The fundamental differences between Adorno and Habermas, as noted above, have their roots in their differing perceptions of the nature of conceptual thought and its relationship with truth (or validity). To be sure, Habermas, on one hand, does recognise the problematic nature of language. However the problems, according to him, are solved by the ethics that regulate discourses of mediation between competing validity claims. Adorno, on the other hand, denies that a discourse ethics can work in the way that Habermas advocates. For him, language has its own logic, hence any discourse, of any kind, is simply a tautological exercise in which language reaffirms its ability to define through the systematic elimination of nonidentity. This is the point of difference between the two. As Wellmer admits, both approaches have their own strengths and weaknesses and could not be used as a basis to adjudicate on which one is better than the other. Indeed he notes that:

Perhaps we might speak of an implicit philosophy of language or theory of rationality in Adorno. But whatever we decide to call it, I doubt whether the reformulation of Critical Theory in terms of language pragmatics is sufficient to supersede the philosophy of Adorno.

These affinities are also manifested in Habermas’s claim that there is a mimetic element in all forms of conceptual thought as expressed in language (everyday speech), which follows closely from Adorno’s insistence that all human practices and forms of thought contain a mimetic or non-conceptualised corporeal moment. In fact Habermas’s suggestion that the ‘system’ must be anchored in the social sphere of reproduction is, from this point of view, an attempt to address his mentor’s claim that the mimetic moment in conceptual thought is ignored, because classificatory or identity thinking seeks complete mastery over its object. Indeed, the only difference seems to be that in Habermas’s view, this mimetic moment is

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619 See chapter 3 for an extended discussion on this.
621 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 150.
622 Albrecht Wellmer, The Persistence of Modernity, p.5. For Habermas this move would preclude the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’.
preserved rather than being ignored in conceptual thinking. The preservation of the mimetic moment becomes a cornerstone of Habermas’s belief in the possibility of salvaging the project of modernity. In other words he recognises that the works of Adorno can still inform the broad contours of his theorization on the Enlightenment promise. As such there is no valid basis, on this point at least, to mount an argument about the superiority of communicative competence.

Adorno, in maintaining that we are living a ‘damaged life’ in capitalist modernity seems to indicate a direct continuity between justice and the right kind of life: one that is rooted in freedom itself. Hence the normative grounds necessary for critique are derived from the recognition that the current hegemony of conceptual reason and its socio-economic counterpart, exchange relations, are symptomatic of the rise of a specific type of society that further entrenches these. In light of this, ideas of freedom and justice are inseparable from a transformative change to the type of society we live in. Just as Adorno gave preponderance to the object, Habermas talks about the way in which the system is rooted within the lifeworld. Yet it is also here that Habermas’s problems start. By giving precedence to the lifeworld, Habermas reintroduces the aporias that are associated with subjective thought. In the end, people with various disabilities are simply excluded from the processes of the public sphere. Habermas can be sensitised to the inner logic of his discourse ethics via an Adornian turn.

This ultimately leads back to the major argument of this thesis: that a re-appropriation of Adornian insights will mitigate some of the weaknesses in Habermas. Indeed the thematic statement of this dissertation is that the rationalisation of the world will not eliminate all forms of societal evils. This is precisely where Habermas is found lacking. To be sure, the resistance against societal evils marks a shift of Adorno’s philosophy from the Kantian position on the pursuit of moral goodness. This shift was propelled by the former’s personal anguish over the horrors of the Second World War to which he laconically lamented that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’. It also reflects Adorno’s conviction that the task of the Enlightenment project is not so much to expand reason in our society as to critique and eliminate unreason. Given this insight, it is critical that Adorno is rehabilitated and his works included within the pantheon of contemporary critical theorising. This is essential if the tradition of the Frankfurt is to be of continued relevance for us.

623 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 34.
In an eloquent passage in the *Dialectic*, Adorno poignantly reminds us of the current contradictions inherent in the social fabric of capitalist modernity, contradictions which continue to be the biggest hurdle to the emancipation of humankind. For him, the law of equivalence has become the modern byword for freedom. Equivalence has become an end in itself, turning a blind eye to the idea of incommensurability. It is in this way that he argues ‘[T]he blindfold over the eyes of Justitia means not only that justice brooks no interference but that it does not originate in freedom’.\(^{624}\) Despite its sense of melancholy, Adorno’s oeuvre is animated by the familiar theme of a perpetual quest for a better society. For Habermas, the concept of the public sphere is a tangible manifestation of this yearning to realise the project of the Enlightenment: a state where, for Adorno, writing poetry becomes a celebration of being free.

\(^{624}\) Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, p. 12.
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200


