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Hegel and the Frankfurt School: Rethinking Historical Progress

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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The criticism of Hegel's philosophy of history is a recurring theme in the work of the Frankfurt School critical theorists. There is good reason for this, as Hegel's philosophy of history seems to have become hopelessly outdated. After the events of the past two centuries, we can no longer think of the historical process as the manifestation of Reason in the world. Yet there is nonetheless a certain power in the idea of history as spirit working through its inadequacies and self-alienation, a power that authors such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin do not fully recognize. This dissertation attempts to show how the Hegelian idea of history can be rethought in a way that preserves its critical power, while avoiding the pitfalls of Enlightenment-era historiography. Through the work of Adorno, Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer, I try to show that we not only can think of history as a kind of progressive overcoming of an objectivity alien to humanity, but also that such a conception can be beneficial to our projects oriented toward a better present and future.

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Introduction

The question that I will be addressing here is, most generally, whether it is still possible for us to think of human history as displaying progress. By "historical progress" I mean a movement in which human beings advance from a state of being *subjected* to the historical process, in which historical development is outside of human control, to a state in which human beings become the conscious *agents* of this process. To put it in another way, is it possible for us to think of history as a properly *human* history, one in which human beings are the self-conscious *subjects* rather than the mere *objects* of history? In Max Horkheimer's "Traditional and Critical Theory," the essay that articulates many of the basic tenets held in common by the "Frankfurt School" critical theorists, he writes that those who "adopt the critical attitude"

> experience the fact that society is comparable to nonhuman natural processes, to pure mechanisms, because cultural forms which are supported by war and oppression are not the creations of a unified, self-conscious will. That world is not their own but the world of capital. Previous history thus cannot really be understood; only the individuals and specific groups in it are intelligible, and even these not totally, since their internal dependence on inhuman society means that even in their conscious actions such individuals and groups are still in good measure mechanical functions.[1]

To the extent that we can ascribe any particular position to the "critical theorists" as a whole, this is an accurate statement of their shared conception of society and history. Human beings are not, and have not been, the conscious agents of these processes. Society and history are therefore "unintelligible" in an important sense; we can, of course, understand the mechanisms at work in their development, but what they lack is a *human* meaning, a meaning derived from their being the result of conscious human projects. Yet it is precisely this human meaning that is essential to the truest sense of "history." If history is not the result of conscious human action, then historical change is essentially no different from change in the natural world; history of course deals with human beings, but they have here the characteristic of being passive objects to which change merely *happens*. Part of what I would like to do here is to see whether we can think of the historical process as having this properly human significance, in such a way that we can think of history as a movement from its being an *unconscious* process toward its being a *conscious* one. This would have the effect of making the blind and unconscious course of history, what has been *un*intelligible, into something intelligible.

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[1] Max Horkheimer. "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Collected Essays*. Tr. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, p. 207-8

Of course any thought of ascribing progress to history, of thinking of it as a development from a "worse" state to a "better" one, strikes us in the twenty-first century as anachronistic, conjuring up images of long-discredited Enlightenment-era historiography. The idea that history displays any sort of rational, progressive development belongs to particular time and place, being as they are the products of a combination of particular events and particular intellectual currents. Hegel's philosophy of history stands at the apex of this tradition of historical thought (unless, perhaps, we would want to include Marx in this tradition). Yet, despite the continued relevance of Hegel's philosophy two centuries later, his philosophy of history, or any portrayal of history as a rational, progressive whole, presents significant problems for us today. Apart from its foreignness to our own intellectual climate, the idea that history is rational, that there is a progressive principle operative in it, seems to have been decisively refuted by the events of the last two centuries; any thought that ascribes progress to history would seem to make a mockery of the suffering of history's victims. How can we look at the slaughter of millions upon millions in the twentieth century and say that, despite this, history progresses? Adorno, whose thought will provide the counterpoint to Hegel's philosophy of history, writes that “[a]fter Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate.”[2] This does not simply mean that the *events* of history contradict positive, progressive accounts—Adorno's criticism is not that “bad things have happened, therefore we cannot see progress in history,” which would be a criticism that a progressive account of any sophistication could respond to. Rather, there is an *ethical* problem with thinking of history in this way—to do so would be a *violation* of those who have suffered over the course of history.

Despite the obvious problems with thinking of history in terms of some kind of progressive actualization of humankind's rational potentials, this idea persists in our everyday thought in more or less subtle ways. There is a tendency to unreflectively take what happens *later* as being *better* than what had happened earlier, thereby ascribing a power to time itself to bring about progress; the president of the United States can talk of a war as evidence that “freedom is on the march” and be taken seriously by many. This points to one possible reason for the persistence of the idea of progress: it can be made useful for ideological purposes. If we assume that history progresses, then any event or occurrence can be interpreted as an instance of that progress, making it possible to justify almost any event or course of action. There is therefore a danger in the persistence of this idea. But I do not think that this is *all* that there is to it. If we look back at the original expressions of this idea in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we see that the progressive model of historical development was not always purely ideological, even if it is part of its intrinsic nature to lend itself to such uses. We can see that the idea originally contained a genuine attempt to understand how the human world was changing, and could continue to be changed, for the better; this idea therefore has a *critical* force, and this is what has drawn me toward these ideas despite the fact that if they are taken seriously at all today it is only for their historical interest.

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[2] Theodor W. Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. Tr. E.B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 361

If we look at Kant's idea of history, for example, we can see that there is a truly productive force contained in the idea of history as progress. He begins his short essay on universal history by ascribing historical development to “nature's purpose” for humankind, but toward the end he reveals what is at stake in our *conceiving* of history in this way: “A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at a perfect civil union of humankind, must be regarded as possible and even as capable of furthering the purpose of nature itself.”[3] Our understanding of history as progress, that is, can contribute to our working toward *actively bringing about* this progress. By understanding what would constitute the ultimate aim of humankind (which would have to be formulated very generally of course), we can give our actions a content, a direction and aim, that they might not otherwise have; the position of an era within history as a whole can help to define that era's rational tasks for the future. This idea of history, then, is not “merely” an idea; it can have progressive consequences in reality, introducing the possibility that “we might by our own rational projects accelerate the coming" of a time in which conditions will exist that will allow for the development of humankind's rational potentials.[4] The idea could have the power, that is, to contribute to humankind taking *conscious* control of the historical process.

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[3] Immanuel Kant. “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Kant: Political Writings*. Ed. Hans Reiss. Tr. H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 51

What I would like to do here is to try and rethink "progress" and "development" in history in such a way that we might be able to *reclaim* the critical force contained in these ideas, while at the same time avoiding the problem of finding progress in history where it does not exist, or of simply affirming the necessity of the events of history despite everything that has happened to belie the very thought of progress. I think that a necessary condition for thinking of progress responsibly would be to avoid conceiving of the present as the positive *outcome* of historical development, as the *completion* of what history has been working toward, as, for example, the reconciliation of subjectivity and objectivity and the actualization of self-conscious freedom that Hegel takes the outcome of historical development to be. Self-conscious freedom, which should be the *goal* of history, should not be thought of as a completed state that has been *achieved*, but rather as the self-conscious *activity* of historical subjects continually striving to overcome the repressive objectivity that stands against human beings and determines them, thereby preventing the actualization of humankind's potentials. The realization of freedom would then consist in this *process* of overcoming, rather than in a completed state.

I will use Hegel's philosophy of history as a guide to thinking of progressive historical development, since he presents a vision of what human history *ought* to be, even if he makes the mistake of taking it as what history actually *has been*. His idea of history has a power to it, a critical force, if it is thought of as a *goal*, as something that does not exist but should. I will use Adorno's criticisms of Hegel's philosophy of history as a way of getting at this critical force contained in it; this might be thought of as an attempt to rescue what is still important in this area of Hegel's philosophy that most lends itself to outright rejection. What is interesting about Adorno's rejection of Hegel's philosophy of history is that it is not consistent with his usual attitude toward Hegel. That is, his criticisms usually take the form of accusing Hegel of not being true to his own principles, of not following them out as he should. In his criticisms, then, he typically attempts to set Hegel right, or to rescue the truth contained in Hegel's thought; in regard to the philosophy of history, however, his attitude seems to be simply one of rejection. Adorno's stance toward Hegel's philosophy of history is perhaps best summed up by his response to Hegel's supposedly beholding in Napoleon “the world spirit on horseback,” an embodiment of the rational principle active in historical development. Adorno writes that “[h]ad Hegel's philosophy of history embraced this age, Hitler's robot-bombs would have found their place...as one of the selected empirical facts by which the state of the world-spirit manifests itself directly in symbols. Like Fascism itself, the robots career without a subject. Like it they combine utmost technical perfection with total blindness. And like it they arouse mortal terror and are wholly futile. 'I have seen the world spirit,' not on horseback, but on wings and without a head, and that refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel's philosophy of history.”[5] The development of the world spirit as Adorno conceives it does not result in a rational *human* order, but rather gives rise to a world that is *hostile* to human beings. The process is neither guided by, nor does it result in, subjectivity; it advances blindly and destructively.

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[4] "Idea for a Universal History," p. 50

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[5] Theodor W. Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Tr. E.F.N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1974, p. 55

What I will try to do is to rethink Adorno's criticisms in such a way that the *truth* contained in Hegel's philosophy of history can be revealed, in a way consistent with Adorno's own claim that "rescuing Hegel—and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him—means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth from it where its untruth is obvious."[6] There is perhaps nothing in Hegel's philosophy whose untruth is more obvious than the philosophy of history; yet we should not, for this reason, overlook whatever truth might be contained in it. The first two chapters will present Hegel's philosophy of history and Adorno's critical response. In the final three chapters, devoted to Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin, I will take the results of Adorno's criticisms and use these to look for the possible ways of thinking of history as a unified and developing whole; I will approach the work of Adorno, Kracauer, and Benjamin in these final three chapters as three different, but intimately related, attempts to develop accounts of the kind of relations between the subject in the present and objects in the past that would allow us to see the meaning or development in the course of history.

In the first chapter I will present Hegel's philosophy of history, focusing on the principles behind historical development that lead to the actualization of freedom in the modern state. I will approach his account from the perspective of how it is that human beings go about actualizing their implicitly rational nature; we will therefore see humankind, as spirit, coming to itself out of the confrontation with its other, namely, nature, in such a way that humankind goes from being *subjected* to this objective force to finding freedom in overcoming this force and subjecting nature to its own powers. This overcoming of nature will lead to a *new* objectivity, in the form of political and ethical orders, being set up over subjects. I will not attempt to cover all of the historical configurations that Hegel addresses, but will rather focus on those of the Greek and Roman worlds, as these will allow us to see the principles of how and why historical change comes about according to Hegel. Crucial to this will be Hegel's idea of the "cunning of reason," the mechanism by which substantial, universal objective orders arise out of the mere particularity of human beings. I will read this "cunning" in a way that moves away from the way in which it is often understood, with "reason" being thought of as some kind of independent force standing over and above human beings, in order to see how we can think of reason as a force active in history without having to accept any metaphysical presuppositions. Finally, I will look at Hegel's account of the arena in which spirit's self-conscious freedom finds its actualization, namely, in the modern state. My focus will be on his conception of "civil society," as this is the realm in which we find the dialectical movement from particularity to universality, the movement that is the presupposition for the reconciliation of the particular subject with the universal objectivity, in which subjects find their rational realization, the actualization of their freedom. We will see that Hegel is ultimately unable to adequately justify his claims of reconciliation, however, because of the modern state's inherently *antagonistic* nature; it renders a true and free unity of subjectivity and objectivity impossible, instead merely covering over the antagonisms and unfreedom by interpreting them in terms of harmony and freedom.

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[6] Theodor W. Adorno. "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," in *Hegel: Three Studies*. Tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993, p. 83

The question, then, is how we are to account for this antagonism between the subjective and objective orders. Chapter Two will therefore be devoted to elaborating the negative philosophy of history that can be found in Adorno's work, especially in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[7] I will read this as a response to Hegel's *positive* or progressive philosophy of history; the significance of this negative account is that it will first give us an alternate view of the principles operative in history and the results of these principles working themselves out and, second, it will show us what our *task* is in relation both to our thought about the past, and to future historical development. My interest in Adorno's account in relation to Hegel lies in the fact that the problems with Hegel's understanding of history are not merely philosophical, that is, it is not a problem with, for example, the coherence of his claims; rather, the problem lies in the state of the objective world itself, the course that history has actually taken, and the fact that it has not given rise to the reconciliation that he claims exists. What Adorno's account will bring out, then, is what is *wrong* with the objective world that historical development has given rise to, and *why* it is such that it is unable to be represented (accurately) in terms of progress and reconciliation, and *how* it prevents the actualization of spirit, the reconciliation of the subjective and objective worlds.

The significance of Adorno's criticism, then, and the value of its taking the form of a negative philosophy of history, is that it reveals the principle behind the antagonism of subject and object, and why the modern world is, in principle, incapable of effecting the reconciliation that Hegel ascribes to it. This is important because, if we are to give any thought to what *real* progress might mean, we must first face up to the obstacles to this progress, which is what Adorno's developmental account of history provides. In revealing the obstacles to progress and reconciliation, Adorno will use the same key categories that we find in Hegel's account, positing, for example, reason as the force behind historical development, but giving these categories different significations, such that their unfolding in time leads to unfreedom rather than freedom, to antagonism rather than reconciliation. What we will see is that history, for Adorno, has not been truly historical at all, but has rather exhibited a structure more closely related to *nature*. The products of unconscious human activity (our political, social, and economic orders) have not been truly *human* products, in which human beings would be able to find their wills objectified to them, but are rather alien objectivities that stand over and against human beings. This is why, for Adorno, there has not been a reconciliation between subject and object—the objective order has not been of conscious human making, but has rather developed independently of the human will. For Adorno, then, human history remains at the stage that Hegel had claimed was overcome by spirit, a stage at which human beings are confronted by an alien objectivity, external to the human will.

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[7] Ascribing a negative philosophy of history to Adorno is not uncontroversial; I will therefore have to justify my reading Adorno in this way.

We can see, then, that the significance of Adorno's criticism of Hegel lies not merely in refuting Hegel's philosophy of history, but also in giving a picture of human historical development and its outcome that is stripped of the impulse to justify what exists. By showing history to have the structure of nature, and the objective world that of an alien objectivity, Adorno's account shows us that the "natural" world, now in the form of a "second nature," remains yet to be overcome—any thought of "progress" or true development in history must therefore take this into account, such that hope for progress is nothing other than the hope for overcoming this second nature.

Critics of Adorno claim, however, that his thought is incapable of helping us to think this overcoming of second nature, since he seems to totalize the evil in the world by tracing it back to a deficient form of rationality, which becomes total and omnipresent. It seems, that is, that his thought, while positing what progress would consist in, at the same time forecloses the possibilities for that very progress. I will therefore devote Chapter Three to developing those aspects of Adorno's thought that do in fact point to the possibilities for something other than the wrong state of the world. In his idea of “nonidentity,” and “nonidentity thinking,” we can see how possibilities for a different world can be recovered, even out of the wrong state of the world. This will show us that progress, for Adorno, has its source not simply in something that stands in opposition to the world of second nature, but rather *in* those aspects of the world that are damaged by the advance of destructive rationality, in the sense that they have been *denied* their possibilities, or prevented from becoming or developing into what they *could* be. This chapter, then, will serve both as a response to criticisms that Adorno's thought closes off possibilities for a better world or hope for the future, and as a way of pointing toward those aspects of the world in which hope or possibility might still be found. Although identity thinking (i.e., the form of thinking bound up with instrumental rationality) and its social embodiments strive to form a complete totality, there will remain something that escapes this totality in both thought and existence. Adorno therefore develops his idea of the “non-identical,” by which he means those things that are not encompassed in the negative whole of thought and society. It is thus the nonidentical content that thought must orient itself toward in order to uncover the different possibilities that exist in the present and past, for the sake of a different future.

Although Adorno's idea of the nonidentical points the way toward recovering the possibilities that exist in the past and present, his analysis remains fairly abstract.

Chapters Four and Five will therefore be devoted to more concrete attempts to recover the unfulfilled possibilities that may still exist in the damaged, antagonistic world. Chapter Four will focus on the work of Siegfried Kracauer, in whose work we can see a more concrete application of Adorno's idea of nonidentity thinking (although Kracauer does not frame his thought in these terms). Of particular interest will be Kracauer's approach to technologies that developed in the early part of the twentieth century, particularly photography and film. What I will be trying to show in this chapter is how Kracauer provides us with a subjective approach that is able to uncover moments full of possibility that have gone unrecognized and therefore unfulfilled. The value of Kracauer's approach is that he looks for these possibilities in the products of the "damaged" world itself, particularly in certain of its technologies. This represents something of a more advanced attitude than Adorno's, who for the most part considers only the destructive aspects of technological developments. Of particular interest will be the ways in which Kracauer sees the subject's relation to these technologies giving rise to a form of subjectivity that is particularly suited to recovering those "nonidentical" moments, those moments within the rationalized world that nonetheless contain possibilities for a different world, moments that have not been fully integrated into the rationalized world. We will see Kracauer conceive this recovery of possibility, of moments that escape the destructive movement of history and contain the seeds of something else, in terms of the "redemption" of possibilities that have gone unfulfilled.

Although Kracauer develops a subjective approach that is capable of recovering unfulfilled possibilities from the past, what his work does not provide, and what is of particular interest for us, is a confrontation with the material of history of itself, that is, with actual moments from the past that contain the seeds of a different kind of historical development, one that has run parallel with the dominant movement of history. I will therefore turn to Benjamin's work, particularly the *Arcade*s *Project*, in which he analyzes a particular historical era and its products. This will give us an idea of how *our* historical activity, how the present's approach to the objects of the past, can give rise to some sort of meaningful unity in history. The aim is to ultimately see how we can think of history as a *whole*, while avoiding the mistakes of the Hegelian approach. That is, I want to see whether it is possible to see history as a unified development of subjectivity and freedom that is not simply a whole in thought, but that can be seen in reality itself, through the mediation of the historian's activity. I will read Benjamin's idea of "redemption" as providing the key for this rethinking of unity in history, as a way, that is, of restoring meaning to a past that lacks it because of the dominant course of historical development. This idea of redemption will allow us to see history as containing a properly human meaning; the result, again, will not be a completed whole, in which the present is an end point, but will rather be a way of thinking of the advance and development of subjectivity and freedom as a continuing activity, a constant task of overcoming objectivity for the sake of the realization of a rational humanity.

Chapter 1

Reason in history

Speculative philosophies of history such as Hegel's have, with good reason, fallen into disrepute; at the same time, however, if Hegel remains relevant, then his philosophy of history cannot simply be ignored, given the position that it occupies in his system.[8] History here is essential to spirit's realization, that is, to the actualization of human potentialities, of our powers of thought and will, through the progressive overcoming of the gulf between the subjective and objective worlds. This realization of spirit comes about through the creation of a world that the spirit can recognize as its own doing, a world that *it* has created, which is therefore nothing other than a reflection and objectification of its own powers (Hegel claims that we find the highest expression of this in the modern state and its institutions). History is crucial for this realization, first, because it is *in time* that spirit must unfold and develop its potentialities; at the same time, the activity of *conceptualizing* humankind's history is necessary for spirit's realization, since this conceptualization serves to bring spirit's activity *to consciousness*:

> since spirit in and for itself is *reason*, and since the being-for-itself of reason in spirit is knowledge, world history is the necessary development, from the *concept* of the freedom of spirit alone, of the *moments* of reason and hence of spirit's self-consciousness and freedom. It is the exposition and the *actualization of the universal spirit*.[9]

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[8] Since my concern here is not with Hegel's system as a whole, I will not be able to cover this question in the depth that it deserves. My presentation of Hegel will focus on those aspects that are necessary for later chapters. Although my discussion will necessarily be lacking in this sense, I do not believe that I am not misrepresenting Hegel in what follows, even if my account is incomplete.

[9] G.W.F. Hegel. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Ed. Allen Wood. Tr. H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, paragraph 342

Spirit's full development, that is, requires not just its activity, but also the *consciousness* of this activity; spirit requires the kind of knowledge that is gained from looking at the process of its development in its entirety. Since spirit, as subject, can be defined as the process or activity of its working through its inadequacies and contradictions, it must grasp in thought *how* these are worked through, and this requires the distancing perspective that the cognition of history provides.

What is at stake in spirit grasping its development retrospectively can be seen in Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness in the *Philosophy of Spirit.* What the emergence of self-consciousness brings about is the union of subjectivity and objectivity (which, in a way yet to be specified, is also the subject matter of history). In self-consciousness, Hegel writes, "I am aware of the object as mine; and thus in it I am aware of me. The formula of self-consciousness is I=I," which, he goes on to write in the Addition to this paragraph, is what "Freedom and Reason consist in...I have in one and the same consciousness myself and the world, that in the world I find myself again, and, conversely, in my consciousness have what *is*, what possesses *objectivity*."[10] The self-consciousness of spirit in looking at the historical world means that the object, historical events, becomes nothing other than a reflection of the subject, spirit; the aim of history itself is this bringing together of the objective and the subjective, a union which constitutes freedom and reason in history. The development of self-consciousness gives rise to "Reason, which as such an identity is not only the absolute *substance,* but the *truth* that knows it...Truth, aware of what it is, is spirit."[11]

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[10] G.W.F. Hegel. *Philosophy of Mind*. Tr. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, par. 424 and Addition

This unity of consciousness and self-consciousness in history can be seen in the dual nature of the term "Geschichte." Hegel writes that "the term combines the objective and subjective sides," an ambiguity that is preserved in the English "history." The term "denotes the actual events...as well as the narration of events."[12] This is not merely an accident of language: "the narration of history is born at the same time as the first actions and events that are properly historical. A shared inner source produces history in both senses at the same time."[13] Events that can be called properly "historical" also carry with them a demand that they be grasped as such, that their significance be understood. The "shared inner source" of both of these meanings of "history" would consist in spirit's drive to both *act* to realize itself and to simultaneously grasp these actions *in thought*. "History" has this double meaning not because there are *two* different things that we call "history," namely, events and our accounts of those events, but rather because history *is* both of these things at the same time.[14] An occurrence or event that does not demand of observers that it be understood is not historical in any meaningful sense.

The object of history for Hegel, then, is not simply anything and everything that has happened in the human world; rather, what qualifies as "historical" for Hegel are those events and eras that mark stages in spirit's actualization, which consists in "Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that very freedom."[15] What I will therefore focus on is the way in which human beings become self-determined subjects, as opposed to our being determined by some sort of objective force external to us. It is freedom, for Hegel, that constitutes the substance of spirit, "freedom" meaning "the absence of dependence on an Other, the relating of self to self."[16] Spirit is free when the objective world only reflects itself, is its *own* doing, the objectification of its own implicit powers or determinations (as we find in the state, whose laws and institutions the subject can experience as its own will and substance). Freedom is not given to spirit straightaway, however; it must be rather be won through its confrontation with the objective world that initially stands over and against it as something *other* than spirit. This is what history is: spirit as subjectivity coming to reconcile itself in a unity with objectivity, and the process leading to this reconciliation being raised to consciousness, so that spirit can recognize this process as having been its own activity.

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[11] *Philosophy of Mind,* par. 439

[12] G.W.F. Hegel. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Tr. Leo Rauch. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988, p. 64

[13] Ibid.

[14] There are obviously problems involved with using Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history, given that they are lecture notes rather than a published work. I believe that what Hegel writes about world history in his published works can give us a certain level of confidence that the main points of the lectures are consistent with his thought. I will also supplement the lectures with material from his published works where it is helpful to do so.

The principle that guides Hegel's approach to history (and this is what seems most questionable to us today) is the idea that it is a *rational* process. Philosophy, he claims, must bring to history "the simple thought of Reason—the thought that Reason rules the world, and that world history has therefore been rational in its course."[17] We should not read Hegel as claiming that history presents a smooth, continuous course of development, with humankind advancing seamlessly from one stage to the next more advanced stage. Such a claim would obviously be implausible, even in Hegel's own time. Rather, we should think of this as being similar to another of Hegel's easily misinterpreted claims, namely, the claim that "[w]hat is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational."[18] Hegel does not mean here that everything we see around us is rational—as he explains elsewhere, "what is there is partly *appearance* and only partly actuality...a contingent existence does not deserve to be called something-actual in the emphatic sense of the word; what contingently exists has no greater value than that which something-*possible* has; it is an existence which (although it is) can just as well *not be*."[19] To say that history is rational, then, is not to say that *everything* that appears in it is rational, but rather that reason is active in those significant eras that contribute to the realization of freedom. The rationality of history is found in the fact that eras do not succeed one another simply through chance, through contingent circumstances; rather, each (properly) historical era will contain some contradiction, some tension or conflict between the subjective and objective orders (i.e., between the people and the laws, customs, political organization, etc.), with the transition to a new historical era resolving that contradiction, or providing some necessary determination that is lacking in the earlier era (we will see examples of this below).

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[15] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 22

[16] *Philosophy of Mind*, Addition to par. 382

[17] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 12

There is, as we would expect, a subjective side to the rationality of history as well. Although Hegel claims that reason is immanent to the events themselves, this rationality only becomes explicit to one who observes these events and interprets them in the proper way: "To him who looks at the world rationally, the world looks rational in return. The relation is mutual."[20] Although this subjective activity is necessary, Hegel does not want to say that the rationality of history is *merely* "subjective," in the sense of being something added to the course of events by the philosophical "historian": "Reason is the

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[18] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 20

[19] G.W.F. Hegel. *The Encyclopaedia Logic*. Tr. T.F. Geraets et al. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, par. 6

[20] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 14

substance in the sense that it is that wherein all reality has its being and subsistence."[21] The world can appear rational to the rational observer because it is reason that forms the *basis* of historical development; reason *impels* spiritual development, it is "the activation of [the] goal in world history—bringing it forth from the inner source to external manifestation."[22] It is important to note here that reason, as both the goal and the presupposition of history, is not something *other* than human beings. Reason impels historical change because the objective orders that exist are not adequate to the implicitly rational, spiritual nature of human beings. It therefore drives human beings to *overcome* the inadequate relations between the objective and subjective orders. If we turn now to the body of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history, we can see some of the key moments in this process.

Overcoming nature

The historical process consists in the development of both the subjective will, which moves toward becoming a will that is *self*-determining, rather than being determined by external influences, and of the objective order, which develops into a rational order in which the subject can find itself at home. Both sides of this development are necessary, as the subjective will requires an objective order adequate to it, while the rationality of this order, the state and its institutions, can become actual only through being embodied in subjective wills. The culmination of the historical process will therefore consist in the reconciliation of the particular, subjective will and the universal, objective order in the modern state: the "ethical totality, the *state*...is the reality wherein the individual has and enjoys his freedom—but only insofar as he knows, believes, and wills the universal."[23] These two sides can form a unity insofar as the laws, customs, and other aspects of the objective order come out of spirit as objectifications of its own inner nature and drive, rather than existing as something alien to spirit. When the particular will is in accord with the laws and institutions of the state, these are experienced as arising out of that will itself. Hegel thus describes the state and its ethical system as "second nature," which is an objective world that is spirit's *own* creation, which it *recognizes and experiences* as its own: "the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom, the world of spirit produced from within itself as second nature."[24]

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[21] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 12

[22] Ibid.

In order to see how this goal of the full development of second nature is accomplished, I will begin by looking at Hegel's account of spirit's relation to "first" nature, a relation that spirit must work to overcome. Hegel claims that "to begin with, human consciousness and will are immersed in their unmediated natural life."[25] This does not mean that he is taking as his starting point some kind of "state of nature" prior to organized states (which, according to Hegel, would not even be historical). Rather, what characterizes this will is that it is immersed in its merely natural determinations, its needs, desires, etc. Even with the formation of states at history's earlier stages, however, the subjective will is still bound up in its naturalness, and is thus unable to relate as a free subject to any objective political or ethical order. This is the situation that presents itself in the Eastern world. The relation between the objective order and the particular will here is characterized by the "subjugation of the mere arbitrary will...Government exists only as the prerogative of compulsion."[26] The objective order has the character of a *natural* power standing over and against the individual, a power to which the individual must simply submit as to a superior power. We do find here a *kind* of unity between the subjective will and the objective order, but it is only a "natural" unity, one "equivalent to the spirit of the family," that is, a unity arising immediately rather than through the mediation of consciousness.[27] Government is based not on any conscious recognition of its objectivity and necessity, but rather on "the paternal management of the Emperor."[28] The individual does not truly exist for itself at this point, but is merely an inessential part of the whole: we find "all rational ordinances and arrangements, but in such a way, that individuals remain as mere accidents."[29] The particular here is therefore merely submerged within the universal order, while the universal order cannot attain its full realization, since it is not willed by free subjectivity. The inadequacy in spirit is actually threefold, however, since the inadequacy of both the subjective and objective results in the impossibility of the two sides *relating* to each other in such a way that each is mediated through the other. Spirit is thus unable to *know* itself as such, since subjects are not capable of the requisite form of reflection. For this unity to develop, it is necessary that subjects begin to separate themselves from this "natural" unity in which they are immersed, in order to then freely reunite with objectivity through the mediation of the conscious knowledge of the necessity of the unity.

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[23] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 41
[24] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* par. 4
[25] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 58

It is in the Greek world, according to Hegel, that we see the subjective will breaking free of its natural bonds and thereby creating a self distinct from the merely natural self.

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[26] G.W.F. Hegel. *The Philosophy of History*. Trans. J. Sibree. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1956, p. 111

[27] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 120

[28] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 121

[29] *The Philosophy of History,* p. 105

The struggle between spirit and nature is first recognized as a *problem*, Hegel claims, in Egypt, which thus represents the transitional moment between the Eastern world and the Greek world. The fact that spirit's relation to nature has become problematic for it finds an embodiment in the Sphinx, with its “human head looking out from the brute body,” which “exhibits Spirit as it begins to emerge from the merely natural...without, however, entirely freeing itself from the fetters nature had imposed.”[30] Whereas the Egyptian spirit comes to *recognize* the problem, at least implicitly, it is the Greek spirit that begins to *solve* it. This is illustrated by the myth of Oedipus, who, “giving the solution *Man* [to the Sphinx's riddle], precipitated the Sphinx from the rock. The solution and liberation of that Oriental Spirit...is certainly this: that the inner being of nature is thought, which has its existence only in the human consciousness.”[31] With the recognition that the truth of nature is spirit, nature can become something other than a force external and hostile to spirit, subjecting and determining it; it becomes the first arena for spirit's objectification of itself.

This objectification first takes the form of the *subjection* of nature, with spirit beginning to determine itself as subject through its interactions with nature, its confrontation with its other, in which it overcomes it by discovering itself *in* it. Greece's oracles, for example, receive their impetus from natural phenomena, but these phenomena acquire their meaning only through being interpreted. Thus the “Greek Spirit...begins with nature, but transforms it into a mere objective form of its own existence.”[32] We also see new forms of activity in relation to nature, such as sea trade, in which the immediate limitations imposed by nature on human beings are overcome—in such activity, “everything depends on man's activity, his courage, his intelligence...Human will and activity here occupy the foreground, not nature and its bounty.”[33] We can think here of the travels of Odysseus, in which he continuously confronts and overcomes primordial natural forces not by opposing them with brute force, but rather through his cunning. Here we can see the beginnings of subjectivity in relation to nature, as the human being overcomes nature's forces through its own power. Further, we see that any benefits that can be derived from nature must be the result of the subject's own activity, as Odysseus is again and again tempted with the easy fulfillment of desires (for example, in the episode with the lotus eaters), temptations which he scorns, choosing instead an active life in which whatever he gains is *taken by* him, rather than being *given to* him.

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[30] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 199
[31] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 220
[32] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 238

This process of spirit coming to know itself through its activity is not accidental; it is not the result of mere chance that the Greek world and the characteristics that it exhibits emerged in history. Rather, this activity of spirit comes about because the drive to overcome its other is internal to human beings; we should recall that for Hegel “reason” is not merely the *end* of the historical process, but is what drives it as well. The principle active in the Greek world, therefore, is the impulse to not leave the subjective and objective worlds in an unreconciled tension, but to rather overcome the objectivity that stands over and against the subjective will.

It is through this “liberation” of spirit from nature that we enter the realm of spirit properly speaking. This liberation is exemplified in the Greek religion, which in its earlier phases is still tied to natural forces as something foreign to spirit, but which then develops into something truly spiritual. Hegel thus finds the “turning point of the whole” in the “degradation of nature in Greek mythology,” represented by the “overthrow of the Titans by the race of Zeus;” this constitutes a pivotal moment in spirit's development because the Titans embody “the merely physical—natural existences, from whose grasp sovereignty is wrested.”[34] The changes undergone by Greek religion are not the result of contingent factors, but rather demonstrate the transition from a world under the sway of nature to one that is spirit's own. Nature is not simply banished from the human world, however, but is transformed in such a way that spirit emerges as its truth: “Helios is the sun as a natural element. This Light, according to the analogy of Spirit, has been transformed to self-consciousness, and Apollo has proceeded from Helios...Apollo is the prophesying and discerning god—Light that makes everything clear.”[35] The activity of spirit, then, is not merely an abstract negation of its other, but is rather the process of spirit discovering *itself* in its other, finding its other to be only a reflection of itself.

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[33] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 191-2

The further development of subjectivity

With this initial overcoming of the natural order, we also see a new relation between the individual and the political order. The objective order is no longer a force of nature to which the individual simply submits: the Greeks “are not...patriarchally united by a bond of nature, but realize a union through some other medium—through law and custom having the sanction of spirit.”[36] Although the Greek political order represents a further step in the development toward a freely reciprocal relation between the subjective and objective, this political union is nonetheless deficient since it is not mediated by the subject's *consciousness* of the rational nature of the objective order. The relation of the individual to the polis takes the form of "custom, in the form of objective will, so that morality properly so called—subjective conviction and intention—has not yet manifested itself."[37] The individual is essentially part of the polis, but this belonging is *felt* rather than *thought.* In order to bring about a true unity with the objective order, mediated by self-consciousness, it is first necessary that subjectivity separate itself from this order, through becoming aware of particular subjective interests as distinct from the interests of the polis.

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[34] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 244-5
[35] *The Philosophy of History,* p. 245
[36] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 225-6

Subjectivity must develop in opposition to objectivity; this development therefore means the downfall of the Greek world, at least as a world-historical stage. The Greek world's dissolution as a historical power comes about because spirit's development demands that the subjective separate itself from its unity with the objective, in order to eventually reunite with it through the mediation of self-consciousness. It is in the Greek world that we see the subject beginning to react to the objective order as to something that is not its own, not something resulting from its own self-conscious will. Thus Hegel claims that "when reflection comes into play, the inquiry is started whether the principles of law cannot be improved. Instead of holding by the existing state of things, *internal* conviction is relied upon."[38] An example of the influence of internal conviction can be seen in the emergence of the Sophists, whose "Man is the measure" Hegel interprets as "intend[ing]...that mere liking was the principle of Right, and that advantage to the

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37 *The Philosophy of History*, p. 251

38 *The Philosophy of History*, p. 253

individual was the ground of final appeal."[39] The individual no longer finds fulfillment in what was previously taken as meaningful and substantial, so he begins the search for answers of his own, building up an "ideal" order that *ought* to be, in place of the one that exists. The Greek world ultimately proves unable to forge a subjectively satisfactory unity either within states or between them; Greece is divided into individual states existing for themselves, and the dominant states are characterized as either a "lifeless equality" of individuals (Sparta), or as one that makes possible and allows the assertion of idiosyncratic individuality (Athens).[40]

This reaction against the traditional orders, and therefore against unity, might seem at first to be nothing more than a *merely* subjective and particular reaction against the objective order. Although the typical reactions against the existing order might have the form of mere particularity, being assertions of individual thought and opinion, there is also a deeper significance to these reactions, one which allows us to see them as coming out of the internal, spiritual drive to call into actuality the antithesis between the subjective and objective. Even if reactions against the existing order are grounded in merely particular and idiosyncratic convictions and opinions, there is nonetheless a rational *basis* for this reaction, namely, the subjective experience that the objective order is not adequate to the subjective will. These subjective reactions can therefore be seen as the demand (though not necessarily formulated consciously) that the objective order ought to be such that the subjective will can find satisfaction in it. The subjective principle in this world finds perhaps its highest manifestation in Socrates, for whom subjectivity does not imply merely particular interests, but who, "in assigning to insight, to conviction, the determination of men's actions—posited the Individual as capable of a final moral decision, in contraposition to Country and to Customary Morality."[41] Socrates' deepening of the meaning of subjectivity thus points the way toward the possibility of a form of subjectivity capable of positing rational, objective powers *out* of itself, although this is possible only for later historical eras, and not for the Greece.

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[39] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 269

[40] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 262, 260

With the dissolution of the Greek world through the dissolving of the bonds between the individual and the polis, we see the scene of world history shifting to a new historical nation that will further develop the spiritual advances made in Greece. The Roman world now becomes the dominant historical people. The transition from one historical stage to the next does not come about, according to Hegel, simply through a more powerful people overcoming a weaker one. Historical change, rather than coming about through the play of contingent situations and events, results from spirit's drive to develop itself; the Roman world constitutes the next stage of history because it provides a new principle that is necessary for this development, the principle of "abstract universal personality."[42] This stage consists in raising the subject above mere particularity, above the "passions and caprices" that characterize the subjective will of the later Greek period. The subjectivity of the Roman world is a *universal* subjectivity, taking the form of "the inherent freedom of the *abstract* ego, which must be distinguished from individual idiosyncrasy."[43] We could say that this stage emerges as historical because it represents the truth of the Greek world; the subject here is no longer a merely particular individual, but displays universality insofar as it becomes a person *as such*, that is, a bearer of rights. Although the aspect of universality here becomes the essence of subjectivity, this does not mean that the individual rises above the concern with his particular and private interests. The individual becomes a person as such, but "the principle of abstract subjectivity...realizes itself as Personality in the recognition of Private Right," that is, this universality is determined primarily in terms of property rights.[44] Rather than seeing here a harmony of free, universally determined wills, we have "the pure egotism of the will in opposition to others, involving no moral element of determination, but appearing in a concrete form only in the shape of individual interests."[45] The Roman world is therefore characterized, for Hegel, primarily by the conflict of particular interests, even though this particularity now rests on a foundation of universality.

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[41] *The Philosophy of History*, 269-70

[42] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 278

[43] *The Philosophy of History,* p. 279

From this play of individual wills, in which each pursues his own interests at the expense of any common good, comes the need for a new kind of power standing over individuals; an (abstract) universal power, power as such, is necessary in order to "discipline" the particular wills, to forge some sort of unity out of this mass of particular wills. We see this necessary power emerge with the move from the Republic to the Empire; in the latter we find "colossal individualities...instinctively impelled to restore that political unity which was no longer to be found in men's dispositions."[46] Although this power *imposes* itself on the particular wills, and thus cannot bring about a true unity of the subjective and objective wills, it does represent an advance insofar as it supplies the principle of the power of the objective order as a *universal* power. This advance is, again, not merely the result of chance; for Hegel, "it was not the mere accident of Caesar's existence that destroyed the Republic—it was *necessity*."[47] It is not just the logic of Hegel's account that demands this; it is spirit itself that demands and brings about this occurrence. That is, human beings, as implicitly rational, will recognize the necessity of there being some universal principle, in the form of some kind of power, above their particular wills. It is not the case that spirit is able to advance in its development because Caesar appeared; rather, Caesar appeared because spirit's development demanded it—if Caesar had not come on the scene, there would have been some other figure to establish this power, and if this had not happened in Rome, it would have come about elsewhere, in a different historical people.

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[44] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 316
[45] *The Philosophy of History,* p. 308-9
[46] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 310
[47] *The Philosophy of History*, p. 311

At this point, there are certainly questions that can be raised regarding Hegel's claims of the necessity of certain historical events. We might be inclined to suspect that Hegel is simply looking at the events that actually *did* occur, and then supplying an explanation for why they *must* have occurred as they did. If this is what Hegel is really doing, then his account would obviously tell us nothing about whether events happened as they did as a *result* of the principles supposedly at work in history; perhaps historical change is the result of merely contingent factors, with Hegel retrospectively reading the necessity of historical development into this mass of chance events. At this point I would like to (briefly) try to see how we can make plausible Hegel's claims about the necessity of historical development. My concern here goes beyond Hegel's account of history; I am taking this opportunity to address the plausibility of finding general principles of this kind at work in history because it will have implications for later chapters.

Even though historical change is, for Hegel, logical and necessary, we do not have to take him to be claiming that history could not have developed differently. To take the example of the transition from Greece to Rome, the necessity is found not in *this* particular world-historical people, Greece, giving way to the next. What is necessary, rather, is the development of the universal subjectivity of the Roman world out of the particular subjectivity of Greece. That is, we can take it as a contingent fact that these principles were embodied in the Greek and Roman worlds—they could have appeared elsewhere.[48] It does not seem implausible to suggest that a world dominated by an arbitrary, capricious form of subjectivity would lead to the dissolution of the relation between the individual and the objective order, as Hegel finds in Greece, and that a different kind of relation becomes necessary, with a different kind of objective power asserting itself over the individual will. That this happened in *Rome* is not necessary; if a person such as Caesar had not appeared, and instituted the form of power that he did, Rome simply would not have been a "world-historical" people, that is, one embodying a key phase of spiritual development, or at least would not have had the same historical significance. The emergence of a new principle of power would simply have happened elsewhere (although it would have to appear *somewhere*).[49] Perhaps Hegel *is* giving his logic priority over the actual events of history; I am only trying to show that it is possible to give priority to the events and still arrive at this (or at least a) developmental account of history. Hegel would claim that he finds this logical development in history not because he is imposing his logical framework on the events, but because *any* possible course of development would have had to unfold according to this logic. Even if we ascribe historical change to some underlying principle internal to the events, we are not thereby committed to claiming that historical events could not have been other than they actually were. The question remains, however, of how exactly this change comes about—what is the mechanism of historical development? What are the means by which this internal, spiritual drive externalizes itself in the world?

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[48] Hegel would perhaps say that the "national spirits" of Greece and Rome made them particularly susceptible to embodying these principles—but we could still say that the *spirits* disposed to embodying them could have appeared elsewhere (although there would be *some* limitations to the principles that may arise in a particular people if we take into account the role of factors such as geography and climate in forming the "spirit of a people").

[49] One aspect of Hegel's philosophy of history that we might find disconcerting is his glorification of the "great men" of history. Given his admiration for individuals such as Caesar, Alexander, and Napoleon, it might seem as though he is simply glorifying power as such; but we can see from this that what draws him to these figures is their significance for historical development, the ways in which they embody world-historical principles.

The cunning of reason

As I said in the Introduction, my concern here (and in later chapters), is to see how we can think of history as being the result of *human* activity and agency, rather than being something that happens *to* human beings. What we need to consider here is how the movement that Hegel describes can be thought of as being an activity of human beings; even if we accept Hegel's claims about the logic of spirit's development in time, it is not clear how this is something that human beings actively accomplish—it still seems to describe a process that happens behind our backs. In this section I will examine Hegel's infamous "cunning of reason;" this is one of the aspects of his philosophy of history that is most open to misinterpretation, as it gives the impression that human beings are mere pawns in historical development, being sacrificed for the sake of some higher being called "Reason" or "Spirit." Hegel's account of history, however, demands that we not think of historical development in this way; we cannot take human beings as being sacrificed to some higher power, since if human beings were to be the means to some higher end which is not our own, the result would not be a *freely* willed unity between the subjective and objective, the universal and particular. It is therefore necessary to see how reason operates in history to raise the arbitrary, particular will to a universality that can be *experienced and recognized* by the subjective will as being its own.

What we will see is that the true universality of the will, and the rational objective order, come *out of* the will's particularity; Hegel's explanation of how this happens depends upon his claim that the particular aims and interests of individuals are not merely particular, but contain also, implicitly at first, a universal element. We can see this in Hegel's account of "world-historical" individuals, that is, those individuals who effect and embody the transition from one historical stage to the next. Caesar, for example, was, according to Hegel, not acting for the sake of furthering the development of spirit; he had his own desires and interests that he was seeking to fulfill through his actions. Yet he emerges as a world-historical individual because, in addition to his own interests, he had "also an instinct that fulfilled what the time intrinsically demanded;" thus, "the great men in history are those whose own particular aims also contain the substantial will that is the will of the World Spirit."[50] It is not simply the case, however, that these individuals are responsible for bringing about advances in spirit's development; it is rather spirit's process of realization that brings about the world-historical individuals: "the universal substance...creates for itself the individuals it requires to carry out its ends."[51] Yet this does not mean that there was some force outside of Caesar governing his actions; rather, we can say that spirit is responsible for creating the conditions in which the person, Julius Caesar, could become the *world-historical* Caesar. That is, it was the development of spirit that brought about the situation in Rome in which individuals had the character of abstract, juridical persons, immersed in their own particular interests. The world-historical individual is the one who recognizes that this situation offers the opportunity of fulfilling his *own* interests. At the same time, however, these interests of the individual are one with what is *objectively* necessary at the time. Caesar's actions did not coincide with this objective necessity because he was a world-historical individual—rather, he was a world-historical individual because his aims coincided with this necessity. Caesar and others of this type are "thoughtful men, with insight into what was needed and what was timely: their insight was the very truth of their time and their world."[52] These individuals can therefore be said to *make* history through their actions, marking new epochs in the progress of spirit, even though they are not looking beyond their own world, their own time. The world spirit does, in a sense, work *through* these individuals, but it is able to do so because their own thoughts and interests harmonize with the objective necessity—the spirit that works through them is thus not a force *external* to them, but is rather one in which they participate through their own thoughts and actions.

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[50] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 32

[51] *Reason in History,* p. 52

Again, the point of this discussion is to suggest how human beings can be thought of as active participants in the historical process. And there is something distinctly unsatisfying about thinking of this activity *only* in terms of the actions of the world-historical individuals. That is, for the idea of human activity in history to have any kind of substantial meaning, we need to think about how the mass of anonymous individuals also participate in the developments of spirit brought about by the "great men." Hegel begins to suggest an answer to this by claiming that the people do not simply submit to the wills of the world-historical individuals; they rather "follow these soul-leaders" because they “feel the irresistible force of their own spirit coming out in the heroes.”[53] The world-historical individuals are necessary not because the people are not themselves part of the world spirit, but rather because the people will lack either the insight into what is necessary at a given time, or the power and position to act upon it. Once the world-historical individuals act, however, the people will come to experience their actions as responding to an objective necessity of the time. Spirit “is the inner soul of all individuals; but this is an unconscious inwardness which the great men bring to consciousness for them.”[54] The Roman people, for example, would have at least felt the necessity of the imposition of a new kind of power on their world, and thus recognized the objectivity of Caesar's actions.

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[52] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 33

Even if this begins to make plausible how spirit can work through human beings, from a principle internal to them, it is nonetheless not clear at this point whether we can say that individuals are really acting as *agents* of historical change. Agency would seem to require something more than simply acknowledging or recognizing the necessity of an event as it happens or after it has happened, but this seems to be precisely the role that Hegel assigns to the anonymous individuals of history. This presents more of a challenge to Hegel, especially given his description of the “cunning of reason,” the mechanism of change in history, through which “individuals are surrendered and sacrificed” in the development of history.[55] This makes it sound as though individuals are used by reason *only* as the *means* to spirit's development; we can see, however, that there is more involved with Hegel's cunning of reason than is often recognized.

The starting point of Hegel's description of the cunning of reason is his claim that the

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 35

"imponderable mass of wills, interests, and activities...are the tools and means of the World Spirit for achieving its goal."[56] This first moment of human activity thus consists of nothing more than a mass of conflicting particular wills, determined only by their own needs, interests, and desires. This conflict between wills that follows from their mere particularity does not as yet involve universal determinations: "It is not the Universal Idea which involves itself in antithesis and struggle, exposing itself to danger; it remains in the background, and is preserved against attack or injury."[57] This is reason's cunning: that it allows wills determined by *particularity* to conflict with one another, out of which conflict the universal itself will somehow be allowed to emerge. A closer look at this process will allow us to answer the question of whether it is human beings *as such* that serve as the mere means to the realization of reason in history. Again, if this is the case, then it will be difficult, if not impossible, to get from Hegel's account the possibility of a view of history in which human beings truly count as the subjects of the process.

We can get a better sense of what Hegel means by the "cunning of reason" if we look beyond the lectures on the philosophy of history. A discussion of reason's cunning appears as well in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* under the heading of "Teleology," immediately before the concluding chapter on "The Idea."[58] Here he writes that "[i]n dealing with purpose, we must not think at once (or merely) of the form in which it occurs in consciousness as a determination that is present in representation."[59] That is, we can characterize something as a “purpose” if it has its basis in, or emerges out of, some internal drive, even if one is not conscious of this drive, or of the object that it seeks. We can think here of the earlier stages of history that Hegel describes, in which human beings are defined by their contradictoriness; the human being, as implicitly spiritual, finds itself confronted with an external world that does not allow this spiritual aspect to be realized, or is at odds with it (we see this in the Greek world, for example, in which subjectivity does not experience satisfaction in its relation to the objective order). The result is a perceived deficiency in the relation between the subjective and objective orders, with a resulting drive to *overcome* this deficiency. We can consider this experience of deficiency and the drive to overcome it as constituting a *purpose*: “[n]eed and drive are the readiest examples of purpose. They are the *felt* contradiction, as it appears *within* the living subject itself; and they lead into the activity of negating this negation (which is what mere subjectivity still is).”[60] If we think of “purpose” in this way, then the purpose to be fulfilled in history is not *external* to those who also serve as the means to fulfilling this purpose—it is not something that stands beyond or outside of human beings, or that can be attributed to some power independent of human beings. The purpose to be fulfilled is not external to those who serve as the means of its realization, but emerges from the nature of human beings themselves.

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[56] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 28

[57] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 35

[58] Hegel is not writing about history in this section (or in this work), but about logic; however, it does not seem illegitimate to apply his logical reflections to historical occurrences. Although we should not jump back and forth between logic and history indiscriminately, it nevertheless seems to be the case that these are not completely *distinct* areas of thought, given that history develops logically, and that the logical determinations unfold themselves within history. I hope that the parallels between the two areas of thought will become clear in what follows.

[59] *Encyclopaedia Logic*, par. 204

The question remains, however, how reason, if its realization can actually be said to constitute a *human purpose*, can also use human beings as a *means*, one that is “used up” and “sacrificed” in the process of fulfilling this goal. What needs to be noticed here is that Hegel does not claim that it is human beings *as such* that serve as the means to history's development, to spirit's end—this would not make sense, given that this end is nothing other than the realization of humankind's implicit rational substance. Thus Hegel writes that what constitutes reason's cunning is "that it allows *the passions* to work for it."[61] What is sacrificed in reason's movement is *particularity*, which we should not identify with the substance of human beings as such. Although "Reason...lets objects act upon one another according to their own nature, and wear each other out," and thereby "executes only *its* purpose without itself mingling in the process,"[62] we should not take this to mean that reason is some ghostly power hovering over the process and directing it; rather, it is a power internal to human beings, while human wills determined by *particularity* come into conflict and "wear each other out." The "cunning of reason" is being attributed to something internal to us; it is the "cunning" of *our* substantial nature.

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[60] Ibid.

Human activity could not, in fact, serve as the means to spirit's realization if human beings consisted only of particularity: "objects used as means must already be such as to be appropriate to their end and must have something in common with it."[63] Particularity, the will determined by needs and desires rather than by substantial objects, does *not* by itself have anything in common with the end of reason's development; this aspect of human activity is appropriate to serve as the means to this end only because there is more to the human being than its particularity: "there is that in individuals which is not to be made subordinate, but is something intrinsically eternal and divine. This is *morality, ethics,* and *religious commitment*; therefore, humans are ends in themselves with respect to the content of this goal."[64] Human beings are not *mere* means to history's end, but are able to serve as both means *and* ends because of our dual nature. And these two aspects are not unrelated in this process; it is the activity of one aspect, particularity, that *makes possible* the explicit emergence of the other, higher, aspect. Universality arises out of particularity; it comes to be actualized through the mediation of the passions and of actions determined by particularity. The means that reason uses in the development of history is therefore "the activity of those in whom Reason is present as their intrinsically substantial essence—though primarily as a still obscure ground, one that is hidden from them."[65]

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[61] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 35 (my italics)

[62] *Encyclopaedia Logic,* Addition to par. 209

[63] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 36

[64] Ibid.

Yet Hegel does nonetheless claim that *individuals* are "surrendered and sacrificed" to the movement of history (which must of course be admitted, given the the facts of history). In order to reconcile this admission with the claim that human beings are actually the *ends* of history, we must keep in mind that human beings do not develop into actualized ends in every era of history—this is only the result of a long process of development. Human beings at earlier stages of history thus serve as the means to spirit's realization, without themselves taking part in the culmination of the process. This does not necessarily signify a problem with Hegel's account, since it is simply a result of the nature of the development of the human world in time. We can think here also of Kant's attitude toward the fact that human beings existing at different times do not partake equally in the fruits of progress; he notes that it is "disconcerting...that the earlier generations seem to perform their laborious tasks only for the sake of the later ones," such that they "had worked without themselves being able to share in the happiness they were preparing."[66] While Kant recognizes here that there is something troubling about this, the problem seems to lie not with the idea of progress in history, but rather with the nature of humankind, the fact that, as Kant points out, the fulfilling of potentials requires generations rather than a single lifetime. For Hegel too, the *nature* of progress in history requires that earlier epochs work for the sake of later ones, rather than simply for themselves.[67] This is simply a result of the fact that humankind has ends that *cannot* be developed within a single era, but require the expanse of history in which to work themselves out. Since these ends require the bringing to consciousness of something that is initially only implicit, this can happen only gradually.[68]

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[65] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 40

[66] Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," p. 44

We can think of reason's cunning working, most generally, in the following way: given a mass of individual wills all acting according to their particular desires, and for the sake of fulfilling their particular interests, conflicts will necessarily arise between them. In order to prevent conflict, or to regulate the interactions between these wills, institutions (such as those that we find within social and political organizations) must be developed. As John Burbidge describes this process, the individual whose will is determined by particularity will "find herself struggling against the interests and needs of another. His actions frustrate her ends. In the struggle they wear each other down, developing over time customary responses that allow each to achieve satisfaction, and provide a more secure base for their free actions."[69] Ethical and political institutions, *universal* powers, then, arise out of the need to allow individuals to satisfy their particular wills in a situation in which everybody else is acting for their own ends as well. This cannot, however, be the full explanation of how universality arises out of particularity; social, ethical, and political institutions are not there *only* to prevent individual wills from infringing on one another as they satisfy their own needs and inclinations—they must also allow the particular wills to *recognize* their universality, and to will the universal. This is made possible by the fact that "[i]n their actions, agents have finite aims and interests, but they also know and think, the content of their aims is permeated by the universal and essential determinations of what is right, good, duty, etc."[70] That is, our particular interests themselves have a dual character; they are *more* than merely particular. We develop systems of laws, for example, to resolve or prevent conflicts, but there is more here than just the desire to prevent others from frustrating me in my ends. When somebody infringes upon my will, I do not see this as nothing more than an impediment to my attaining my end—I also take it to be a violation of *right*. And I refrain from impeding the aims of others not simply because I fear the punishment of the law, but because I recognize that I have a *duty* toward others and toward the law. These are the kinds of universal aspects that will emerge and be made explicit through the conflict of particular wills. Of course this universality will not be *explicitly* present in all stages of history. In earlier periods the laws may in fact operate through nothing more than the fear of punishment, but the laws' existence, and individuals' relation to them, sets the stage for further advances in the development of a rational system of right.[71] Thus we see individuals "fulfilling their goals according to their natural determinations and bringing forth the edifice of human society, in which they have provided for law and order as forces *against* themselves (i.e., restraining those passions)."[72] Out of these forces, I would add, comes the insight into the *rationality* and *necessity* of restraining those passions, and of making right, in its universality, into the content of the will.

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[67] Although we can ascribe this "disconcerting" feature of history to the nature of human beings as historical beings, the fact remains that there *is* something troubling about it; Kant's attitude of resignation in the face of this fact feels insufficient. While it does not seem that we can get around this, I will attempt later to think about this feature of progress, to see how some sort of dignity can be restored to earlier generations, such that are not *merely* means to some later end.

[68] Again there is a parallel between Kant and Hegel, with Hegel requiring that spirit become conscious of development as its own activity, and Kant's claiming that nature intends our "rational self-respect," requiring that we not only be responsible for our own activity, but that we also recognize it *as* being the result of our own work.

[69] John W. Burbidge. "Final Causality in Nature and Human Affairs," in *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. 30 (1997), p. 151-162

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[70] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 31

[71] Further, the development of this universality does not imply that at the advanced stages of history the wills of agents are perfectly rational and that they always have the universal as the content of their wills; wills of individuals can always be more or less in accord with their concept.

The realization of reason in the state

Although there remains a further stage of history in Hegel's account that has not been considered, that of the "German world," I will at this point move away from the philosophy of history, strictly speaking, and examine what Hegel considers to be the accomplished realization of reason in the state (particularly in the *Philosophy of Right*), in which we find the reconciliation of the subjective will and the objective order, of the particular and the universal. In the state, at least in its concept if not in every actually existing state, we have freedom, the substance of spirit, realized ("the state is the realization of freedom, i.e., of the absolute end goal"[73]). This means that universal objects such as law, ethics, etc. are actualized by being instantiated in the actual wills of individuals, while the subjective will discovers its true freedom in having these universal objects become the *content* of that will. The human being's "spiritual reality consists in the fact that their essence—rationality—is objectively there for them as knowers, and that that rationality has an immediate objective existence for them."[74] The particular discovers its true nature only *in* the universal and rational, while the universal has *actuality* only in being taken up as the content of actual wills. Thus "[t]he state is the actuality of the substantial *will*, an actuality which it possesses in the particular *self-consciousness* when this has been raised to its universality."[75]

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[72] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 30
[73] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 41
[74] *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, p. 42

As we examine the nature of this reconciliation, this dual actualization of the subjective and objective each in its other, we must keep in mind Hegel's characterization of this reconciliation since what will be at issue is whether the course of his reasoning can actually justify locating this reconciliation in the modern state, and whether the state and its systems *are capable* of allowing or bringing about this reconciliation. Again, this reconciliation must involve the individual freely willing the universal, with the subject's implicit rationality becoming objective to it, such that the unity of the two moments cannot consist in any kind of *domination* of the particular by the universal, the subjective will by the objective order. What we will pay particular attention to here is the way in which the universal arises out of the particularity of the subjective will, rather than emerging as a power separate from the particular, or over its head. This is because, again, for Hegel, the particular and subjective will is not simply *negated* in the course of historical development, but is rather *itself* raised to a higher level, to universality and substantiality.

Hegel begins his account in the *Philosophy of Right* with the single individual will; here we see the will "as it is in its abstract concept,"[76] that is, its concept, freedom, is at this point only implicit in it. At this stage (in a logical, rather than temporal, sense) it is "in the determinate condition of immediacy."[77] In its immediacy the will is taken simply as an individual will, not yet integrated into, or mediated by, the world around it: "In accordance with the moment of *particularity* of the will, it has in addition a content consisting of determinate ends, and as *exclusive individuality*, it simultaneously encounters this content as an external world immediately confronting it."[78] The will, oriented toward its particular ends, finds the external world standing over and against it. Other wills, too, would count merely as part of this external world, standing as they do *against* my will. The will in this abstract state cannot exist as the will in its freedom, since it is "present...as desire, need, drives, contingent preferences, etc."[79] Here we have a situation similar to the relation between spirit and nature at history's earlier stages; there is a gulf between the two terms that must be *overcome* by the will, but its becoming a true subject means overcoming objectivity in such a way that this objectivity is not simply negated. Rather, the subject works to find itself *in* the objectivity, to discover that the objectivity is nothing other than itself.

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[75] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 258
[76] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* par. 34
[77] Ibid.

We should keep in mind, again, that this abstract will figures only as an ideal moment in Hegel's account; he is not thinking of it here as a *temporal* development. Nonetheless, I think it is plausible to suggest that we can in fact see the different moments or aspects of the will predominating at the different historical stages that Hegel describes. We might then think of this moment of the will's particularity, the will as abstract, as predominating at earlier stages of history, prior to the development of an objective order that allows the universally determined will to emerge. We need to be careful in ascribing different moments of the will (or any of Hegel's logical moments, for that matter) to different stages of history, since there is certainly no one-to-one correspondence between logical moments and historical ones; yet Hegel would claim that the will does not, in fact, display the same level of development at all stages of history, and the differences between the will at different stages can be thought of in terms of the predominance of different logical determinations. The development of the will from its determination as particular, toward concrete freedom, is not *only* a logical development, but is also an essential aspect of historical development.

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[78] Ibid.

[79] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 37

The will's development to freedom, again, requires that it overcome the separation between its mere particularity and the external world. Hegel writes that "[t]he activity of the will consists in canceling the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and in translating its ends from their subjective determination into an objective one, while at the same time remaining *with itself* in this objectivity."[80] The problem that Hegel's account of the will sets itself to solve is how the will moves from its abstract moment of particularity to being determined objectively, without simply *eliminating* the subjective side. The objective order, that is, and *its* ends, cannot simply take the place of the subjective will's ends. Both sides must not only be preserved in the "canceling" of this contradiction, each must also find itself realized in the other; what will therefore change is the *relation* between them, such that they will not be hostile forces standing against one another. The universality will arise out of the particular will in a way that will allow us to see Hegel's "cunning of reason" at work within the moments of what Hegel calls "ethical life." Although it is in the moment of "the state" that this reconciliation achieves its fullest realization, I will focus my discussion on an earlier moment, that of "civil society," particularly in its character as the sphere in which the particular will satisfies its needs and desires. This is because it is in this sphere that the will develops that universality out of its particularity; civil society is where we find the particular will being mediated by universal principles. It is therefore the necessary condition for the higher form of universality in the state; if Hegel cannot give a convincing account of how this happens in the sphere of civil society, then his account of subjective universality in the state must also be called into question. To put it differently, it is in the sphere of civil society that Hegel attempts to answer the question of where the universality of the particular will comes from; it is the necessary condition, the basis of the will's universality in the state.[81]

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[80] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 28

Universality first appears in the sphere of civil society because individuals do not fulfill their particular ends as isolated individuals, but rather do so only within a system encompassing other individuals who are pursuing *their* own ends. In this interconnection of particular wills, "[t]he end of subjective need is the satisfaction of subjective *particularity*, but in the relation between this and the needs and free arbitrary wills of others, *universality* asserts itself."[82] I cannot satisfy my needs and desires apart from others; this satisfaction is possible only within the system that arises out of the self-interested activity of all individuals. Through features of economic life such as a developed division of labor, we have a "dependence and reciprocity of work and the satisfaction of needs," through which "*subjective selfishness* turns into a *contribution towards the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else.* By a dialectical movement, the particularity is mediated by the universal, so that each individual, in earning, producing, and enjoying on his own account, thereby earns and produces for the enjoyment of others."[83] This universal, in which all of the individual's activity takes place, thus becomes the *condition* for the satisfaction of his or her needs and desires. Individuals are bound together in a system that extends beyond the interests of any particular individual; the individual has come to be part of a whole in a way that is qualitatively different from earlier social or economic wholes.

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[81] Although I am focusing on a particular *logical* moment in Hegel's account, and, further, one logically prior to the state, we are nevertheless not moving out of the realm of the historical. This is because, while civil society precedes the state logically, the *temporal* relation between them is the reverse—a developed state is the necessary precondition for a developed civil society; civil society thus appears only with the modern state, so in looking at civil society, we are looking at the *culmination* of Hegel's account of the historical process.

[82] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 189. This is not, however, a fully realized universality, but only a "manifestation of rationality."

We need to consider, however, the nature of the "dialectical movement" by which the particular is mediated by the universal. We can see that there *is* some sort of mediation of particularity by universality, insofar as my needs can only be met through my participation in the universal, the economic order that encompasses all individuals; however, my actions are mediated by a universal that is *not* my own, that cannot be an aim that becomes my *consciously willed* object. In the economic order, we simply do not act for the sake of this order, or out of a conscious recognition of its rationality and substantiality. It is precisely this kind of consciousness, however, that is demanded if the particular will is to become truly universal, and if the universal is to become a *concretely* existing universal. Hegel does not claim that this actually occurs at this stage, but the question is, does the universality of this sphere *make possible* a later consciousness of the universal? Or does this universality simply subsume individuals under itself, as a "natural" power standing over them? I will return to these questions below.

The universality arising in civil society also takes the form of a *social* universality, one in which individuals become more than just a collection of particular wills. This social aspect emerges in the "system of needs" because of the fact that the satisfaction of human needs involves more than simply acquiring what is necessary to stay alive. This is because human beings are not only natural beings, but are also spiritual beings: "the ways and means by which the *animal* can satisfy its needs are limited in scope, and its needs are likewise limited. Though sharing this dependence, the *human being* is at the same time able to transcend it and to show his universality...by multiplying his needs and means."[84] We are not satisfied with meeting only our most basic needs, or by meeting our needs in only the most basic ways; we seek also to satisfy social, rather than merely natural needs, needs that come out of our spiritual nature and that are not imposed on us externally. We thus see here, in the realm that would seem to bind us most firmly to nature, a further aspect of the spiritual overcoming of nature: "Within social needs as a combination of immediate or natural needs and the spiritual needs of *representational thought*, the spiritual needs, as the universal, predominate. This social moment accordingly contains the aspect of *liberation*," that is, liberation from external determination, since the individual now relates to "a necessity imposed by himself alone, instead of simply to an external necessity, to inner contingency, and to arbitrariness."[85] The ways in which we satisfy our needs therefore contain within themselves an essential moment of freedom; we are no longer subject only to the demands of nature (although this moment of course remains), but are subject to needs and the means of satisfying them that are of our *own* creation.

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[83] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 199

This liberation from merely natural need also makes possible another form of universality: "The fact that I have to fit in with other people brings the form of universality into play...I acquire my means of satisfaction from others and must accordingly accept their opinions," while "at the same time I am compelled to produce means whereby others can be satisfied...To this extent, everything particular takes on a social character."[86] The universality of needs, their quality of being conditioned by their reference to others, gives needs and their satisfaction "*the quality of being recognized*," as "the moment which makes isolated and abstract needs, means, and modes of satisfaction into *concrete*, i.e., *social* ones."[87] These social needs and their satisfaction serve to bind individuals together, to make of them something more than a collection of isolated individuals, through their customs, habits, fashions, etc. This points the way toward the possibility of a people becoming a true whole, rather than a whole that is created simply by integrating individuals into a single system of the satisfaction of needs.

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[84] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 190

[85] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 194

Despite this mediation of the particular through universality, however, Hegel does not take this as indicating the true unity of the particular and the universal. The relation between the two at this stage only *points toward* their true reconciliation, given that the sphere of "needs" will of necessity remain marked by particularity. Adriaan Peperzak writes that civil society "is dominated by universality in two ways. First, economic interaction, similar to natural processes, is ruled by economic laws that are not subject to personal choices...Second, the exchanges between persons are necessarily ruled by the objective and universal demands contained in the right of their personality and their moral claims to well-being."[88] The description of universality *dominating* civil society is appropriate. The universal asserts itself in this sphere as a force *apart from* particular wills, as a principle standing over and above them. In locating the appearance of universality in the realm of *economic* activity (in particular, capitalist economic activity), Hegel seems to be looking for too much from this area. The economic realm could probably be best described as a system that arises *from* human activity, but that ultimately lies *outside* of our conscious control, such that it cannot really be experienced as *ours*, as being the result of free and conscious human activity; it is, rather, a system to which we must conform, rather than one which conforms to our free subjective wills. Economic forces determine the possibilities open to individuals, rather than providing the conditions for a will to freely determine itself.

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[86] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Addition to par. 192
[87] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* par. 192
[88] Adriaan Peperzak. *Hegel's Legal, Moral, and Political Philosophy.* Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001, p. 435

As far as Peperzak's second claim above, we can certainly question whether the universality of the economic system implies the universality of right. That is, in the economic sphere, individuals are determined as essentially particular. As economic agents, the last thing we are thinking of are demands related to the "right of personality" and "moral claims to well-being." Often, in fact, these demands will present themselves as *antithetical* to our success as economic agents. The fact that we act in a sphere in which we are necessarily involved with others does not of itself imply that we will come to orient ourselves toward objective demands of right, and the nature of our actions in *this* sphere in particular seems to actually hinder this orientation. It seems that my relation to right in this sphere is such that it is something that I must respect *if* I am to successfully attain my ends. All that this requires is that my actions in this sphere be *in accord with* universal demands of right, but they need not be performed *for the sake of* these demands. If this is the case, then right remains something external to my will, rather than its being experienced as something coming out of my will. In my earlier discussion of the cunning of reason, I interpreted Hegel's account as meaning that human beings can move beyond this external relation to right and come to *recognize* their universal validity, because of our implicitly rational nature. I would still maintain that, in general, this exists as a possibility, that human beings would be able to move from their particularity to universality in the way described. But it seems that this move would require the *proper conditions*, that is, a will determined by particularity will not *of necessity* advance to universality. For this to happen, there would need to be a truly universal basis for the objective conditions themselves; capitalist economic life does not seem to provide this, given its basis in particular interests. The problem that Hegel's account seems to run into here is not simply that he has chosen the wrong sphere in which to find the crucial advance from particularity to universality. He could not have simply left the economic realm out of consideration, as he is correct in recognizing its centrality to the modern state. The problem seems to be that this aspect of the *world* itself prevents the advance from the particularity of the will to its universality.

Hegel does recognize certain limitations inherent to the sphere of needs, since particular interests contain the element of universality “only abstractly...as the *right of* property;” yet this abstract universality contains within itself the possibility of a more concrete universal, a sphere in which “this right is present no longer merely *in itself*, but in its valid actuality as the *protection of property* through the *administration of justice*.”[89] The subjective will, that is, has supposedly developed to the point at which it can experience law not simply as a constraining force but as a rationally binding principle. We see right develop here to “an *existence* in which it is *universally recognized, known,* and *willed*, and in which, through the mediation of this quality of being known and willed, it has validity and objective actuality.”[90] The existence of right, the claim is, comes to be mediated through the conscious recognition of its existence as a valid universal principle, while the subject can find its realization and true freedom in willing this rational, objective principle for its own sake. This principle thus overcomes the mere particularity that exists in relation to needs and their satisfaction: “In the administration of justice, civil society, in which the Idea has lost itself in particularity...returns to its *concept*, to the unity of the universal which has being in itself with subjective particularity.”[91] This sphere of the “administration of justice” does not constitute the ultimate reconciliation of the subjective will and the objective order, according to Hegel (this sphere of justice still belongs to civil society rather than to the state), but we can see from this at least how this reconciliation is supposed to come about, namely, through the subjective will orienting itself toward universal, rational objects, rather than just to its own arbitrary particular interests, while the universal attains concrete realization through its being mediated through the subjective consciousness and being *knowingly* willed by the subject. Again, however, Hegel runs into the problem of trying to base a consciousness of universality on a ground of particularity: “While right comes into existence primarily in the form of being posited, it also comes into existence in terms of *content* when it is *applied* to the *material* of civil society—to its relationships and varieties of property and contracts in their endlessly increasing diversity and complexity—and to ethical relationships based on emotion, love and trust.”[92] The individual's relation to the system of justice is mediated through his or her particular interests; it seems more plausible to suggest that justice would be dragged down to the level of particularity than to say that the particular will is raised to the level of universality.

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[89] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 208

[90] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 209

The question that remains, then, is whether Hegel has provided a *basis* for this move from particularity to universality. That is, there must be something that *makes possible* this change in orientation on the part of the subjective will. Economic life and the interests of the will in that sphere do not make that possible—Hegel fails here to recognize the complications that arise due to the *nature* of the particular economic system and economic activity in the modern state. Although principles of justice may apply universally, there is no necessity here for the subject to *recognize* them as objectively and universally valid. These principles, that is, can remain *external* to the subjective will.

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[91] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 229

[92] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 213

I am not going to consider Hegel's account of the state itself, as what is most important here for my purposes is his account of civil society as the stage that begins the mediation of the particular by the universal. The question that I will turn to is, *why* does Hegel encounter these difficulties in reconciling subjectivity and objectivity, particularity and universality, in his thought? That is, what limits does the world itself impose on claims of reconciliation? Adorno's answer to this question would be that the difficulties of Hegel's account are necessary, insofar as they reflect the contradictions of the world of his time, with the bourgeois world attempting to create a harmonious whole in a world based on merely particular interests, which are for that reason conflicting and antagonistic. According to Adorno, Hegel, because of the complicity of his thought with this bourgeois world, is forced to betray his own critical impulses: “while [Hegel's] experience did indeed ascertain the limits of bourgeois society, limits contained in its own tendencies, as a bourgeois idealist he stopped at that boundary because he saw no real historical force on the other side of it. He could not resolve the contradiction between his dialectic and his experience: it was this alone that forced Hegel the critic to maintain the affirmative."[93] It is this failure to push his dialectic beyond the limits of his world that leads Hegel to assign to the State the position that he does in his philosophy: "that idolization [of the state] is itself produced by insight into the fact that the contradictions of civil society cannot be resolved by its self-movement."[94] I am not going to address Hegel's account of the state itself, but I will say that it is not at all clear to me how the state arises logically out of the sphere of civil society. This transition strikes me as one in which Hegel merely makes assertions about the movement to the higher stage, without really *demonstrating* how this comes about.

Having seemingly reached a dead end in the search for reconciliation, I will now move to Adorno's response to Hegel's philosophy of history; here we will see Adorno attempting to account for the limits that Hegel encounters. Adorno, that is, will attempt to show how the modern world has developed in such a way that, not only does it not bring about reconciliation between the subjective will and the objective order, but it even *prevents* this.

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[93] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," in *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 80

[94] Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," in *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 28

Chapter 2

Adorno and the philosophy of history

In the previous chapter we saw the problems with Hegel's account of the supposed actualization of spirit's freedom in the modern state. I will now present Adorno's conception of historical development as a way of accounting for the lack of freedom and subjective self-determination in the modern world, and for the antagonism*,* rather than reconciliation, between the subjective will and the objective order. We can read Adorno's critique of Hegel as taking the form of a *negative* philosophy of history. By a “philosophy of history” I mean simply an historical account that attributes historical development to some overarching principle which is operative throughout history as a whole (such as “reason” or “spirit” in Hegel's account). It is by virtue of historical development being attributed to some single principle that history can be seen as a unified whole, rather than as a series of more or less disconnected, or merely causally connected, eras. A “negative” philosophy of history, then, would be one in which this overarching principle is *regressive* rather than progressive, resulting, for example, in the development of increasing unfreedom rather than freedom. Whereas Hegel sees history as the progressive unfolding of spirit's implicit determinations, Adorno sees the development of the domination of the subjective will *by* the objective order, rather than the subject's freedom in and through this order. Both authors, however, attribute historical development to the *same* principle, namely, reason; the crucial difference between the two, as we will see, consists in their respective understandings of what "reason" means.

Before getting into Adorno's understanding of historical development it needs to be pointed out that there is debate over whether Adorno's work contains a philosophy of history. Those who find a philosophy of history in Adorno's work (especially in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) usually use this to criticize Adorno. Hauke Brunkhorst, for example, claims that the negative philosophy of history contained in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* implies the necessity of historical regression, which closes off the possibility of intervening in the historical process in order to bring about change for the better.[95] More sympathetically inclined readers usually defend Adorno against such criticisms by *denying* that his work contains or implies a philosophy of history. J.M. Bernstein, for example, writes that "Adorno's work is not a negative philosophy of history because he does not think that the past was ideal nor that the present is a necessary or inevitable outcome from its raw beginnings; things might have gone otherwise."[96] I would question, however, whether a philosophy of history carries with it the implication of the *necessity* of a particular course of development, or that the current state of the world is a "necessary or inevitable outcome" of whatever principle is said to be at work in history. It is absolutely correct to say that for Adorno things could have been different in the past (and could therefore be different in the future); Adorno does not see history's development as being *necessary*, but it does unfold according to a particular *logic* that can be seen to be operative throughout the whole. I will maintain that we can read Adorno as having a negative philosophy of history, yet still find in his work the basis for hoping or planning for different course for the future. What I will be trying to show in later chapters is that this negative philosophy of history, rather than foreclosing possibilities for change in the future, for improvement, is actually what *gives rise* to these possibilities. The possibilities for a future different from the past are found only in relation to the totalizing account of history and society that Adorno provides. This is because for Adorno, the possibilities for a "right" state of things do not exist outside of or independently of the "wrong" state, but are intimately bound up with it. As Lambert Zuidervaart writes, "[s]uffering and hope sustain Theodor W. Adorno's vision of philosophy. Not simply suffering, and not merely hope, but suffering and hope in their dialectical entwinement."[97] It is the suffering caused by the course of historical development that will give rise to the concrete, determinate possibilities for a different future.

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[95] Hauke Brunkhorst. "The Enlightenment of Rationality: Remarks on Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," in *Constellations* 7:1 (2000), p. 133-140

[96] J.M. Bernstein. *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 237. Other arguments of Bernstein's will be addressed below.

Although the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which will be examined below, is ambiguous about whether it is supposed to present a developmental account of history, Adorno does provide justification elsewhere for thinking of history as a unified whole. He is, of course, deeply distrustful of philosophies of history that posit some metaphysical principle as the operative force in history. Yet he writes that "to strike out [universal history] as a relic of metaphysical superstition would spiritually consolidate pure facticity as the only thing to be known and therefore accepted."[98] That is, a "positivistic," merely abstract negation of metaphysical philosophies of history, denying any unifying principle in history, would only substitute one untruth for another;

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[97] Lambert Zuidervaart. *Social Philosophy after Adorno.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 48

[98] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 319-20

something essential would be missed, namely, that metaphysical philosophies of history do express a *truth* about the historical process. Even though Adorno denies the idea of history-as-progress that we find in writers such as Hegel, denying the unity of the historical process and reducing it to a series of *facts* would merely cover over the fact that there is *some* principle, albeit not a metaphysical one, that unifies history. The "essence," which "lies concealed beneath the facade of immediacy, of the supposed facts...comes to be the law of doom thus far obeyed by history, a law the more irresistible the more it will hide beneath the facts, only to be comfortably denied by them."[99] To fail to see this, then, is to simply allow this principle to continue to operate unrecognized. This is why Adorno says that "history is possible only as the philosophy of history;" any "historiography...that denies this is simply unaware of itself and its own requirements."[100] Any thought of history must seek to *uncover* those principles operative in the course of events.

Adorno is therefore ambivalent toward the idea of universal history: "Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it."[101] The actual course of history, and here Adorno particularly has in mind the horrors of the twentieth century, prevents us from finding anything positive or affirmative in the course that history has taken, and from seeing history as some kind of unfolding of humankind's positive potentials.[102] While not unifying history into a *positive* totality, however, we must not be blinded to the principles that do in fact unify history. Thus Adorno continues:

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[99] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 167

[100] Theodor W. Adorno. *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Tr. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity, 2006, p. 10

[101] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 320

[102] Again, we should think of the claim here as being that to see in history the development of a progressive principle would constitute an *ethical* transgression against history's victims.

> Not be denied....is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history—the unity of the control of nature, progressing to the rule over men, and finally to that over men's inner nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. It ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men...It is the horror that verifies Hegel and stands him on his head.[103]

It must be admitted that Adorno here does seem to lend support to the view that his thought devolved into an unproductive pessimism; given this universal history that "stands Hegel on his head," it seems that all we can do is sit back and watch history continue to develop for the worse. I think, however, that this should be read as a claim about how history will continue to develop *if* nothing changes—it is not absolutely inevitable, but is so only if history is *allowed* to continue to unfold in the way that it has. Adorno himself recognized the dangers inherent in seeing history as a regressive totality. In his lecture course on the philosophy of history, delivered around the same time that *Negative Dialectics* was being written, he noted that "[w]here pessimism is a general proposition, when it has a totalizing view, it implies that everything is fundamentally flawed," which "means that it tends to leap to the assistance of evil in the world. It does so by arguing that attempts to change the world as a whole are doomed. This is also implicit in a negative philosophy of history."[104] We will see, then, how Adorno's thoughts about history will allow us to formulate the possibilities that come out of his negative account; totalizing and absolutizing this evil would close off the possibilities that do exist, yet looking for hope without facing up to the full extent of real evil in history would be naively optimistic. Adorno's negative philosophy of history is therefore only a *first* step, to which we will now turn.

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[103] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 320

[104] *History and Freedom,* p. 8. This work, and other of Adorno's lecture courses that have been published, contains many formulations that weaken or qualify the seemingly absolute claims that we find in his published works, such as *Negative Dialectics*. This suggests to me that the strong statements that we find in these works (claims about, for example, the all-encompassing nature of negativity and evil in the modern world) should be read as rhetorical devices rather than being taken for the evidence of Adorno's supposed hopeless pessimism for which they are sometimes taken.

Natural history and second nature

Just as Hegel begins his philosophy of history by setting out the perspective from which history must be seen, namely, that of reason, so Adorno begins by setting out his own view about the perspective from which history should be viewed. The best place to begin Adorno's account of history is the text of his lecture on "The Idea of Natural History."[105] This piece was written early in Adorno's philosophical development (1932), yet its core formulations continue to guide his thought throughout the rest of his works, with parts of it reappearing almost verbatim in *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Although intended as a response to, and criticism of, the "neo-ontological" thought of certain currents in the phenomenology of the time, my interest in this piece lies in the way in which Adorno attempts to articulate a new perspective from which history should be viewed. What Adorno points to here is the need to overcome the conceptual dualism of "nature" and "history": "the division of the world into nature and spirit or nature and history, a tradition set by subjective idealism, must be overcome and...its place must be taken by a formulation that achieves in itself the concrete unity of nature and history."[106] Traditional philosophical thought, that is, holds the two poles apart as antitheses, with nature seen as what is static and unchanging, while change, the emergence of the qualitatively new, is assigned to the realm of history. By “nature” in this essay Adorno means the conceptual structure analogous to “the concept of myth,” that is, “what has always been,” that which is either unchanging or exhibits change only in the form of cyclical repetition.[107] The problem here is that this dualism, undialectical as it is, falsifies the objects of both nature and history. We need to distinguish here between, on the one hand, the *objects* to which the terms “nature” and “history” refer, and “nature” and “history” as *conceptual schemas*, or structures of thought, which are *applied to* the object domains. The events and occurrences of the human world have traditionally been placed under the concept of “history,” which has the form of change and newness.

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[105] Theodor W. Adorno. "The Idea of Natural History." Tr. Bob Hullot-Kentor. *Telos* no. 6 (Summer 1984), p. 111-124

[106] "The Idea of Natural History," p. 116-7

What should be noticed here is that if the historical perspective, that of change and the emergence of the qualitatively new, is applied to the human world, or if the human world is seen from this perspective, then the character of the human world is essentially determined in advance; it is this *perspective,* or the imposition of this conceptual structure on the material, that determines the character of the human world as consisting in change. It is then a small step to seeing the historical world in terms not just of change, but of change for the better, of “progress.” What Adorno wants to point to here is that approaching the human world from the perspective of “history” serves to falsify it, or to cover over an essential moment of it: “Every exclusion of natural stasis from the historical dynamic leads to false absolutes, every isolation of the historical dynamic from the unsurpassably natural elements in it leads to false spiritualism.”[108] To look at history purely in its dynamic aspect, or to see it purely as *change*, is to miss in it the moment of *stasis*, of what is unchanging in the human world. It is crucial to discover this moment of

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107 “The Idea of Natural History,” p. 111

108 “The Idea of Natural History,” p. 117

stasis, this natural aspect, in history since it is precisely this moment that falsifies the view of history as progress; further, it is the natural moment that must be overcome if history is to become a truly *human* history, one in which the qualitatively new is introduced through active human agency. In a sense, history has not moved beyond the stage that Hegel had placed at the beginning of his philosophy of history, namely, that of spirit's confrontation with "nature" as an external and hostile objectivity.

It is to this end of comprehending the static, natural (or "mythical") moment in history that Adorno claims "[i]f the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed, then it only offers any chance of solution if it is possible to *comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature*."[109] What is needed to overcome the conceptual dualism of history and nature, a dualism which renders invisible the true character of both nature and history, is to see in history, in the human world, the structure of nature, of myth, precisely at those points at which it presents itself as changing and developing, as giving rise to the new. The purpose of this reconceptualization, of shifting the categories or conceptual structures through which the human world is viewed, is to locate those points at which the human world is still in thrall to "myth" in the broadest sense, that is, where it is unchanging and eternally the same, governed by an order that is *not* under human control or the result of human activity, and to which human beings must therefore simply submit as to a superior force. Adorno's intention, then, is "to retransform the structure of inner-historical events into a structure of natural events," that is, as unchanging. "Natural history," he continues, is not a synthesis of natural and historical methods, but a change of perspective."[110]

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[109] Ibid.

This change in perspective allows an essential feature of the human world to come out into the open. If we approach the human world from the perspective of history, again, we will *see* only history, only change; but this merely covers over those aspects of the human world that are *not* properly historical. This change in perspective is intended to force us to confront those aspects that do not change, that are simply continuations or repetitions of what has always been. If the concepts of "nature" and "history" are brought into a dialectical confrontation with one another, they "generate an idea, which is a modality of concept with no correlate in any given experience;" rather than merely expressing an experience of world, this idea "has the opposite function of *disintegrating* or deorganizing what is given (or what wants to be given) in experience."[111] It is necessary to disrupt experience here because, in our experience of the human world and its events, it may seem that the object, the *world,* has priority, in the sense of being something simply given to experience; as we have seen, however, experience here is not simply a given, because the subject brings with it certain presuppositions that are contained in the conceptual apparatus through which the object is viewed, and which therefore *determines* experience. The perspective of natural history *disintegrates* this experience by bringing to the object, the human world and its products, the image of stasis and repetition rather than true change.

Adorno traces the natural-historical perspective to its origins in Lukacs's idea of "second nature."[112] We should recall here Hegel's idea of the human world and its complex of institutions (social, political, economic, legal, etc.) as constituting a second nature. Hegel meant by "second nature" an objective world standing apart from the subject, but rather than constituting an order alien and hostile to the subject, it is an order of the subjective will's own creation, in which it can therefore find its rational will reflected and fulfilled. "Second nature" takes on a different significance in the work of Lukacs. This concept first appears in his pre-Marxist *Theory of the Novel.*[113] In delimiting the difference between the meaningful world in which epic literature was produced and the modern world which is devoid of such meaning, he writes that the modern world's formations and institutions, the laws by which this world operates, "form the world of convention," whose "strict laws...are necessarily evident to the cognizant subject, but despite its regularity, it is a world that does not offer itself either as meaning to the aim-seeking subject or as matter, in sensuous immediacy, to the active subject. It is a second nature, and, like nature (first nature), it is determinable only as the embodiment of recognized but senseless necessities."[114] That is, the laws that are operative in the human world (the economic, legal, and political structures that determine the life of society) are not ones that the subject can embrace as coming out of its will, or as something in which its will can find fulfillment. This second nature appears here as merely a *continuation* of "first" nature, in the sense that it is experienced as an alien

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[110] "The Idea of Natural History," p. 118

[111] Max Pensky. "Natural History: the Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno." *Critical Horizons* 5:1 (April 2004), p. 227-258

[112] The other source of this perspective, according to Adorno, is found in Benjamin's theory of allegory in

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The Origin of German Tragic Drama. I will leave this part aside for now, but will return to it in Chapter 4.

[113] Georg Lukacs. *The Theory of the Novel: a Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Tr. Anna Bostock. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971. This idea of "second nature" is taken up again by Luckacs in his Marxist writings, particularly in his influential essay on "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." Although I am not focusing on this idea in its Marxist formulation, we should not underestimate the significance of Marxism for the authors that I am discussing here. In not focusing on this aspect of their thought I do not mean to play down its significance; however, to give it the attention that it deserves would tie the ideas of progress and unity in history to a specific tradition, the Marxist one, which I want to avoid in favor of a more general idea of progress in history.

[114] *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 62

objectivity standing over and against the subject. Subjects can come to know the laws by which society operates, but they are like the laws of first nature insofar as they regulate this order but they cannot be *changed*, they must be simply accepted as given and adapted to. The lack of meaning available to the subject in the modern world is determined by this gulf that exists between the subject and the objective world which has arisen out of human activity, yet cannot be *experienced* as the subject's own. The difference between first and second nature is that we are no longer merely subjected by an order outside of our control, but have rather come to subject *ourselves* through the creation of this objectivity standing against us which has grown into an independent power and taken on a life of its own.

Lukacs's concern here is to account for the lack of substantial meaning for subjects in the modern world. Lukacs thus continues, writing that "[t]his second nature is not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses—meanings—which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities."[115] Second nature is unlike first nature in that it is not defined simply by its *absence* of human meaning; it rather represents a *failed* attempt to erect a truly human order, one grounded in objective meanings that subjects can embrace. There is *some* sort of meaning contained in the laws and objectivities that govern the human world, but these meanings are lost to us.[116] Since this order cannot persist by means of being freely accepted and willed by subjects, there must be some other means by which it perpetuates itself. Thus “the constructs...must, in order to subsist, achieve a power which dominates men blindly...And so men call 'law' the recognition of the power that holds them in thrall, and they conceptualize as 'law' their despair at its omnipotence and universality: conceptualize it into a sublime and exalting logic, a necessity that is eternal, immutable and beyond the reach of man.”[117] It becomes, in essence, a *mythical* power—one that controls our lives yet over which we have no power, and to which we must simply submit as to a superior force. We can think, for example, of the economic laws that determine the lives of individuals but that are experienced as working *against* the majority of individuals, or the political orders over which individuals feel powerless, even in “democratic” nations, or legal systems that are experienced as not providing justice, but rather as serving particular interests. All of these represent aspects of objectivity that subjects must *adapt* to; we must do what is demanded by them, but their demands are not experienced as being in accord with our own wills. In Lukacs's later, Marxist, writings he takes up again the question of the subject's relation to second nature, writing that the subject is “transformed into a receptive organ ready to pounce on opportunities created by the system of laws and his 'activity' will narrow itself down to the adoption of a vantage point from which these laws function in his best interests.”[118] We can calculate how to use these laws to our advantage, and this is essentially *all* that the subject in the capitalist world becomes for Lukacs, but the laws themselves remain beyond our reach, just as eternal and unquestionable as the laws of nature.

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[115] *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 64

[116] For Lukacs, at least in this early writing, the dead meanings contained in second nature could be recovered only through a "metaphysical act of reawakening the souls which, in an early or ideal existence, created or preserved it" (*The Theory of the* Novel, p. 64). Although Adorno rejects any metaphysical sense of "reawakening" here, he does recognize the necessity of asking how we can come to "know and interpret this alienated, reified, dead world." We will be returning to this question over the course of the next three chapters.

If we see the modern world in terms of second nature in *this* sense, then this suggests that history has not actually progressed as Hegel would say it has; rather, the result has only been the recreation of a "natural" world that stands against the subject as an alien force. The significance of this for Adorno's view of history (although he does not express it in these terms) is that this *second* nature takes on a role similar to the one that *first* nature had in Hegel's account of history—it is an objectivity that must be *overcome* in order for history in the proper sense to actually *begin*. It is the arena in which subjectivity must prove itself, must find itself in its activity of overcoming the objectivity that stands opposed to it. Second nature presents the same demand in Adorno's understanding of history—it is what must be overcome if free subjectivity is to be possible. Further, the overcoming of this alien objectivity would at the same time constitute the *realization* of subjectivity, as it was for Hegel, since overcoming this objectivity would mean creating an order that is not hostile to the subject, but is rather one in which the subject can experience itself as fulfilled and actualized. Approaching history from the natural-historical perspective thus serves the dual function of *revealing* the fundamental nature of the human world, while at the same time making clear the *task* that exists for the subjective will. To see the world where it appears most historical as merely natural or mythical thus has an initially negative aim, functioning as it does to raise questions about the nature of our world and the way that it appears to us; but there is a positive aim as well to seeing the human world from the natural-historical perspective, as the modern world's "pathologies will remain closed off to critical investigation until the critic is able to bring about a *change of perspective*, and it is this changed perspective that Adorno ultimately means by the concept of natural history."[119] Opening this area for critical investigation is what will allow for the possibility of intervening in this pathological state.

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[117] *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 65

[118] Georg Lukacs. “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Tr. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971, p. 130

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[119] Pensky, "Natural History," p. 232

Since the pathologies of the modern world did not arise simply by chance, according to Adorno, but are attributable to some deeper principle active in historical development, it is necessary to see *how* this world came about, what was behind its development into this alien second nature. For Adorno, the present state of the world is the result of the unfolding of *reason* throughout history, which is, then, the principle that gives rise to the institutions of the objective order that exists today. We will now turn to the way in which Adorno rethinks the concepts of the philosophy of history that we have already seen in Hegel's account, and "turns them on their head." For both Hegel and Adorno, second nature is the result of reason working itself out over time; we will see the way in which Adorno conceives of this process in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which, according to Susan Buck-Morss, can "be seen as a a concrete working out of the idea of natural history,"[120] insofar as it attempts to show how the modern world is merely a continuation or repetition of the same structures that have persisted in the Western world since its very earliest stages.

Reason and Enlightenment

Adorno, like Hegel, takes reason to be the force behind historical development, and therefore the principle that accounts for the character of the present, but Adorno has a very different understanding of what "reason" is. We can see the nature of the rationality that Adorno claims is operative in history if we begin at the same point at which Hegel finds spirit beginning to assert itself *as* spirit, that is, in the human being's relation to nature. We should recall that “nature” for Hegel designates the sphere that human beings must master in order to become subjects; it refers not only to physical nature, but at the same time indicates a kind of *relation* to the objective world, with a “natural” relation designating one in which human beings are determined by a force *external* to them. In Adorno's account as well, human beings are faced with the demand to overcome this relation in which they are externally determined.

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[120] Susan Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute.* New York: Free Press, 1977, p. 59

This drive to overcome external determination is, most generally, what characterizes the mode of thought that Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, characterize as “enlightenment.” (This use of “enlightenment” to designate a kind of thinking operative *throughout* history, rather than one limited to a particular historical era, announces from the start their intention of calling into question our traditional historical understanding.) They write that “[e]nlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters.”[121] Human beings, that is, strive to liberate themselves from the fear of nature as a mysterious and unmasterable force that stands against them and dominates human life. The aim of enlightenment, then, is to turn the subjected into subjects; the process of enlightenment is determined by the drive to acquire knowledge of the world not simply for its own sake, but for the sake of exercising control over these objective forces, thereby subjecting nature to *human* purposes. For Hegel this process of subjecting nature is essentially a positive one; spirit asserts itself where previously it had not, and human purpose begins to predominate in a sphere that had not previously been subjected to it. Horkheimer and Adorno, however, conceive the work of enlightenment as an essentially *negative* process. "Enlightenment" does not mean simply the advance of knowledge in the sense that ignorance about the objective world is replaced with knowledge about it; rather, enlightenment operates by directing itself *against* the way in which human beings had hitherto related to the objective world, namely, through the "mythical" relation to the world. Enlightenment's aim is the negation of myth. It reveals myth to be nothing more than "anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature."[122] What defines myth, from the perspective of enlightenment, is that it consists in human beings, subjected to the vicissitudes of a mysterious and hostile world, ascribing a subjective agency to the objective world in order to then be able to *influence* it, to turn this world into one that can be controlled.

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[121] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Tr. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 1

The work of enlightenment therefore consists in showing the untruth of the magical or mythical attempts to control nature, with the aim being to control nature more effectively. The fact that the two approaches share this aim, however, this internal drive to master nature, is what leads to the *dialectic* of enlightenment. It means that myth, which enlightenment sets up as its other, is *not* actually its other, but rather "is already enlightenment."[123] This dialectic results from the fact that "the myths that fell victim to the Enlightenment were themselves its products."[124] The mythical world view is already enlightenment because the two share the same impulse, the same internal drive, to master the objective world and subject it to human purposes. Enlightenment, rationality, does not represent a break with the mythical relation to the objective world, it is not the development of a *new* kind of subjective relation to the objective world, but is rather the

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[122] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 4

[123] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xviii

[124] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 5

continuation and further unfolding of the impulse behind mythical thought. The difference that is introduced into the subjective relation to nature is that enlightenment does not operate by attempting to influence some sort of subjective will that supposedly lies behind the objective world; it rather divines the laws that regulate the natural world, laws that are predictable, the discovery of which therefore makes possible the subjective manipulation of this world.

This is not to suggest, however, that rationality is *simply* continuous with earlier modes of relating to the objective world—it does in fact introduce something new. One way to see the difference between enlightenment and the "pre-rational" relations to the world is through what Horkheimer and Adorno call the "mimetic" relation to the world found in earlier belief systems. They write that "[m]agic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object."[125] The mimetic subject, that is, seeks to assimilate itself to the powers that lie behind the objective world, to become like them in the hopes of influencing them (we see this, for example, in the wearing of masks to become like the demons or spirits that lie behind the visible world). As Anson Rabinbach writes, "the concept of mimesis is not understood as mere imitation, but as a form of mimicry or semblance that appropriates rather than replicates its object in a nonidentical similitude."[126] What characterizes this mimetic relation to the world, then, is the *connection* that it posits between the subjective and objective worlds; the mimetic subject does not attempt to influence the objective world through setting itself in *opposition to* nature, as the rational subject does, but does so through becoming *like* nature and the forces that govern it.

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[125] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 7

[126] Anson Rabinbach. "The Cunning of Unreason: Mimesis and the Construction of Anti-Semitism in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," in *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 176

Despite the differences between the mimetic and the rational relations to the world, however, Horkheimer and Adorno at the same time find tendencies within this mimetic relation that prefigure the rational relation, as seen, for example, in the practice of sacrifice. They write that the "substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic. Even though the hind which was offered up for the daughter, the lamb for the firstborn, necessarily still had qualities of its own, it already represented the genus. It manifested the arbitrariness of the specimen," which they take to be a defining feature of logical, scientific thought, in which "[r]epresentation gives way to universal fungibility. An atom [for example] is smashed not as a representative but as a specimen of matter."[127] It is this *distancing* of the subject from nature, dealing with it not in terms of its concrete qualities, but rather in terms of quantity, and treating its objects not as *concrete* things, but only as abstractions, as instances of a class. This mimetic relation therefore contains the seeds of abstracting scientific thought, even while retaining aspects that are antithetical to science: "Mimesis therefore represents both the prefiguration of and the 'other' of reason."[128]

It is this distancing from nature, this setting the subject in opposition to an abstract and manipulable object, that defines the "rational" relation to the objective world: "Myth becomes enlightenment and nature mere objectivity. Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted. Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings.

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127 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 7

128 Rabinbach, "The Cunning of Unreason," p. 177

He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them."[129] Once the spirits have been exorcised from nature, nothing remains of the object but dumb matter. The discovery of natural laws, of the quantifiable regularities that govern nature, allows for the subjective manipulation of the objective world. But in the drive to uncover the laws that make this manipulation possible, the subject creates an objective world that shares the crucial structural features of myth: "the more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature...the principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself."[130] The move from the mythical worldview to the enlightened one thus results in the substitution of one ironclad, objective order, one world of unchanging repetition, for another. This is why, just as myth was already enlightenment, enlightenment itself is the continuation of myth, and "history" is nothing other than "nature." What Horkheimer and Adorno are doing here, according to Bernstein, is "dismantling the conceptual dualism of enlightenment and myth, and thereby the [progressive] idea of history it grounds."[131] Enlightenment does not constitute progress since it merely perpetuates and extends the mythical structure. Bernstein, however, takes this to mean that Horkheimer and Adorno should not be read as giving a negative philosophy of history, a regressive developmental account, as they are only calling into question this *conceptual* duality. We can say, however, that this is precisely why we *can* take this to constitute a philosophy of history, one in which history is seen from the natural-historical perspective; the undermining of this conceptual dualism reveals the *lack* of progress, or true change, in the structure of the subjective relation to the objective world. This is what constitutes the negativity of history—the failure to develop or advance, while allowing the mythical world to expand its reach. The ultimate, enlightened, expression of myth is the creation of a system of knowledge that encompasses everything, and from which nothing can escape the process of abstraction: "Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the 'outside' is the real source of fear."[132] This principle ties together systems of thought as disparate as positivism and idealism, insofar as the tendency behind each is to create a total system; we see this in reality as well, with the principle of exchange embodying this same tendency (more on this in the next chapter).

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[129] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6

[130] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 8

[131] *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 85

Even if we accept the connection that Horkheimer and Adorno make between mythical and enlightened, scientific thought, it is still not clear what implications this has for the subject's freedom, or lack thereof, in relation to the objective world, particularly to the objective world that human beings have unconsciously created. Horkheimer and Adorno would claim that this structure of thought, and the relation between subject and object that it entails, does have implications for subjective freedom; this approach to the world, they claim, in which the objective world is seen as a closed system operating according to unchangeable laws, and subjective activity is limited to intervening in the objective world only to manipulate these laws, is a structure of thought that extends to *all* areas of the subject's relation to the objective world. As Bernstein writes, the "principle of immanence," that shared basis of mythical and enlightened thought, "is the hinge connecting rationality and instrumentality...an empirical item is recognized, and so cognized, only when it is classified in some way, when it is shown, via subsumption, to share characteristics or features with other items. Analogously, and by extension, an event is explained if it can be shown to fall within the ambit of a known pattern of occurrence."[133] Once the world comes to be seen as this closed system in which everything is merely an instance of some general class, and in which subjects can intervene only through the manipulation of its laws and regularities, reason becomes merely *instrumental* reason. If this becomes the structure of rational thought itself, then all areas of the objective world will take on this appearance of immutability: "The mythical scientific respect of peoples for the given reality, which they themselves constantly create, finally becomes itself a positive fact, a fortress before which even the revolutionary imagination feels ashamed as utopianism, and degenerates to a compliant trust in the objective tendency of history."[134] The subjective attitude becomes one of adaptation to reality, rather than seeing it as something that has come into being and could therefore be different. We should recall that, for Lukacs, this is precisely what characterizes the subject's relation to the objective world of second nature. Further, subjects themselves become nothing more than *objects* to be used instrumentally; the principles operative here find their social embodiment in the exchange principle. Under the influence of this principle human beings themselves becoming nothing more than instances of abstract quantities (i.e., abstract labor-power), to be manipulated for the sake of maximum efficiency. The principle behind the domination of nature here extends itself as far as the domination over human beings themselves.[135]

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[132] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 11

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[133] *Disenchantment and Ethics,* p. 87. The "principle of immanence" is closely related to what Adorno elsewhere calls the "principle of identity," or "identity thinking." I will be examining this is in some detail in the next chapter.

[134] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 33

Horkheimer and Adorno illustrate the development of subjectivity as instrumental subjectivity, and the implications of this development, through the stories of Odysseus and his travels in the *Odyssey*. Beyond simply giving us an example from antiquity of a calculating subject employing instrumental rationality, Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of the *Odyssey* will also allow us to rethink the "cunning of reason" as the driving force behind historical development, with this cunning resulting in the continued unfreedom of the subject, in opposition to Hegel's account in which this cunning explains the development of freedom out of mere subjective particularity.

Odysseus and the cunning of reason

Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of Odysseus's encounters with the mythical and magical powers of his world is set within the context of their discussion of the significance of the practice of *sacrifice* in the ancient world. Since they are looking at the past through the lens of natural history, they want to find the moment of stasis in historical development, here meaning those aspects of the human world that are only repetitions or continuations of earlier stages; what they find is that the logic behind the act of sacrifice continues into the modern world, and is formative for modern subjectivity. Horkheimer and Adorno sum up the relation between sacrifice and the subject, writing that "[t]he history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice—in other words, the history of renunciation. All who renounce give away more of their life than is given back to them, more than the life they preserve."[136] What *constitutes* the subject is some sort of sacrificial act—the important point here will be what it is that is "renounced," what is given up in the development of the subject.

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[135] Cf. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 146

Horkheimer and Adorno link the sacrificial act to the subjective attitude of *cunning*, insofar as the logic behind sacrifice is to get back something more than what is given up. Sacrifice is, in a sense, an attempt to "cheat" the powers to whom the sacrifice is made: "The moment of fraud in sacrifice is the prototype of Odyssean cunning...All sacrificial acts, deliberately planned by humans, deceive the god for whom they are performed: by imposing on him the primacy of human purposes they dissolve away his power."[137] What begins as a way of honoring and respecting the gods becomes a means of controlling them, of subjecting them to human purposes. We see here implicit in the sacrificial act the moment of cunning, of outwitting the gods. Odysseus's cunning represents an advance over this logic of sacrifice in his isolation of this moment of cunning, making it explicit and intentionally exploiting it: "the moment of fraud in sacrifice...is raised to self-consciousness through Odysseus."[138] This characterization of Odysseus is certainly familiar to us, as this cunning is his outstanding trait, it is what allows him to prevail over hostile forces whether in war or in his return home. We will see, however, that there are *two* moments involved in Odysseus's cunning: the first is what we might call his *subjective* cunning, that is, the cunning that *he* employs in order to "cheat" nature and thereby triumph over it. The second, however, is an *objective* cunning, a cunning ascribable in some sense to reason *itself*, which, while allowing Odysseus to triumph, also cheats *him*. Horkheimer and Adorno define "cunning" as "a

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136 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 43

137 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 40

138 Ibid.

means of exchange in which everything is done correctly, the contract is fulfilled yet the other party is cheated."[139] We will see that Odysseus ends up on both ends of this process of exchange; his cunning cheats the powers of nature out of something, yet Odysseus at the same time will be cheated. It is this kind of cunning that will allow reason to constitute and perpetuate itself as a power *external* to human beings, rather than being an *internal* power or capacity.

I will first look at what I have called "subjective" cunning, or cunning as a strategy employed *by* a subject. What defines Odysseus's relation to the objective world in the course of his travels is that he is unable to overcome the objective forces that he faces by simply imposing his will on them. He must rather confront these powers from *within* their systems of laws, through adapting to their rules. Odysseus "can never engage the exotically persisting mythical powers in physical combat. He has to accept as a given reality the sacrificial ceremony in which he is repeatedly caught up."[140] Steven Vogel contrasts Odysseus's relation to these powers with the "hubris of the pre-Odyssean hero" who attempts to "defy, and indeed to supplant, the natural forces or the gods in a heroic but doomed act of self-assertion."[141] Odysseus has learned from those who dared to defy the gods and nature; he displays the "sobriety of cunning," which "involves a recognition of the impossibility of supplanting these forces and instead undertakes the remarkable (and fateful) project of *overcoming them by submitting to them*."[142] Odysseus is able to defeat these powers only by recognizing, and resigning himself to accepting, their superior power.

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[139] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 48

[140] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 44

[141] Steven Vogel. *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory.* Albany: SUNY Press, 1996, p. 54

[142] Ibid.

This does not mean, however, that he submits to these powers unconditionally, since he does receive something in return for his recognition of their superior power, namely, his life. He cannot overpower Scylla or Charybdis, but in acknowledging the fact of their superior strength and resigning himself to giving them their due, he and the members of his crew who are not taken as tribute are able to pass by with their lives. He preserves his life, that is, by adapting to the demands made by these powers and calculating, within the parameters of the rules laid down by them, how to achieve this end. Thus "[t]he formula for Odysseus's cunning is that the detached instrumental mind, by submissively embracing nature, renders to nature what is hers and thereby cheats her."[143] We see this as well in the episode with the Sirens; here Odysseus fulfills their conditions—he sails by them rather than trying to avoid them, and he listens to their song, yet his cunning stratagem of having himself tied to the mast allows him to preserve his life despite meeting them on their own terms.

The "cunning of reason" in this sense, as a tactic employed by the subject to overcome nature, is straightforward enough. Yet if we think of cunning in relation to the *sacrificial act*, as Horkheimer and Adorno would have us do, it becomes less clear whether and to what extent Odysseus really comes out of these interactions as the victor. As Vogel writes in regard to the "dialectic of cunning," "[w]hen one defeats nature by strictly obeying its laws, it remains ambiguous who the victor really is and in what the victory actually consists."[144] Horkheimer and Adorno will question what this "victory" does to the subject or, since they read these episodes in terms of the development of the subject through its interactions with nature, what *kind* of subjectivity can result from this kind of interaction. This ambiguity of subjectivity is given an allegorical formulation in the episode of Odysseus and the Cyclops. In order to fool the others after he has put out Polyphemus's eye, Odysseus has told him that his name is “nobody,” exploiting the similarity between the two Greek words. Thus, “Odysseus, the subject, denies his own identity, which makes him a subject,” yet this denial is necessary in order for him to come away with his life; “[h]is self-assertion, as in the entire epic, as in all civilization, is self-repudiation.”[145] That is, he only gains his life by denying himself. The lesson here is reinforced after his escape from the cave, when we see him trying to reassert his identity, telling Polyphemus his name as he sails away, thereby giving himself away and nearly *losing* his life through this belated act of self-assertion. It is this self-denial that Horkheimer and Adorno take to be at the basis of the formation of subjectivity; this is where the logic of sacrifice comes into play. Odysseus can appear as the “prototype” of the civilized subject insofar as “[t]he way of civilization has been that of obedience and work, over which fulfillment shines everlastingly as mere illusion, as beauty deprived of power.”[146] What the subject gives up, what is sacrificed for the sake of self-preservation, is the possibility of *fulfillment*, of true happiness. In the episode with the Sirens, for example, Odysseus hears their song, but he must resist the temptation of giving himself over to it completely.[147]

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[143] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 45

[144] *Against Nature,* p. 55

What defines Odysseus's adventures as much as, or even more than, the physical

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145 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 53

146 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 26

147 In Kafka's fascinating take on this episode (“The Silence of the Sirens”) it is Odysseus, and not just his crew members, who has his ears plugged with wax. Although this is not how the story appears in the *Odyssey*, it is possible that Kafka expresses the truth of the situation here—if Odysseus is unable to give himself over completely to the beauty of their song, perhaps it could be said that he doesn't *really* hear it at all. Adorno might have something like this in mind when he finds in Odysseus's relation to the Sirens' song the model of merely aesthetic enjoyment, in which the subject is detached from the aesthetic object, such that it becomes merely an object of enjoyment or contemplation.

dangers that he faces is that they are “dangerous temptations deflecting the self from the path of its logic.”[148] The logic here is that of the subject's developing *control* over nature, as opposed to some sort of harmonious relation to it. This subjective mastery over nature extends to the subject's own inner nature, as “the ego,” of which Horkheimer and Adorno take Odysseus to represent a formative stage, “owes its existence to the sacrifice of the present moment to the future.”[149] From the eternal happiness promised by life with Calypso on her island (where Odysseus is at least prudent enough to give himself over to that happiness for a time before his thoughts turn to home, like a man spending a few blissful hours with his mistress before returning home to his wife in time for dinner), and on throughout the rest of his adventures, the possibilities for happiness and fulfillment pose more of a threat to Odysseus as a subject than do the physical dangers that he faces. Giving himself over to the mindless bliss of the lotus-eaters would spell death for the developing subject just as much as physical death would. Circe's “curse condemns them to nothing worse than a primal state exempt from labor and struggle,”[150] yet Homer's portrayal of her and her magic makes her seem more sinister than any of the natural forces that pose merely physical dangers. Thus “all the renown he gains in his own and others' eyes merely confirms that the honor of heroism is won only by the humbling of the urge to attain entire, universal, undivided happiness.”[151] In this act of internalized sacrifice, “Odysseus himself acts as both victim and priest.”[152] This does not mean that Horkheimer and Adorno think that it would be preferable for Odysseus to simply abandon himself to the pleasures promised by the mythical forces, or that the modern subject should strive for fulfillment at the cost of putting his or her preservation in jeopardy (they recognize, for example, that Odysseus is right to not give in to the temptation of life with the lotus-eaters). The problem is rather that such a choice is even *necessary*, that the situation is such that preservation implies forgoing fulfillment and that fulfillment endangers preservation.

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[148] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 38
[149] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 40
[150] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 49
[151] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 45
[152] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 40

If we recall Horkheimer and Adorno's characterization of "cunning" as an exchange in which each party fulfills their end, yet someone is nonetheless cheated, we can see how Odysseus is not only the one who *employs* cunning as a tactic, but is a *victim* of it as well. Robert Hullot-Kentor writes that "[d]ivested of its theodocian veneer, Hegel's theory of the cunning of history became Adorno's fundamental insight into the dialectic of enlightenment: the unity of the self is the work of a sacrificial cunning."[153] This *sacrificial* cunning is a cunning perpetrated *against* the subject. It allows the reason operative in the world to assert itself over the subject's head, as a force external to the subject, which comes out ahead of the subject. For Adorno, Hegel's cunning of reason is unacceptably metaphysical,[154]coming, as Adorno thinks, to be posited as a force outside of human beings, something that works itself out behind our backs.[155] There is, however, a truth to this; this cunning comes to be "employed" by the external world in order to coerce subjects into fulfilling the demands of the objectivity that has come to be erected over us and has taken on a life independent of us. This objectivity imposes demands on us that we must fulfill in order to preserve our lives; it is through our fulfilling these demands, thereby foregoing true fulfillment, that this objective order is able to perpetuate

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153 Robert Hullot-Kentor. "Back to Adorno" in *Things Beyond Resemblance.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 36

154 *History and Freedom*, p. 5

155 *History and Freedom*, p. 118

and strengthen itself. We can think reason here as a force *external* to human beings since it is directed toward perpetuating an order hostile to human life, rather than one in which the fulfillment of human life would be the end. As Bernstein puts it, "renunciation is a continuation of the logic of sacrifice in which the pattern of sacrificing present happiness to ideal future happiness is transformed into the sacrifice of the particular to the universal."[156]

As long as the subject adapts itself to the demands of the objective order, it can escape with its life. Horkheimer and Adorno, however, want to question what *kind* of subject is really preserved here. The subject, again, must overcome nature *within* him or herself, suppressing desires, the natural aspect that strives for happiness and fulfillment, for the sake of becoming an ego that can successfully navigate and adapt to the demands of the objective forces. But this "denial of nature in the human being," means that

> the *telos* of one's own life becomes confused and opaque. At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void, and the enthronement of the means as the end, which in late capitalism is taking on the character of overt madness, is already detectable in the earliest history of subjectivity. The human being's mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity, of which the achievements of self-preservation can only be defined as functions—in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved.[157]

When self-preservation becomes the ultimate end, requiring the sacrifice of the possibility of happiness, the purpose of this preservation itself becomes questionable. Odysseus suppressing his inner nature for the sake of preservation is no different from the worker today sacrificing happiness for the sake of preservation, the mere continuation of existence. Horkheimer and Adorno are not, of course, suggesting that we *not* take self-preservation as our aim; their point is that in a rational world self-preservation would be only a *means* to the end of a fulfilled life—a world in which this becomes the *end* is therefore irrational. Horkheimer and Adorno's use of this example from antiquity is intended to reveal the lack of true progress or development in subjectivity over the course of the historical process. Just as Odysseus must sacrifice himself for the sake of surviving his encounters with nature, so must we today sacrifice ourselves for the sake of surviving our encounters with the *second* nature that we have constructed around us, and which appears just as powerful and immutable as Scylla and Charybdis. The subject's attempt to *overcome* the forces of second nature would be just as doomed as the pre-Odyssean hero's attempt to overcome the gods. For the sake of dealing with this second nature, then, subjects "shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them...Individuals define themselves now as things, statistical elements, successes or failures. Their criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function."[158]

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[156] *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 199-200

[157] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 42-3

For Hegel second nature arises out the implicit rationality of human beings as spirit; here, too, second nature comes out of *rationality*, but Horkheimer and Adorno see the rationality operative in history as merely *instrumental* rationality, one directed at the control and manipulation of its objects. Thus reason's "ruse consists in making human into beasts with an ever-wider reach, and not in bringing about the identity of subject and object."[159] Reason that aims at controlling nature through abstraction and quantification

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158 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 21
159 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 185

comes to be extended to human beings as well; we can think here again of Marx's analysis of the reduction of human beings to quantities of abstract labor-power. The bourgeois exchange society that emerges is not, for Adorno, merely an accident of history, but is rather the logical result of the development of this model of reason. What Adorno sees this development resulting in is, again, the *failure* of the objective order to offer the conditions for *self*-determining subjectivity, the failure of the reconciliation of the subjective and objective realms, of the particular and the universal. In the final section of this chapter I will give a brief account of what the relation between the universal and particular in the modern world looks like to Adorno, and how it runs counter to Hegel's claims about their reconciliation.

Before doing so, however, I would like to briefly consider some criticisms that can be raised in regard to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* account of history and the forces active in it. Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the development of subjectivity and rationality is certainly open to question on a number of counts. From the questionable anthropological generalizations regarding human prehistory and its practices and their significance, to the attempt to account for the prehistory of subjectivity and rationality in sixty pages, there is much that is unsatisfying about this work. Perhaps the most significant problem, for my purposes, is the feeling that this account of enlightenment as myth, and reason as merely instrumental reason, renders us prisoners of the historical process, offering no possible ways out of this destructive course of development. Foremost among the book's critics is Habermas, who picks up on the troubling nature of the totalizing claims about enlightenment and rationality. He writes, for example, that "*Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity that was captured in bourgeois ideals."[160] That is, Horkheimer and Adorno here see the bourgeois world as nothing more than the outgrowth of these mythical, instrumental-rational tendencies within history; yet this world *has* given us values and ideals that would seem to transcend their origins in a destructive form of rationality, ideals such as "freedom," "progress," "human rights," etc. While such ideas cannot simply be taken at face value, since they arise within a world that is problematic in its very core, they do nonetheless contain something crucial for any hope of *real* progress or improvement. Horkheimer and Adorno, however, seem to imply that there is *nothing* outside of instrumental rationality in the modern world. They "critique enlightenment at such a *depth* that the project of enlightenment itself is endangered. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* holds out scarcely any prospect for an escape from the myth of purposive rationality that has turned into objective violence."[161] Horkheimer and Adorno's account is powerful precisely because it locates the pathologies of modernity in tendencies at work in the very beginnings of human history, yet the other side of this is that it seems to leave no way out, since these pathologies are rooted so deeply in the human relationship to the objective world. In this work, according to Habermas, "[t]he suspicion of ideology becomes *total*, but without any change of direction. It is turned not only against the irrational function of bourgeois ideals, but against the rational potential of bourgeois culture itself."[162] If, as Horkheimer and Adorno claim, it is their goal to *save* enlightenment from itself, to rescue the potentials that lie within it but have gone undeveloped, they need to locate the source of these possibilities, the aspects of

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160 Jurgen Habermas. "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Tr. Frederick G. Lawrenece. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987, p. 113

161 "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," p. 114

162 "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," p. 119

rationality in the modern world that might *escape* the destructive tendencies of enlightened thought. It is not enough to simply *claim* that "freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking,"[163]they must also show how such thinking can contribute to the realization of this freedom. And this is clearly their intention; they write at the beginning of the book that their "critique of enlightenment...is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination."[164] I think it must be admitted that they do not go very far toward this goal in the book, which they must have recognized if, as Rabinbach reports, Horkheimer proposed a sequel dealing with the "rescue" of enlightenment.[165]

The next chapter will show that much of Adorno's work outside of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is motivated precisely by such a desire to rescue the rational potentials that exist for true enlightenment. For now, just let me suggest that we should see a *strategy* in this totalizing account of rationality and enlightenment that Horkheimer and Adorno offer. Adorno would say that the destructive totality that arises *attempts* to encompass everything, to assimilate every aspect of life to itself, but that this total assimilation is, in principle, impossible, for reasons that we will see. Yet the system of objectivity can nonetheless be said to be *total*, insofar as there is nothing that is not touched by it; everything in the human world is somehow affected by this system's attempt to encompass the totality of human life. This does not meant that there is no possible source of resistance to it—resistance will come out of those things that are *damaged* by enlightened rationality, such that any hope that exists must be found *in* the damage inflicted by the total system of the modern world. Whatever is not completely subsumed under or incorporated into this whole must be approached from the perspective of the damage done to it by the overarching totality.

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[163] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi
[164] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xviii
[165] Rabinbach, "The Cunning of Unreason," p. 171

Antagonism between the universal and the particular

The question that arises is how Hegel could have found the reconciliation of the subject and the objective order, and the actualization of freedom, in the very same developments to which Horkheimer and Adorno ascribe the continued domination of the subject by the objective order. Hegel, of course, is writing at the beginning of the development of the industrial, capitalist, bourgeois world, while Horkheimer and Adorno can survey it from a later stage of its development. Yet Adorno would want to point to something deeper; the bourgeois world and its apologists, he would claim, *have* to find reconciliation and harmony in this world, because the alternative is to realize that it fails to bring this about, that it *cannot* in principle accomplish what it claims to. Hegel, then, finds reconciliation actualized where there is only the *appearance* of reconciliation and harmony. The capitalist world, that is, does in fact display a *kind* of unity between the particular and universal. Although the objective order has priority, insofar as the subject is required to adapt to its demands for the sake of self-preservation, this order becomes internalized to such a degree that the subject's actions and will may very well seem to be in accord with this order: "The more completely subjects are embraced and determined by the system, the more the system survives not simply by applying compulsion to the subjects, but through the subjects themselves."[166] Subjects may *appear* to be pursuing their own ends in acting in accord with the demands of the universal system, but this is *only* an appearance because such identification with the universal becomes necessary in the absence of any other option: “It is only because, to survive, they have to make an alien cause their own that there arises that appearance of reconcilement—an appearance which Hegelian philosophy, incorruptible in its recognition of the predominance of the universal, corruptibly transfigures into an idea.”[167] Adorno goes so far as to claim that not only does this coincidence between the subjective will and the objective order not constitute a true reconciliation, it even acts to further *prevent* any such reconciliation: “the more individuals identify with the universal—not consciously, but in their unconscious and preconscious reactions—the more they can be said to distance themselves in a sense from the universal by the fact that their identification with it is blind and defenseless because they are acting unconsciously, as a form of adaptation.”[168] The more *unthinking* this identification becomes, as a mere unconscious reaction, the *further* the individual is from being able to freely and consciously find this universal, or any other, as an expression of its own will.

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[166] Theodor W. Adorno. *Introduction to Sociology*. Ed. Christoph Godde. Tr. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 152

Hegel, in his philosophy of history, becomes an apologist for this antagonistic order. In Hegel, “the historical objectivity that happened to come about is exalted into transcendence.”[169] Hegel, that is, merely takes what *is* and raises it to the level of necessity. This move, however, is as necessary as it is false: the bourgeois world, according to Adorno, is *unable* to reconcile its contradictions and antagonisms in reality, so it must force reconciliation onto it from the conceptual realm. Hegel's principle of the world spirit, the force or principle that guides development and ultimately brings about the actualized unity in the modern world, is therefore given the *opposite* significance that it has in reality: "spirit as a second nature is the negation of spirit. Hegel's world spirit is the ideology of natural history. It is domination absolutized and projected onto being itself."[170] That spirit that is operative in history is, for Adorno, merely the principle of ever-increasing domination. Hegel is therefore correct to write about this as an all-powerful force, one which is responsible for historical development and for forging the modern world into a unified whole; but he is wrong in raising this to the status of a metaphysical principle rather than seeing it as a material one. It is the principle of reason that dominates nature, giving rise to the totality of our material conditions, along with the systems that support this (political, social, legal, etc.): "The evolution of spirit as rationality...is the product of the material needs of human beings."[171] Even though this world spirit is in its origin traceable to human beings and human activity, it in fact becomes something over our heads, a principle that comes to dominate us as second nature.

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[167] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 311
[168] *History and Freedom*, p. 71
[169] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 323

Adorno's *Hegel: Three Studies,* written as an anticipation and presupposition of the ideas developed in *Negative Dialectics,* stresses this relation between the material conditions of society and Hegel's concepts. The problem with Hegel, he claims, is that his concepts *forget* their material basis, their grounding in actual human beings and actual human conditions, and this is where his system goes astray, and where it becomes ideological:

> idealism becomes false when it mistakenly turns the totality of labor into something existing in itself, when it sublimates its principle into a metaphysical one, into the *actus purus* of spirit, and tendentially transfigures something produced by human beings, something fallible and conditioned, along with labor itself, which is the suffering

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[170] *Negative Dialectics*

[171] *History and Freedom*, p. 16

of human beings, into somethingeternal and right.[172]

The question for Adorno is, what is it that allows Hegel to overlook the lack of reconciliation between the universal and the particular, the subjective will and the objective order that stands against it? Adorno's answer to this is that Hegel fails to properly think through the relation between the universal and particular. We should recall that, for Hegel, the universal is supposed to arise out of particularity, and this is what allows the particular, the subjective will, to recognize this universality as its own, to find itself fulfilled in it; this is how the cunning of reason was supposed to work. Hegel, however, ends up giving priority to the universal, and taking its side against the particular. Adorno writes that "[t]he concept of the primacy of reason contains the idea that reason has the task of taming, suppressing, ordering and governing whatever is unreasonable, instead of absorbing it into itself in a spirit of reconciliation."[173] We can find examples of this in Hegel's account of the development of the universal out of the particular in the various stages of history; he sometimes writes about this in terms of the universal principle "taming" the merely particular impulses, "training" subjects to orient themselves toward universal aims. Adorno would not dispute that this is an accurate description of what happens in the actual relations between the universal and particular; the question that he wants to ask, however, is whether this really constitutes particularity making a "dialectical advance" to universality, or whether it is simply the *elimination* or disregarding of particularity so that it can be replaced by universal principles that are imposed on the subjective will.

What Adorno wants to point to is that subjective reactions of unhappiness, of the lack of fulfillment, are not simply irrational, not simply the mark of a will that has failed to set aside its merely particular desires for the sake of universal and rational aims. Expressions of unhappiness, of reaction against the objective order, need to be taken seriously, since they are *rational* expressions of the lack of reconciliation. And, Adorno would point out, the modern world could be defined by this lack of fulfillment, by the subjective feeling of being subjected to an alien order. This is not simply a matter of individuals failing to see a rationality that is there and available to them; it is rather the indication that the objective order is not adequate to the subjective will. Of course, Hegel's claims about the reconciliation of the universal and particular do not imply that the criterion of this reconciliation is subjective *happiness* (and Adorno recognizes that happiness is not the goal of history for Hegel[174]). What Adorno wants to question, however, is whether a relation between the universal and particular that fails to take into account subjective happiness, the fulfilling of (rational and justified) subjective desires, can really count as the kind of unity that Hegel claims is formed. Even seemingly irrational reactions against the prevailing order cannot simply be *dismissed* as irrational, as even these reactions contain a core of objectivity, of universality, that is, a claim about what would, or at least what does *not*, constitute a rational objectivity. But “Hegel simply ignores the element of objectivity, of universality, that lies concealed in the particular, in individuality.”[175] What Adorno sees motivating this is the unjustified attempt on Hegel's part to purge his philosophical categories (such as the “subject”) of concrete aspects of the things that form the basis for these categories (i.e., actually existing subjects).[176] We cannot leave aside certain subjective demands or desires, the desire for happiness, for example, however ill-defined, without losing the meaning of the entire process. In expressing a concern for subjective fulfillment, Adorno is not simply introducing a concern foreign to Hegel's account; he is rather pointing to a condition that must be fulfilled in order to make any claims about the historical process giving rise to unity or reconciliation. If an objective order does not provide the real possibility for fulfillment, then it cannot lay claim to being fully rational:

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[172] "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," p. 23
[173] *History and Freedom*, p. 45

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[174] Cf. *History and Freedom*, p. 41

[175] *History and Freedom*, p. 64

> We can really talk about the rationality of history only if it succeeds increasingly in satisfying the needs and interests of individuals...Hegel disagrees with this in principle when he states that the theater of history is not the theater of happiness. In so doing, Hegel hypostatizes rationality and falls into the trap of thinking of rationality as the logic of things independently of their *terminus ad quem* in human beings, the very thing he had expressly called for with his realist interpretation of the concept of reason. The rationality, or the universal, then, if it is to be rational at all, cannot be an abstractly self-standing concept, but must consist in the relation of the universal to the particular.[177]

What Adorno is calling for here is a rationality that does not forget that human beings, the satisfaction of human ends, is its true end, as opposed to a rationality that merely perpetuates the given order. This "bad" rationality might be said to advance insofar as it results in, for example, the development of our scientific or technological capabilities; the *irrationality* of this reason, however, consists in the fact that these advances, which should serve only as a means to a better state for human beings, come to be taken as the end itself, regardless of the actual conditions in which human beings live. Adorno's aim, then, will be some sort of rescue of reason and rationality that would allow for a *true* reconciliation of the particular and universal, and a *true* freedom for the subject.

Despite Adorno's criticisms of progressive accounts of historical development, he certainly does not want to eliminate the concept of progress itself from our thinking. This concept, rather, is essential for our thinking a better state, as can be seen in his late lecture "Progress." It is "progress" in its *ideological* use that is problematic, and that prevents us from thinking about the possibility of a better state, since this ideological conception posits progress as something that has *already* occurred, and that continues to occur. The concept itself is problematic, given its origins and function in bourgeois thought: "The nineteenth century came up against the limit of bourgeois society, which could not fulfill its own reason, its own ideals of freedom, justice, and humane immediacy, without running the risk of its order being abolished. This made it necessary for society to credit itself, untruthfully, with having achieved what it had failed."[178] Yet this does not mean that the concept itself, or even those things in the world that have come to be put under the concept of "progress," do not have a place in our thinking about a better world. Rather, they do contain potentials, which need to be recognized. Thus Adorno claims that "while indeed progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb may well amount to satanic laughter, in the age of the bomb a condition can be envisaged for the first time in which violence might vanish altogether."[179] Progress in the domination of nature, which has also given rise to the domination of human beings, has nonetheless also given rise to a state in which we have the power to meet humanity's needs *without* violence and domination, without the subjugation of external nature and the internal nature of human beings. Progress, then, would consist in the realization of the possibilities that exist implicitly and undeveloped in this wrong state of things.

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[176] This forms a core element of "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," in which Adorno wants to bring Hegel's categories back into relation to the concrete realities out of which they arise, in order to *confront* these concepts with the concrete realities.

[177] *History and Freedom*, p. 41

A large part of what makes Adorno's thought seems hopelessly negative is the way in which he finds the hand of destructive rationality and the wrong state of things even in those aspects of our lives that seem *good*, that seem to be *refuges* from the negative aspects of the world.[180] But we will see in the next chapter the other side of this: even in those areas that seem hopelessly founded on domination, on the deformation and subjection of the human world, we can find the possibilities for a better world (even though we may be pessimistic about the possibilities for *realizing* these potentials). The fact that progress has not actually occurred does not render the idea of progress meaningless; it rather requires a change in its significance from its being a *fact* to its defining a *task*: "progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place," rather than taking "progress" to "imply that humanity in general already existed and therefore could progress."[181] The following chapters will therefore attempt to show what a non-ideological concept of progress might mean; I will begin by looking at the attempt that is made to rescue or recover the possible sources of rationality or objectivity that have been left behind or covered over by the destructive course of world history and the destructive totality of the modern world. This will require a particular kind of conceptual or epistemological orientation, one whose explicit aim is the recovery of these forgotten possibilities. I will approach the question of what kind of possibilities exist for the *future* from the perspective of the possibilities that have been left behind, unrealized, in the *past*. We will see the necessary connection between the past and the future; what I am working toward, again, is a rethinking of the aims of Hegel's philosophy of history, in which the actualization of freedom and subjectivity in the present or future is essentially bound up with the cognition of the past, the comprehension of the process of human history, such that the realization of the present can *only* come about through the cognition of the course of human events. This cognition of the past will later be formulated in terms of the category of "redemption," which is of great importance for Adorno and, especially, Benjamin; this "aspect of redemption, no matter how secularized, cannot be removed from the concept of progress."[182] I will now turn to Adorno's attempt to salvage the potentials that might still exist in the world's damaged state.

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[178] Theodor W. Adorno. "Progress," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Tr. Henry W. Pickford. New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 154

[179] "Progress," p. 153

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[180] *Minima Moralia*, for example, constitutes in large part Adorno's attempt to show how even those areas in which we think ourselves free and think that we find true human meaning are deformed by the prevailing state of the world.

[181] "Progress," p. 145

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[182] "Progress," p. 148

Chapter 3

Progress and universal history

We have seen that the danger inherent in a universal history such as Hegel's is that, rather than allowing the facts of history to speak for themselves, the "historian" might simply be imposing a preconceived conceptual structure onto the material. Hegel could be blinded to the facts that would contradict his claims about the actualization of freedom and the reconciliation of the subject with the objective world because he gives priority to his conceptual structure rather than to the facts, and thus sees the facts only through the filter of his concepts. Doing this ensures that what is seen in history will be nothing more than what the subject puts into it, and that what contradicts this will either not be seen or it will be explained away. We can see this, for example, in Hegel's approach to the individuals who are not fulfilled by the institutions of the objective world; he does not take this seriously, instead giving priority to the whole over the individual: "The conception of a totality harmonious through all its antagonisms compels him to assign to individuation, however much he may designate it a driving moment in the process, an inferior status in the construction of the whole."[183]

This is not meant simply as a criticism of Hegel; it is a danger inherent in *any* attempt to conceptualize the historical process as a whole. If we begin with an idea of what it is that provides unity to the disparate moments of history, what it is that forms it into a whole, we run the risk of interpreting the material in such a way that it conforms to this preconceived idea. At the same time, however, it seems important to try and think of history as consisting of a unity of *some* kind between past and present, such that there is a connection between eras that is more than just a *causal* connection. To simply eliminate this idea of unity from our thinking about history would seem to be as much of a mistake as it would be to impose a false unity on it. Tying our thoughts and hopes for a better future to the goals and struggles of humankind over the course of its history can give these thoughts a fuller *content*, and thus a *power* that they would not have if taken in isolation from the past. The following chapters will therefore be an attempt to approach from different angles the question of unity in history, of what kinds of connections, beyond merely causal ones, exist between the past and present (and the future as well). In doing so it is of course essential to be mindful of the trap of introducing unity into history where there is none, or of positing an affirmative story of progress that fails to do justice to the actual course that history has taken and the effects that this course has had on those subjected to it. I will focus on the kinds of subjective approaches to the objective material that will allow us to think of unity and connection in history. The question is, how should the subject in the present approach the objects of knowledge, past events and occurrences, such that the damaged state of the world is respected and not covered over, while the possibilities and potentials that might exist in the past are allowed to come to light?

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[183] *Minima Moralia*, p. 17

This chapter will be devoted to an elaboration of Adorno's idea of the kind of cognitive approach that should determine the subject's relation to its objects in general, which will reveal something about the subject's proper relation to *historical* objects. As a way of getting into this question, I will return to the point at which the previous chapter left off, that is, with Adorno's essay on "Progress." Adorno reflects here on the difficulties inherent in defining "progress." It is not immediately clear what "progress" refers to, and what kinds of improvements would constitute progress. Adorno claims that to define "progress" too precisely is to somehow violate the concept: "the concept of progress dissolves upon attempts to specify its exact meaning, for instance what progresses and what does not...To use the term pedantically merely cheats it out of what it promises: an answer to the doubt and the hope that things will finally get better."[184] To give it a definite meaning, to say that a particular state of affairs, a particular development, would satisfy the criterion of progress would betray the subjective *reaction* to the world which informs the concept of progress, and which looks for hope or solace in this concept. The yearning for progress, he seems to be saying, is not tied to any *particular* area of the world but is more of a generalized reaction to the state of the world as a whole. There is, then, no adequate definition since we cannot conceive a completely different objective order: "one cannot say precisely what progress should mean to people, because the crisis of the situation is precisely that while everyone feels the crisis, the words bringing resolution are missing."[185] To limit the concept, then, would be to reduce its meaning, to betray the experience of the world that it expresses, this totalized reaction to the negative totality of the world.

Adorno does nevertheless go on to give a very general idea of what progress would and would not mean. He claims that "no progress is to be assumed that would imply that humanity in general already existed and therefore could progress. Rather, progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, whose prospect opens up in the face of its extinction. This entails...that the concept of universal history cannot be saved; it is plausible only as long as one can believe in the illusion of an already existing humanity, coherent in itself and moving upward as a unity."[186] What would constitute progress, that is, would be the establishment of what had previously been *assumed* to exist. We cannot assume the existence of humanity as some sort of agent of history (even if an unconscious one) since participation in "humanity" is not something that can be ascribed indiscriminately to human beings at any given time. "Humanity" is not a unified whole because the *objective* circumstances also play a role in determining whether a true humanity can be said to exist or not. If the objective conditions of the world are not conducive to the *realization* of humanity then we cannot posit the *existence* of a humanity that could progress as a single, unified whole; the state of the world can allow or, more pertinently, block the humanity of the human world.

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[184] "Progress," p. 143-4

[185] "Progress," p. 144

I think it is open to question, however, whether this lack of a realized humanity as the subject of progress would of itself necessarily imply the implausibility of the idea of universal history. The fact that true humanity has yet to be established would contradict a certain *idea* of universal history, one which presupposes this unified agent acting to bring about progress. Part of what I will be trying to do in the next three chapters is looking for some way to think of a "universal history" in which the existence of an actualized humankind is not assumed, but is rather set as the *goal* of historical development. If we think of a unified humanity (and what this means must remain vague for now) as the goal rather than as the presupposition of history, then it might make sense to think of history (in both of its senses, as events and as thought about these events) as the attempt to

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[186] "Progress," p. 145

constitute humanity as a whole; what ties history together, then, what gives it its unity, would be the thought that this establishment of humanity is a *continuing* task over the course of history.

To establish any kind of humanity, however, it would be necessary to put an end to the *inhumanity* of the objective order to which human beings are subjected. Adorno claims that any idea of "progress" for us in the present would have to have the meaning of putting a stop to the advance of the rationalized world that is grounded in domination and repression: "Progress means: to step out of the magic spell, even out of the spell of progress that is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues. In this way it could be said that progress occurs where it ends."[187] Progress, that is, would mean putting an end to the false progress that takes itself to be true progress. For Adorno, progress can only have a negative function at the present time, constituting a reaction to the dominant historical movement. If the resistance or reaction that constitutes progress is to have its full meaning, however, then we need to think of it as giving rise also to a positive (though not conclusive) idea of progress as well. The trick here is to avoid resignation in the face of the facts of history on the one hand, and the premature affirmation of progress on the other. This can be done if, at every step, progress is conceived only in relation to the negativity against which it reacts; to conceive of progress as a reaction to the wrong state of the world keeps it grounded in negativity, thereby preventing it from turning into the naïve affirmation of an established humanity that ideas of progress have often tended to be.

Thought about progress, then, should proceed not by looking for it in things that supposedly lie *outside* of the dominant historical tendencies altogether, in the supposed exceptions to the course of history; rather, the possibilities for progress should be sought within the dominant tendencies of history itself, that is, precisely within those elements that are damaged by this movement, *in* their damaged state. Adorno's "negative dialectics" is an attempt to develop an approach to this damaged world. He writes that "[d]ialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to break out of the context from within."[188] The presupposition of his thought is that, as was mentioned at the end of the last chapter in response to Habermas's criticisms, nothing is left untouched by the dominant historical tendencies, but at the same time not *everything* can be completely encompassed by or integrated into the dominant rationality of history and the present society. This rationality attempts to encompass everything, but "by virtue of its antagonistic essence it is also impossible for it to extort that complete identity with human beings that is relished in negative utopias."[189] Since this order is antagonistic to human beings, something in the human being will resist its integration into or its subsumption under this alien objectivity. Thought will therefore need to direct itself toward those moments of resistance to objectivity that can be discovered. Adorno's rethinking of rationality and conceptuality can be seen as the positive side of his and Horkheimer's critique of rationality in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno's approach here has the merit of of not simply opposing a different idea of rationality to the one that he claims is destructive, but of rather being developed out of that destructive rationality itself. He claims that "[t]he beneficial self-reflection of reason...would be its transition to praxis: reason would see through itself as a moment of praxis and would recognize, instead of mistaking itself for the absolute, that it is a mode of behavior. The anti-mythological element in progress cannot be conceived without the practical act that reins in the delusion of spirit's autarky."[190] Reason, that is, should be seen not as something existent in itself as an independent force, something absolute in opposition to the world of things, but rather as *part* of that world. His negative dialectics, then, can be thought of as an attempt to set limits to reason, to demarcate its boundaries as an activity belonging *to* the world, in opposition to its self-understanding as something free and independent in relation to the world.

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[187] "Progress," p. 150

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[188] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 406

[189] "Progress," p. 156

Identity thinking

In Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the mythical nature of the process of enlightenment, we saw what they called the "principle of immanence." This principle was characterized by the way in which it seeks to turn the world into a closed system completely encompassed in thought, such that anything in the world would be subject to thought's system of laws and principles. This idea reappears in Adorno's later work, where he calls it the "principle of identity" or "identity thinking." Adorno uses these terms to refer to the particular model of conceptuality, and the corresponding relation between the knowing subject and its object, that emerges out of the development of reason. This principle contains the key to the modern subject's approach to the world, with Adorno paying particular attention to the ways in which it appears in philosophical thought, in German idealism for example. The underlying problem with this kind of thinking, what ultimately renders it untrue according to Adorno, is that thought comes to see itself as independent of the objects that it takes as its material. It becomes independent from the actually existing human world, in the sense that its conceptual systems repress things like the human impulses that give rise to thought, and the human ends for whose sake thought exists in the first place. These things that are purged from thinking are, however, the only possible source of thought's *truth* in any meaningful sense. Thought in its true sense is not an essentially disinterested process, disconnected from the human world in which it originates and to which it ought to be applied for the sake of fulfilling human needs and desires.

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[190] "Progress," p. 153

The forgetting of this human basis of thought can be traced back to the essentially *negative* nature of the classifying, abstracting, quantifying process of "enlightenment" that Adorno and Horkheimer examine in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Enlightenment, as the disenchantment of thinking, strives to purge thought of its animistic and anthropomorphic elements; this aim is pursued so far, however, that eventually anything in thought that can be seen as connected to the subject becomes suspect and is eliminated (perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this is the ideal of "objectivity," which demands that thought be neutral and disinterested, precisely *not* subject-dependent). Eliminating subjective elements from thought is necessary, given what is taken to be the aim of thought; it is necessary, that is, if thought is to be effective in manipulating its objects. Bernstein writes that "[t]he work of classification, subsumption, explanation, deduction each permits the item in question to be detached from its immediate sensory impact upon the cognizing subject: classification and explanation negate immediacy and thereby objectify experience. Only when an item is objectified, detached from the subjective states to which its presence gives rise, can it be regarded as belonging to the furniture of the world; and only what belongs to the furniture of the world is a candidate for being manipulated and controlled."[191] In explaining a natural phenomenon, for example, thinking cannot be concerned with the subjective states that the phenomenon might give rise to, nor can it take into account the subjective claims that are tied to these subjective reactions if thought is to be effective in manipulating the elements of the world.

This by itself does not seem particularly problematic. If we want to use thought to intervene effectively in the objective world, it obviously does not matter how a phenomenon affects one as a subject. The problem here, however, is that if enlightenment's aim is essentially negative, if what defines it as an activity is the *elimination* of the subjective element from thought, then it has no obvious place to *stop* in its elimination of the subjective from thinking. Bernstein goes on: "If what counts *as* projection and *as* subjective are not defined, if there does not exist positive criteria for what is subjective or anthropomorphic, then there is no reason to attribute a positive end or goal to critique. Once projection becomes the *formal* rather than substantive object of critique, then whatever appears in a definite and therefore conditioned relation to the knowing subject becomes subject to critique."[192] Thought, that is, strives to be completely independent of subjects; but this would mean independence from "subjective" aspects such as the *reasons* that a subject has for acquiring knowledge, or the *uses* to which knowledge should be directed. What thinking is purged of is everything that ties it to actually living subjects. Thought becomes independent of the subjects for whose sake it is employed in the first place. Scientific knowledge, for example, forgets the human purposes behind the desire to understand and control nature; the hopes and fears that *drive* the search for knowledge are no longer part of the system.[193] A statement or theory might therefore be "true" in the sense that it corresponds to something in the objective world, but it loses its truth in a more emphatic sense, namely, the truth that would do justice to the subjective impulses, the drives and desires, that give rise to thinking in the first place. Thoughts or concepts that contain any reference to these human ends come to be seen as nothing more than irrational, "merely" subjective additions to thought: "Mythology itself set in motion the endless process of enlightenment by which, with ineluctable necessity, every definite theoretical view is subjected to the annihilating criticism that it is only a belief, until even the concepts of mind, truth, and, indeed, enlightenment itself have been reduced to animistic magic."[194]

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[191] *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 88
[192] *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 92

The drive of enlightened, "rational" thought to purge thought of the human element, to become independent of the human world, is the same impulse behind what Adorno calls "identity thinking." We could define identity thinking, most generally, as the kind of thinking that makes the implicit claim that its concepts are adequate to the objects that fall under them, that there is an identity between concepts and objects, such that the object is simply what its concept says it is. In regard to a conceptual *system* there is the further assumption that the system as a whole contains and covers all possible objects, such that nothing is left outside of the system; just as a concept is claimed to encompass its object in its entirety, so also does the conceptual system claim to encompass the objective world in its entirety. Related to this is the separation of the concept from its object, the distance between them that finds expression in the philosophical tradition in the separation of the subject of thought from its object. In this separation, the subject is placed in a position of superiority, which results in the privileging of concepts over their objects. This is what characterizes a system such as Hegel's, according to Adorno. Such a system becomes abstract and false, because the knowing subject does not immerse itself in the objects that it seeks to know, but rather imposes concepts on those objects from above them. We can think, for example, of the concept of "history." If we impose this concept, with its meanings as the development of freedom and self-determination, onto the material of the historical world, then this is simply what we will see in the world. But it is only because the material is seen *through* that concept that it displays these features. If the subject were open to seeing the material in a different light, then the objects would be able to display their *lack* of freedom and self-determination. Imposing concepts on objects means that the knower will only see what it has put into the objects, thereby missing the other possible ways in which the objects might appear.

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[193] This sounds like an extravagant claim; surely there scientists who are engaged in research for the sake of benefiting humanity. This might be the case, but there are nonetheless features of the system itself that supersede the subjective intentions of individuals. Medical research, for example, may result in effective treatments for illness, but since the end is profit, rather than good for human beings, it will be *more effective* in producing profit than in aiding human beings.

[194] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 7

Adorno thus claims that the "Hegelian system in itself was not a true becoming; implicitly, each single definition in it was already preconceived. Such safeguards condemn it to untruth" since, if consciousness were truly immersed in its objects, "the phenomenon would not remain a case of its concept, as it does to Hegel, despite all pronouncements to the contrary."[195] Hegel, again, according to Adorno, gives priority to his concepts rather than to the material subsumed under those concepts, with the result being that the concepts are not *true* to their objects. We can think here of Hegel's concept of “freedom” as it is supposedly actualized in the modern state. He must force the world to fit under this concept in order to claim that the world is adequate to its concept, and that the concept covers the facts of the world. He writes in regard to the “estates” of civil society, for example, that “each individual, by a process of self-determination, makes himself a member of one of the moments of civil society through his activity, diligence, and skill, and supports himself in this capacity.”[196] To attribute one's place in society to self-determination, and to claim that one experiences this as arising out of one's own will, is to make a mockery of the actual societal processes that contribute to determining one's place in society. He thus interprets the facts in such a way as to fit them under the concept of “freedom,” thereby failing to be attentive to the fact that the capitalist world he writes about in the section on “civil society” does not, and cannot, lead to the actualization of freedom in its fullest sense.

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[195] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 27

It is this act of identification, and the resulting priority given to concepts over objects, that is responsible for what Adorno calls the “reification” of concepts. They “are no longer measured against their contents, but instead are taken in isolation.”[197] They are taken, that is, as *things* standing over and above their objects, existing for themselves rather than as something essentially *belonging to* the objective world from which they come to be separated off: “That the concept is a concept even when dealing with things in being does not change the fact that on its part it is entwined with a nonconceptual whole. Its only insulation from that whole is its reification.”[198] What is left out of concepts in their reification is their *origin* in the objective world, their relation to what is *not* concept.

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[196] *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, par. 207

[197] Theodor W. Adorno. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Tr. Rodney Livingstone. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008, p. 24

[198] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 12

To cut concepts off from their connection to the world in which they arise is to falsify them, since "all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation."[199] To take a concept as a thing existing independently of the world falsifies it because its relation to the world is *essential* to its true meaning. Concepts arise out of the nonconceptual world, are themselves merely *part* of the nonconceptual world, in ways that we will see shortly. An approach to the objects of the world that attempts to get beyond the reification of concepts would reveal that the concepts do *not* adequately cover their objects; but giving priority to the concept allows those moments that might contradict the concept, or that resist being subsumed under it, to be ignored. If we approach the world with the concept of "freedom," then the unfreedom that comes into play in determining one's place in society, for example, will be missed, or this unfreedom will be interpreted *as* freedom, thus justifying the world as it happens to exist.

Identity, then, not only damages the objects of thought by failing to give them proper consideration, by not being open to all of the relevant aspects that they present; the claim that concept and object are identical has the further effect of making possible the *justification* of aspects of the objective world that damage those subjected to it. Thus "identity is the primal form of ideology."[200] The claim that an object is adequately covered by its concept, and that what the concept claims is in fact *actual* in the world is the link between identity and ideology. Despite this inherent tendency of concepts to lend themselves to ideology, however, we should not be led to think that Adorno is advocating some sort of irrationalism, a kind of "thinking" that would do without

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199 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 11

200 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 148

concepts because of their complicity with ideology. For Adorno concepts and their ideological function are not *purely* destructive. I will cover this in more detail below, but for now it should be pointed out that this ideological aspect of conceptual thinking has a *progressive* function as well: “The supposition of identity is indeed the ideological element of pure thought...but hidden in it is also the truth moment of ideology, the pledge that there should be no contradiction, no antagonism;” there is therefore a “utopian” moment inherent in thought alongside its ideological aspect.[201] Implicit in concepts and their claim to actuality is the claim that what they say exists in the world *ought to* exist. To say that human beings are free may be to use the concept of “freedom” ideologically, but Adorno sees in this also the claim that this is what *ought* to be. To go back to Hegel, his claims about the actualization of freedom and self-determination may not match the facts of the world, but they nonetheless present an image of what the world should be, and what would constitute freedom and self-determination. Ideology could be characterized not only as an illusion that justifies the state of the world, but also as an anticipation of a better state; it is destructive not so much because of what it says, but rather because of its *premature* reconciliation of concept and world, its taking what ought to be the case as actually being the case. The goal of thought will be to uncover and reclaim this utopian element in thought.

Before we see what this might mean, however, we should note that, just as concepts arise *out of* a nonconceptual context, they also have implications *for* the “real” world. A structure of thought, a tendency found in philosophical thinking, for example, will extend to other areas of the world as well, rather than being limited to the philosophical realm. Identity thinking, the epistemological priority given to concepts, to systems of thought, and the integration of objects into these conceptual systems, is related to the tendencies that lie at the basis of the capitalist world. The integration of objects into the economic and social system, and the violence done to them in this integration, appears in the material world: “The exchange principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Exchange is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no exchange; it is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical.”[202] Just as identity in thought must strip away the particularity of the objects that it covers, in order for concepts to *be* concepts, particularity and individuality must be stripped away from individuals in order to render them commensurable for the sake of the exchange principle. The particular *character* of individuals, or their particular needs and desires, for example, are irrelevant to them as instances of labor-power. Further, exchange comes to encompass everything within society, leaving nothing untouched, coming to infiltrate every aspect of the life of society; it becomes a total system in reality just as Hegel's system, for example, is a total system in thought.[203] Adorno thus conceives of the developed exchange society as “the unity of a totally socialized society” whose “closest kin in the sense of tolerating nothing outside it is the philosophical idea of absolute identity.”[204] The two are not simply analogous. It is the *same* kind of thought that both seeks to create total systems in philosophy or science *and* makes possible a total system of society. This is not to say that philosophical systems are somehow *responsible* for the repressive system of society. Rather, the claim is that they spring from the same source, namely, “reason's” own internal tendency to identify, to create systems that encompass the world in its entirety. This aspect of reason gives rise to both, with the philosophical systems reflecting the social reality, and, in turn, serving to justify this reality.

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[201] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 149-50

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[202] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 146

[203] The bulk of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* is devoted to analyzing just these ways in which exchange and commodification come to engulf all areas of life, even those that would seem to lie outside of these principles. He writes there that “the entire private domain is being engulfed by a mysterious activity that bears all the features of commercial life without there being actually any business to transact” (*Minima Moralia*, p. 23).

[204] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 314

The problem with both forms of identity, its philosophical articulation and its social embodiment, is that they fail to do justice to the particulars that come under them: objects have aspects that cannot be included in the philosophical concepts, while the social system damages its objects, individual human beings, by failing to take into account the particular needs and desires of individuals (these *must* be left out of consideration if the system is to persist). The task for philosophy, as Adorno sees it, is to think in a way that avoids falling into the trap of identity thinking, and that can therefore do justice to the particularity that has been left out of account in both thought and reality. Recovering the particularity in the things that have become abstract would allow us to see where, precisely, the social system goes astray, how, in particular, it fails to do justice to the human beings that it encompasses. Adorno's rethinking of dialectics, of the thinking subject's relation to the material of the world, is intended to recover what has been stripped from objects, and therefore what has been forgotten in both the formation of concepts and in the formation of real systems in the world. It is this nonconceptual material, the experience underlying concepts, that the knowing subject must orient itself toward; this change of direction is what characterizes Adorno's rethinking of dialectics: “dialectics means 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."[205] Since Adorno sees the tendency to identify in terms of the subject imposing its concepts on the objects, it is not sufficient to simply impose a different conceptual schema on the material; rather, it is the knowing subject's attentiveness to the *object* itself, to what is left out or distorted in the identifying judgment, and thus to the concept's inadeqaucy, that provides the impetus for breaking the impulse to identify. This is what motivates Adorno's "negative" dialectics: "To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection."[206] We will now turn to the role of the nonconceptual, its constitutive character in the concept, in order to see what this means, and how it might contribute to the recovery of the lost possibilities contained in the objects of thought.

The nonidentical

For Adorno, as we have seen, philosophical thought is intimately bound up with its historical context. The turn to *non*identical thinking, to a negative dialectics, thus represents a task for philosophy that arises at a given historical moment. The demand for a negative dialectics, for the recovery of what is nonidentical in concepts, is imposed on thinking by the *world* in which identity thinking has given rise not only to the ever-continuing expansion of the capitalist exchange society and the damage that this inflicts on human beings, but also, pushed to its extreme, to Auschwitz. For Adorno, then, "[t]he matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity—things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant."[207] The urgency of this change in thought's orientation lies in the fact that it is this turn toward what the philosophical traditional has taken as irrelevant that allows us to see the possibilities for *halting* the progress of the world, through the bringing to light of new possibilities.

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[205] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 157
[206] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 12

The obvious question here is, what exactly does Adorno mean by the "nonconceptual"? What is it that the concept fails to cover, that goes unrecognized in the process of the reification of concepts? One aspect of the nonconceptual is *nature,* which must be abstracted from in the formation of concepts. We can think, in particular, of the internal nature that human beings must suppress in order to adapt to the demands of society, the "internalized sacrifice" of desires for fulfillment. The reified concept fails to include the very desires which give rise to concepts, and which would therefore give them their *true* meaning. For Adorno, there is an intimate connection between thinking and the physical drives and impulses; he therefore wants to tie thought back to its somatic basis:

> The supposed basic facts of consciousness are something other than mere facts of consciousness. In the dimension of pleasure and displeasure they are invaded by a physical moment. All pain and all negativity, the moving forces of dialectical thinking, assume the variously conveyed, sometimes unrecognizable form of physical things, just as all happiness aims at sensual fulfillment and obtains its objectivity in that fulfillment. A happiness blocked off from every such aspect is no happiness. This dimension is the anti-spiritual side of the spirit, and in subjective sense data it is enfeebled, so to speak, into the spirit's epistemological copy...[208]

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[207] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 8

[208] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 202

The drive behind thought is ultimately a physical need; the impetus for gaining knowledge about the world is some felt physical desire or pain, of which the “higher” desires are sublimations. This somatic side is “anti-spiritual” in the sense that links the productions of spirit back to the physical world, to nature, such that spirit cannot escape from this realm even though it thinks that it does. Yet Adorno claims that this is not simply *opposed* to spirit, it is not spirit's “other,” as it is the “anti-spiritual *side* of spirit.” That is, spirit itself and its productions must include this natural aspect, in order to truly be spirit at all. No concept can be thought of as sufficient as long as it ignores this aspect—doing so merely perpetuates the natural in repressed and damaged form.

We can see Adorno's idea of this natural basis of conceptuality through the example of the concept of “freedom.” Adorno claims that this concept is inextricably linked to something natural within the individual, something prior even to the individual's development as a social being: “The dawning sense of freedom feeds upon the memory of the archaic impulse not yet steered by any solid I...Without an anamnesis of the untamed impulse that precedes the ego...it would be impossible to derive the idea of freedom, although that idea in turn ends up reinforcing the ego.”[209] This does not mean, of course, that “freedom” for Adorno would simply mean an unleashed id (which would not, of course, even be a possibility given the development of the ego that tames these impulses). What he is trying to point to here is that there is some remnant of the experience of the untamed impulses that informs the concepts of freedom that we develop, some primal impulse that links our concepts to the physical drives. A concept such as freedom, then, is deficient in its meaning if it is completely divorced from the drives, if it does not contain in *some* form, however altered, the most basic impulses of finding fulfillment, of being free from coercion. It is these very experiences that impel subjects to develops concepts, so these experiences are an inherent part of the meaning of "freedom." The concept thus becomes untrue when it forgets this, which is precisely what happens in the concept's elaboration throughout its history, and its development into a philosophical concept. Kant, for example, "cannot bear freedom without compulsion. Its mere undistorted conception fills him with that fear of anarchy which later urged the bourgeois world to liquidate its own freedom."[210] The pressure of social forces invades the concept, takes it over in such a way that it betrays the basic experience contained in it, with the concept thereby turning into its opposite, into untruth.

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[209] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 221-2

The "nonconceptual" refers not only to the nature that is forgotten by concepts, but also to the nonconceptual whole in which concepts are entwined, that is, their context in the external world. It would be a mistake to, for example, apply the concept of freedom to human beings regardless of the objective circumstances in which they find themselves. Freedom cannot be thought of simply as an attribute of the human will, apart from the total context. If we say that "human beings are free" simply by nature of being human, of having a will, this judgment leaves out the fact that "the empirical subject...is itself a moment of the spatial-temporal 'external' world. It has no ontological priority before that world. This is why the attempt to localize the question of free will in the empirical subject must fail."[211] Freedom is not an attribute of the individual subject, but rather refers to the nature of the *whole*; if we take this nonconceptual whole into account, then we see that freedom is not a positive attribute of the human will at all, but rather "a polemical counter-image to the suffering brought on by social coercion; unfreedom as that coercion's image."[212] This is not simply a matter of Adorno trying to articulate an idea of freedom different from what it has come to mean in philosophy, one that takes into account the external circumstances in which subjects act; rather, what he is getting at here is the *nonconceptual* origin of concepts, the nonconceptual factors that lead to their formation in the first place. The very idea of freedom cannot be separated from the particular circumstances in which human beings feel themselves to be *unfree*, and the particular character of this unfreedom. To eliminate the role of this nonconceptual whole is thus to eliminate what is essential to the concept's meaning. What kind of human meaning would a concept such as freedom have if it were to forget the very reason for its formation, the very experience that made the concept necessary as a means of articulating the feeling and the source of subjective unhappiness in the world?

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[210] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 232

[211] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 213

The way to recapture the kinds of subjective experiences that are eliminated from reified concepts is to continually confront the concepts with the objects that they are supposed to cover: "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction...indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived."[213] We have seen how the claim that concepts are in fact adequate to their objects is linked to ideology. We should also recall, however, what Adorno writes about the "utopian" moment of ideology. The aim of his negative dialectics is not simply to do away with conceptual thinking (which would not be possible anyway, if there is to be any thinking at all), or to simply reverse the order of priority in the relation between concept and object that has held in philosophical thought, giving the object priority over the concept. Concepts themselves are essential for any substantive thought. Adorno writes that "[t]he nonidentical element in an identifying judgment is clearly intelligible insofar as every single object subsumed under a class has definitions not contained in the definition of the class. But to a more emphatic concept...*the opposite applies as well*."[214] That is, a concept does not only cheat its object out of something—it also *adds* something to the object, it *promises* something: "in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed under it," which is to say that concepts are not simply generalizations from certain aspects of the objects covered. Thus, "in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to."[215] "Freedom" refers to something more than just the particular freedoms that we as subjects may be granted. If we think of particular struggles for certain freedoms or rights, the fight for women's suffrage, for example, it becomes clear that such struggles are not *only* about the particular right being fought for—there is also, at least implicitly, a claim that one be treated as a human being, and that as such one should not be subject to certain limitations or restrictions. There is a vision of a world in which one would not be subject to limitation, a world in which one could function as a truly human being.

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[212] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 223
[213] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 5

The fact that Adorno recognizes that *both* concepts and objects are moments indispensable to any real thinking is what keeps his negative dialectics from being simply an abstract negation of Hegel's dialectics. What he is saying is not that we should give absolute priority to objects (although they are prior in a sense that we will see below), but rather that the dialectic between concepts and objects needs to carried out more completely, through attentiveness to the object. He accuses Hegel of failing to do precisely this, of stopping short in his dialectic, rather than confronting concepts and objects with one another in order to reveal those points at which *either one* is insufficient. Thus Adorno writes that “[r]eciprocal criticism of the universal and of the particular, identifying acts of judgment whether the concept does justice to what it covers, and whether the particular fulfills its concept—these constitute the medium of thinking about the nonidentity of particular and concept.”[216] This is because, again, concepts arise out of a context, in reaction to the world. In order to determine whether a judgment is true or not, it must therefore be determined whether the concept does justice to its object, and whether the object measures up to the determinations contained in the concept, or whether the object should be something *other* than what it is. Martin Jay therefore writes of Adorno's “normative” sense of truth; something is true, that is, when it exists as it could and should.[217]

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[214] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 150 (my italics)

[215] *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 7

Suffering and utopia

One way to think of Adorno's negative dialectics is as an attempt to recover the *history* contained in concepts. In their reified form, concepts present themselves as eternal and unchanging, ahistorical and atemporal. If concepts are essentially part of a nonconceptual whole, however, then they develop over time, with changing significations, depending on the different experiences sublimated in them. What needs to be recovered are the concrete experiences that deposit their meanings in the concepts over the course of their development. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno claim that "[a]ll reification is forgetting."[218] The concept, in the process of its formation, and eventual reification, should then also involve a forgetting of some sort. From what we have said thus far, it would seem to be the experiential content of the concept that is forgotten; while this is true, it does not go far enough. Their statement about reification and forgetting comes as a commentary on the reservations expressed by a nineteenth-century physician about the use of chloroform as an anesthetic for surgical patients; he writes that it does not actually prevent the subject from feeling what is being done to them, but only prevents the formation of a memory of the experience[219]—it is therefore *suffering* that is forgotten in reification. In experience giving rise to a concept, it is not just *any* kind of experiences that contribute to the their formation, but is rather primarily the reaction to a repressive objectivity, the experience that things are not as they ought to be, and the suffering caused to the subject by the overpowering objectivity which prevents fulfillment. Bernstein illustrates this relation between suffering and concept- formation with the example of slavery: "The universalistic ideals of equality and liberty are in part *formed* through the appreciation of the awfulness of slavery;" the *reaction* to this practice, "gives a sense to what *we mean* by liberty and equality that they would not possess without it...The import of the statement that slavery is wrong is not what it states but what it remembers."[220] The reification of concepts, their formation as something separated from the human world to which they nonetheless are applied, prevents cognition from being the act of memory that, at least in part, it should be. The suffering that is sublimated into concepts, however, is what gives them their content, their *force*. It is essential for us that our use of concepts include this recollection or memory, as this is what give the concepts concrete meaning. Thus, "[f]or Adorno, classical epistemology is to be understood as a form of anesthetic, as the way of eliminating pain (and happiness and desire) from cognition."[221] This "anesthetic," however, is the *necessary* condition for any claim of identity, of reconciliation between the concept and object or the universal and particular. The forgetting at the heart of identity cuts off the present from the possibility of constituting itself as part of a *continuing* struggle, a continuing attempt to express substantial meanings in concepts and to then use these to confront the existing world with; they are rather taken as static, with the danger that we will come to accept in the *world* whatever diminished meaning the concept is taken to have (think, for example, of the limited sense of what "freedom" means to the average American).

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[216] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 146

[217] Martin Jay. *Adorno.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 72

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[218] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 191

[219] Ibid.

[220] *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 341

The remembrance of suffering thus serves an epistemological purpose—our knowledge is reduced and diminished by taking concepts in their reified form; yet this remembrance also points toward an *ethical* issue. Our knowledge, the adequacy of our thoughts and claims, depends upon a recovery of experiences from the past, while these experiences make a claim on us, a demand that we give *expression* to the suffering contained in concepts, that we allow those who have been *damaged* by the course of historical objectivity, and who can no longer speak, and perhaps never could, to speak. Thus Adorno writes that "[t]he need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is the objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed."[222] To say that truth is bound up with "giving a voice" to suffering is not to say that truth involves the expression of some sort of irrational, idiosyncratic, "merely" subjective feeling—there is a *rational* moment of suffering, namely, the fact that it is suffering that gives us an idea of the inadequacy of the objective world. This inadequacy is revealed precisely in what this objectivity does to *subjects*. The subject's suffering is nothing other than a reflection of the nature of the objectivity of the world. It is only by way of the suffering subject that we have access to the insufficiency of the objectivity of the world, its inadequacy in relation to the subject, since to criticize this objectivity is nothing other than to criticize what it does to *subjects*. If this is a condition of truth, however, then expressing truth at the same time requires that we orient ourselves toward the human significance contained in knowledge.

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[221] *Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 340

It is not immediately clear, however, what exactly is meant by Adorno's injunction to "give a voice to suffering;" that is, whose suffering is he talking about? and what constitutes "suffering" in the past? It seems that what Adorno has in mind is that our thought should give a voice to what has not *previously* had a voice, what has not previously been expressed. "Suffering" should not be taken as referring to only the most obvious kinds, such as instances of brute, physical suffering, pain that is experienced immediately and is expressed in one way or another. This would certainly be a part of what Adorno means, but "suffering" seems to be something that runs deeper as well. Axel Honneth gives us a helpful formulation for thinking about what "suffering" might mean here; he writes that for Adorno subjects, in confronting the objectivity that overpowers them, experience the "deformation of their reason,"[223] in the sense that there is an experience of the inadequacy of the objective world due to the fact that it does not provide structures or resources or a framework in which one could live a fulfilled life, a life in accord with our implicitly rational nature (even if this is not consciously experienced, or expressed in these terms). Honneth continues: “The key to this trust in the fundamental ability to experience 'reification' is to be found in Adorno's category of 'suffering,'” which is not “a merely empirical observational concept...the concept of 'suffering' that Adorno employed is not meant in the sense of noting an explicit, linguistically articulated experience; rather, it is 'transcendentally' presupposed everywhere there is the justified suspicion that human beings experience a loss of their self-realization and happiness through the restriction of their rational capacities.”[224] Subjects who are, at the level of consciousness, *resigned* to their place in the world, in the social order (accepting it as a *natural* order, for example, thus buying into the ideology of ruling classes), can nevertheless have suffering attributed to them since there will be some *visible* evidence in them of the lack of fulfillment, of the experience of the world as inadequate. “Suffering” then, can be attributed to subjects on the basis of indications that point to the fact that potentials are going unrealized, or that subjects are *undergoing* a process rather than being active agents of that process. We can think of the suffering contained in the past as an expression of what objectivity has *cheated* subjects out of, and the fact that it *has* cheated them out of what they could and should become.

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[222] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 17-18

[223] Axel Honneth. "A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno's Social Theory."

This recovery of the history in concepts, the giving expression to the suffering contained in them which is, in part, the impetus for their formation, is also what gives them an orientation toward the *future;* this, in turn, is what forges the substantial

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Tr. James Ingram. *Constellations* Volume 12, no. 1 (2005), p. 50-64

[224] “A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life,” p. 60

connection between the past and the present. The ethical demand placed on the knower in relation to the suffering contained in the objects of knowledge is not satisfied simply by giving expression to this suffering. There is a further task imposed on the subject, namely, to recognize the *unfulfilled* demands and promises that are contained in this suffering. It is therefore incumbent upon the knower to recognize that suffering does not simply express something about the present in which it occurs, but it also contains a claim about the future—that the suffering and the conditions that cause it *ought not* to exist. Suffering, then, is what gives to the concept whatever in it extends beyond what exists and points to what ought to be; if it were not for the experience that things should be otherwise, that present conditions do not provide an adequate framework in which we can pursue and fulfill our rational desires, then there would be no need for this "more" in the concept, for what in it goes beyond the existing world. The nonidentity between objects and concepts does not *only* mean that general concepts must abstract from the particularities of the objects: "What is nonidentical with concepts is nonidentical not only in the sense that objects are not concepts, but also in the more emphatic sense that objects fail to realize the potential inherent in them that would make them adequate to concepts."[225] Of course the reason that human beings fail to realize these potentials is the irrational state of the objective world, which prevents them from realizing them. This, again, creates a kind of ethical bond between past and present. *Our* concepts receive their full meaning only in relation to the past struggles and suffering contained in them. The past has therefore *given* us something in these concepts, and this puts in a relation of debt to the past—if it is our task, one formulated by philosophical thought, to work toward the actualization or realization of the "more" that is contained in the concept, we do this not only for our own sake, but also for the sake of the completion of what is incomplete in the past, that is, the unfulfilled hopes and wishes of the past. There is contained in suffering a *striving* for the completion or actualization of what was desired, a completion that only we in the present (or future) can bring about. The thinking of nonidentity, then, the breaking of the reification of concepts, serves, first, to deepen our own concepts, to restore lost meaning to them, and thus to give concretion to what our tasks are for the future, or to bring them to consciousness; secondly, this also restores something to the past, insofar as what is past is no longer simply dead and gone, but still exists as something incomplete that strives for completion. This serves to create a *unity* between past and present. It is, initially, only a *negative* unity; Horkheimer and Adorno write of our "proper relationship to the dead" as constituting "that of unity with them, since we, like them, are victims of the same conditions and of the same disappointed hope."[226] What I would suggest is that this negative unity, a unity founded on suffering and disappointment, can give rise to a positive unity, one not of fulfillment, but at least a unity of active agency, of the struggle to be active *subjects* of history, with subjectivity here being conceived of as the struggle against the repressive objectivity of the historical process.

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[225] Deborah Cook. "From the Actual to the Possible: Nonidentity Thinking." *Constellations* volume 12 no. 1 (2005), p. 21-35

This restoration of the historical dimension to concepts can serve to disrupt the reified world simply by introducing something *new* into it, something that cannot be accounted for or integrated into its principles. Without this historical dimension, that is, we are left with nothing but brute fact, nothing but the pure present which must simply be accepted as the unchangeable order of the world, rather than being rejected in favor of some ideal of a better world. Adorno writes that the “[l]ack of historical consciousness is more than that: It is the forerunner of the static society in which the bourgeois principle of universal exchange and balanced accounts will triumph, and in which bourgeois rationality will reign supreme. Everything historical will be excluded from such a society. To balance accounts is to leave nothing unaccounted for; but the historical is essentially what cannot be accounted for.”[227] The historical, that is, is in a sense the nonidentical counterpart to bourgeois exchange society—first, because of the predominance of the principle of instrumentality, such that everything must serve a purpose, while the historical, by virtue of being past, has no *purpose*; second, the closed system of society, of second nature, would like to think of its present institutions and its concepts as eternal, as unchangeable facts, while the historical has the function of drawing attention to what is *unsettled*, what is incomplete and still open: thus “the elimination of the historical dimension is an important instrument for sanctioning and justifying whatever happens currently to be the case.”[228] This is what allows a particular, limited concept such as “freedom” to be taken for what freedom in itself is. The thinking of the nonconceptual and the nonidentical, which represents a counterforce against the reification of concepts by opening up the historical dimension, is ultimately a way of restoring force or power to history, of opening up a true historical consciousness and tapping into the unrealized possibilities of the past: “'All reification is forgetting,' and criticism really means the same as remembrance—that is, mobilizing in phenomena that by which they have become, and thereby recognizing the possibilities that they might have become, and could therefore be, something different."[229] The thinking of nonidentity thus releases and draws upon the undischarged power and energy that is contained in the past but that has been forgotten.

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[226] *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 178

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[227] Theodor W. Adorno. “'Static' and 'Dynamic' as Sociological Categories.,” tr. H. Krall. *Diogenes* 9:33 (1961), p. 28-49

[228] *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 149. Of course the “elimination” of the historical does not mean that there is no awareness of history, no memory. What is done away with is rather *true* historical consciousness, one with the power to question the present; what remains is only a neutralized one. One way of doing away with historical consciousness is to simply instrumentalize history, turn it into a collection of stories that can be drawn upon to justify whatever needs to be justified (we can think, for example, of comparisons of Iraq to World War II). History thus loses its true meaning since it is merely employed in the service of the present.

Adorno writes that "[t]he means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility—the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one."[230] This orientation toward possibility gives Adorno's thought (and, he would say, true thought in general) a utopian aspect, in the sense that it strives to get at a world *beyond* this one by opening up the possibilities that point toward this better world. We should note, however, that the "utopian" for Adorno does not necessarily refer to a utopian *world* beyond this one, a different order that we might bring about. Adorno's use of "utopia" is somewhat peculiar. He does not have any extended discussion of utopia in his work; the terms "utopia" and "utopian" instead are introduced into his texts at unexpected moments, often at the ends of some of his most negative, hope-crushing discussions of the reified world. It usually appears as a counterpoint to the reified world, but is not developed, or given any concrete content. If we think of "utopia" as *only* referring to a different and better world, to some indeterminate future state, then Adorno's use of the term, and its function in his writing, is open to the criticism made by Siegfried Kracauer (who will be the focus of the next chapter): "the concept of Utopia is...used by him in a purely formal way, as a borderline concept which at the end invariable emerges like a *deus ex machina*. But Utopian thought makes sense only if it assumes the form of a vision or intuition with a definite content of a sort."[231] I do not think, however, that Adorno uses "utopia" in the way that it is usually used; we should rather think of the utopian as functioning for Adorno as an *epistemological perspective*. It is the perspective, that is, that allows us to see that things are wrong; it is the "ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments."[232] It is what *makes visible* the wrongness of the world; it is the impulse behind thought that drives it to disrupt the appearance of the untrue world, that renders it *not* a meaningful whole, showing it to be lacking. We can perhaps think of this utopian perspective as the counterpart to the natural-historical perspective. While the natural-historical perspective reveals the reified state of the world, the utopian adds to this the thought of what *could* be, what *should* be; it is oriented toward the possibilities that emerge from the natural-historical perspective's fragmentation of the world, its reduction of the world to meaninglessness. The distorted, damaged state of the world, seen from the utopian perspective reveals the reverse side of that damage, namely, that things are damaged because they are *prevented* from being what they could or should be. It is a perspective then, whose ultimate aim is to make whole what has been damaged, to restore to the human world the meaning that it has been stripped of, the idea of fulfillment that is hidden because it is blocked by the present state of the world. Another way to think of the utopian is in terms of *redemption*: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption...To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought."[233] It is only the idea of a *redeemed* world that can reveal the damaged things *as* damaged. Without the thought of what things *should* look like, however vague, it would not be possible to recognize the damaged things as existing in a wrong state.

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[229] *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 150
[230] *Negative Dialectics,* p.52

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[231] Siegfried Kracauer. *History: The Last Things Before the Last.* Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1969, p. 201

[232] "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," p. 88

This utopian or redemptive perspective requires a different kind of relation between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge or interpretation, a relation based on "felt contact" with the object. To conceive of the knowing subject as autonomous in relation to its object, as standing over it in a position of superiority, is to misconceive the true and proper relation between subject and object. The kind of relation that Adorno criticizes is therefore one in which the subject imposes its concepts on objects, such that it can be said to "constitute" its object insofar as the object receives its determinations from *thought*. We have seen, however, that this is to impose a *diminished* concept on the object; it is only a subjective concept, rather than an objective one, because it does not arise out of a true experience of the object, a real contact with it. This is because the object is kept at a distance, it is seen as something other than, and inferior to, the knowing subject. At the same time, however, it seems that *some* sort of subjective constitution of the object is unavoidable—what the object *is* does not simply present itself to the subject, even a subject that is open and receptive to it. The subject must rather intervene in the object in order to *allow it* to express what it really is: "Philosophy...must, from without, imbue its objects with whatever moves them within it. What is waiting in the objects themselves needs such intervention to come to speak."[234] We saw, for example, that the *suffering* contained in the objects of knowledge may not be explicitly expressed; it is rather an interpretation that is sensitive to what the object strives to express but cannot, that allows the object itself to speak. What is crucial here, however, is that it really is the *object* that is allowed to speak, rather than it merely expressing what the thinking subject puts into it: “If thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye.”[235] True objectivity, then, would be a kind of thought that does not strive to fit objects into systems of classification, but rather one that sees through this, a thinking that disrupts these preconceived frameworks of meaning, allowing the objects to express determinations that would contradict such frameworks or systems. This is precisely what Adorno claims true “objectivity” is, but this is not recognized because the form of thought that has come to dominate the world has perverted the meanings of “subjectivity” and objectivity”:

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[233] *Minima Moralia*, p. 247

[234] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 29

> The notions of subjective and objective have been completely reversed. Objective means the non-controversial aspect of things, their unquestioned impression, the facade made up of classified data, that is, the subjective; and they call subjective anything which breaches that facade, engages the specific experience of a matter, casts off all ready-made judgments and substitutes relatedness to the object for the majority consensus of those who do not even look at it, let alone think about it—that is, the objective.[236]

The subject, then, could be said to constitute the object in a certain sense, since the object requires the subject's intervention in order for what it is to be revealed. It is a constitution, however, that aims at constituting the object, or, rather, at allowing the object to constitute *itself,* through the subjective activity of following the objects own internal tendencies and determinations, thereby *allowing* the object to appear in its truth. Thus “[k]nowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object...Subject is the agent, not the constituent, of object."[237] It is the *agent* insofar as it allows the object to speak. This, in turn, will have an effect on the *subject*. The true act of knowing, then, does not simply oppose a subject to an object—there is an *interaction* between them, in which both subject and object are affected in particular ways.

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[235] *Negative Dialectics*, p. 28

[236] *Minima Moralia*, p. 69-70

In the next two chapters I will attempt to develop these insights into the approach to the objective world that aims at restoring its possibilities, and the reciprocal relations between the objects of knowledge and the subjects, with a particular emphasis on the subject of *historical* knowledge. We will see how a new idea of history can come out of this transformed relation to historical objects, one which does justice to history's irrational course and the experiences of those subjected to this course, but which also attempts to see them as something more than mere objects of the process. I will now turn to the work of Adorno's philosophical mentor, Siegfried Kracauer, whose work we can see as providing us with a more concrete application of some of Adorno's principles that we have addressed here, and extending them to other areas of thought.

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237 *Negative Dialectics*, p. 254

Chapter 4

We have seen that for Adorno, as well as for the two authors that will be introduced in this chapter, true reconciliation between the subjective and objective worlds is blocked at the present moment in history. This is because of the principle of domination that governs the relations between the subjective and objective orders (as embodied, for example, in the exchange principle). Reconciliation is blocked by what *both* the subjective and objective realms have become: on the one hand the subject is reduced to the activity of passively registering the facts of, and adapting itself to the demands made by, the objective world. On the other hand, the objective world is the world of second nature, one not of the subject's making, and in fact hostile to the true interests of the subject. The fact that we see antagonism rather than reconciliation between these realms cannot be ascribed *either* to a deficient form of subjectivity *or* to an irrational objective world; each side is deficient, since each is the outcome of the same historical process. We could perhaps even say that the form of subjectivity that Adorno describes (following and expanding on Lukacs) is the kind of subjectivity most adequate to the rationalized objective world. That subjective activity consists of registering the facts of the world and adapting to its demands is not merely a *subjective* deficiency, since this objectivity does not in fact offer any real meaning or real possibilities for fulfillment. Any attempt to develop the possibilities that might exist for overcoming this division between the subjective and objective cannot focus only on one side or the other. Thought here must orient itself toward the *relation* between the subjective and objective, and the reciprocal effects that each has on the other. We saw in the last chapter the kind of relation between the subject and the objective world that is necessary in order to begin to overcome the division between the two. For Adorno, this relation would be found in the activity of the philosopher or the critic. With Kracauer, we can find some indications for a different relation between subjects in general (that is, *non*-philosophical subjects) and the objective world.

The bulk of this chapter will be devoted to Kracauer, whose work is productive for thinking about the relation between the subject as knower and the objective world in the present historical era. His approach has the merit, for example, of beginning from the premise that the subject has come to be alienated from the objective world, and then using this alienation itself as the means to overcoming the alienated state (or at least to thinking about *how* this state might be overcome). Kracauer's approach to the rationalized world is not foreign to the approaches of Adorno or Benjamin, to whom the next chapter will be devoted; this chapter thus serves as something of a meeting point for these three figures. In Kracauer we find a number of anticipations of Adorno's work, or in some cases even more original versions of Adorno's ideas (Kracauer's essay "The Mass Ornament," for example, articulates a version of the "dialectic of enlightenment" some fifteen years before the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). We will also see the affinities between Kracauer and Benjamin, between whom there was a mutual appreciation, as can be seen in the reviews and essays that each wrote on the other's work.[238] (Yet, strangely, neither seems to have had anything to say about the other's work on photography and film, the areas where we find perhaps the closest affinities between their writings.) The point around which I will bring these three authors together is the idea of "reawakening" the dead and reified world of second nature. What this will mean is the reawakening of the *past*, the recovery of human meanings and intentions that have been forgotten, the "charnel-house of dead interiorities" that Lukacs (at least in his earlier writings) takes to be the core element of the reified world of second nature; we began to see what this reawakening might mean in the last chapter, with Adorno's idea of the restoration and reclamation of the past through nonidentity thinking. Kracauer's work will provide some important further steps toward this aim, which will then be filled out in the next chapter with Benjamin's work. Before getting into the relevant aspects of Kracauer's work, however, I will return to Adorno's "Idea of Natural History" and the influence that Benjamin had on this formulation of Adorno's, as well as on Kracauer's work. It is Benjamin, that is, who "marks the decisive turning-point in the formulation of the problem of natural-history in that he brought the resurrection of second nature out of infinite distance into infinite closeness and made it an object of philosophical interpretation."[239] I will look briefly at the work to which Adorno is referring here, Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and the idea of natural history presented there. I will then turn to Kracauer's work, particularly his writing on photography and film, areas that occupied his thinking in one way or another for nearly fifty years. My interest in these areas will be the ways in which they embody modes of knowing or of relating to the objective world on the part of the knowing and perceiving subject. Although they are relatively limited spheres of human activity, focusing on the relation between subject and object that Kracauer finds in these spheres will reveal the implications that they have for the subject's relation to the objective world.

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[238] See Kracauer, "On the Writings of Walter Benjamin," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Tr. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, and Benjamin "Review of Kracauer's *Die Angestellten*," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 1*. Ed. Michael Jennings et al.. Tr. Rodney Livingstone et al. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999.

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[239] "The Idea of Natural History," p. 119

Adorno writes in “The Idea of Natural History” that “[t]he positions of Lukacs, Benjamin and the idea of natural-history are related in the problem of the image of the charnel-house,” this world of buried and forgotten human meanings and intentions. “For Lukacs, it is something simply puzzling; for Benjamin it is a cipher to be read. For radical natural-historical thought, however, everything existing transforms itself into ruins and fragments, into just such a charnel-house where signification is discovered, in which nature and history interweave and the philosophy of history is assigned the task of their intentional interpretation.”[240] It is this approach to the world, the kind of thought that sees the world as ruined and fragmented, rather than as forming any kind of coherent, meaningful whole, that will make possible the “reawakening” or redemption of this fragmented world. The task that the interpreter of the world is faced with is not that of simply replacing the meaning that has been lost, substituting a new meaning-system for the older meanings that are no longer experienced as binding, but rather to discover whatever meaning is possible only *out of* the ruins and fragments of the world, the world in its degraded state. It is Benjamin's theory of allegory that Adorno points to as one of the sources of the idea of natural history; although Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is concerned with an artistic genre from four hundred or so years ago, we will see the significance that it has for cognition in the present.

Allegory and Natural History

One of the central elements of Benjamin's book is his conception of the particular kind of historical experience that is expressed in the *Trauerspiel*, a dramatic genre flourishing in the early modern era. In the first part of this book, Benjamin distinguishes the *Trauerspiel* from tragedy, defending it as an authentic artistic form in its own right, with its own truth, and arguing against the view of earlier critics that it is merely a deficient form of tragedy. The crucial difference between the two, according to Benjamin, lies in the relation of each to history and temporality. The subject matter of the *Trauerspiel* is, in the words of one contemporary, "the commands of kings, killing, despair, infanticide and patricide, conflagrations, incest, war and commotion, lamentation, weeping, sighing, and suchlike."[241] On the surface, the subject matter itself does not distinguish the *Trauerspiel* from tragedy. What sets them apart, however, is that the events depicted by the *Trauerspiel* do not serve to represent some deeper truth about the world, in the way that a tragedy might portray the fall of a ruler or some other conflict in order to represent the inexorability of fate or the mythical origins of a people. The experience motivating tragedy is a *mythic* experience of the world; at the bottom of ostensibly *historical* events lies an essentially *ahistorical* experience. The historical events portrayed by the Trauerspiel, in contrast, "are not so much the subject-matter as the artistic core of the *Trauerspiel*. Historical life, as it was conceived at that time, is its content, its true object."[242] What the *Trauerspiel* reveals is the nature of the historical itself as experienced by the seventeenth century, that is, the historical as a never-ending succession of rises and falls, of violence and suffering, that lead to no further end, that fail to establish any lasting and stable order, but are merely part of a series of ultimately meaningless occurrences. The *Trauerspiel* thus sets itself in opposition to representation of the historical world as a meaningful whole in itself, or as the prelude to meaning in the world beyond: "Whereas the middle ages present the futility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German *Trauerspiel* is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition."[243]

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[240] “The Idea of Natural History,” p. 121

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[241] Cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Tr. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998, p. 62

[242] Ibid.

Although history lies at the core of these dramas, they contain at the same time, and as a result of the particular experience of history that they express, a quite different content, namely, that of *nature*, which Benjamin presents as being dialectically intertwined with history (we see, then, where Adorno gets the idea of natural history from). This dialectical experience comes out in the ways in which rulers and their actions are represented in the dramas. Depictions of the contradiction between what is expected of rulers, and their ultimate failure to fulfill these expectations, are one of the characteristic ways in which the dialectical interplay of nature and history is represented. In a time of instability and constant warfare, the function of the sovereign is to avert the "state of emergency" that is brought about by "war, revolt, or other catastrophes."[244] This understanding of sovereignty, however, inevitably serves to reinforce the dire state of the human world since the sovereign, as a mere human being, is not capable of living up to the supreme power with which he or she is invested. The sovereign is expected to *master* the events of history by maintaining or restoring order in the face of chaos. As represented in the *Trauerspiel*, however, at the moment of crisis the ruler does not exhibit the wisdom and self-control that would allow him to master these events; what comes to the fore in these moments are the ruler's passions, the "sheer arbitrariness of a constantly shifting emotional storm," often terminating in madness.[245] Unable to overcome the weakness inherent in his humanity, "he falls victim to the disproportion between the unlimited hierarchical dignity with which he is divinely invested and the humble estate of his humanity."[246]

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[243] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 81
[244] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 65

It is the representation of the historical world as a force outside of human control, to which human beings are subjected, that draws the historical world into a dialectical unity with the world of nature. The events of the *Trauerspiel*, while taking place in the human world, are *not* the result of human power and determined by human reflection and decision, but are more closely related to occurences in the natural world. We therefore see authors making "use of the techniques of blunting any tendency to ethical reflection by means of metaphorical analogies between history and the cycle of nature;"[247] for example, a person nearing her end, and for that reason particularly dangerous since this brings to the fore the irrational passions, is spoken of as "a tree about to fall." The *Trauerspiel*'s "authors had available an immense store of images by means of which they could convincingly resolve historical and ethical conflicts into the demonstrations of natural history,"[248] revealing, in the terms of Adorno's essay on natural history, those points at which what seems to be the most historical still has the structure of nature. These images from the natural world are not merely metaphors, but are expressions that point toward a deeper truth about the historical world, namely, that it is not other than nature. It should be stressed here that these expressions of the human world in terms of natural history are not merely the whims of the authors, imposed on the material of the world by subjective caprice. It is not only that history is *experienced* by subjects as natural history; the world *itself* is natural-historical. Historical events are able to be expressed in images from the natural world because history and nature, in their inner meanings, converge: "In nature [these authors] saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of this generation recognize history."[249] Both history and nature, at their core, have the character of transience; they are both processes of coming-to-be and passing away that are not guided by any higher meaning, or part of a meaningful whole. Thus the historical world finds expression in one of the characteristic allegorical images of the era: "in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head...this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious."[250] We can think, for example, of those scenes common in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art in which skeletons watch over the living as they go about their lives, mingling among the living as reminders to the viewers of their own eventual destiny, their own transience. Such images represent the convergence of nature and history—everything human is bound to fade away, decay with time, ultimately revealing the true face of the human world.

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[245] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 71
[246] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 70
[247] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 89
[248] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* p. 90

This view of the world is not simply the result of a pessimistic attitude, however, but is, again, rooted in the state of the objective world itself: "It is by virtue of a strange combination of nature and history that the allegorical mode of expression is born."[251] That is, what seems to be a purely arbitrary, subjective artistic technique, in which "[a]ny person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else,"[252] actually has its basis not in the subject, but in the nature of an objective world that is itself devoid of inherent meaning. Allegory, as characterized by Benjamin, presupposes a devalued objective world whose discrete elements do not form any coherent totality: "Allegory holds fast to ruins" of the world;[253] it "views existence, as it does art, under the sign of fragmentation and ruin."[254] The merit of Baroque allegory, its truth as an artistic form, lies in the fact that it is the form of expression most appropriate to that historical period, that is, it captures the truth of history and human activity. It is this allegorical mode of experience and expression that, under different names, is crucial not only for Benjamin, but also for Adorno and Kracauer. The allegorical mode of expression, perception, and experience of the world reveals it to consist of ruins and fragments, of failure, of stasis rather than change, nature rather than history. This is its significance for the present—the world must be seen from a perspective that fragments it, which sees it as ruins, rather than one which searches for meaning in it, or projects meanings onto it. This is the influence that Benjamin's early work exerts over his contemporaries such as Adorno and Kracauer. And it is this kind of approach, seeing the world "allegorically," or in its fragmented form, that ultimately makes possible the rescue of the meanings and the possibilities that exist within these fragments. The allegorical orientation of the subject will find its fulfillment in the attempt to "reawaken" this dead and fragmented world through the interpretation of these fragments.

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[249] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 179
[250] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166
[251] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 167

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252 Ibid.

253 Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 329 (J55,6)

254 *The Arcades Project*, p. 330 (J56a,6)

“Going through the center”

Although Kracauer's writings cover a broad range of subject matter (including philosophy, sociology, film, literature, history, etc.), what ties these disparate writings together is his constant concern with the subject's place in the rationalized world, the development and advance of which has destroyed traditional frameworks of meaning. Kracauer sees the twentieth-century world as lacking the social or religious meanings that had been available to people of earlier times. His understanding of the kind of world that has been created by capitalist rationality, and the position of the subject within this commodified world, is given concise expression in his 1926 essay “Analysis of a City Map.” In this essay Kracauer finds the conflicting tendencies of the age embodied in the physical configuration of the city of Paris. He contrasts the commodified world of the city center to the world at the outskirts of the city, in which he sees the traces of an earlier form of life. He writes of the “humaneness” of life in the faubourgs, a life that “contains remnants of a natural life which give this existence some fulfillment.”[255] While life away from the city center has not, of course, escaped the development of the rationalized capitalist world, Kracauer nonetheless describes it as one in which traces of the proper relations between things can still be found: objects exist for the satisfaction of human needs, rather than human beings existing for the sake of the production and consumption of objects. It is a world of commodities, but the character of the objects for sale is determined by their usefulness to human life. For example, a sinister-looking kitchen utensil becomes a kind of fairytale helper at the service of the household: “the needy character of the environment has put it in a friendly mood and has transformed a mechanical bee into a harmless house goblin that takes care of preparing the meals and is good to the children."[256] To the extent that objects are subservient to human needs and desires, the proper order of the world can be found here.

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[255] “Analysis of a City Map,” in *The Mass Ornament*, p. 41

This fairytale world is not, however, presented as an available alternative to the rationalized world of capitalist society. Kracauer's description of life at the periphery of the city has a melancholy quality about it; this world is determined not only by its humaneness, but also by its imminent disappearance. This world provides a glimpse into a ghostly *past* which obtrudes anachronistically into the present. Kracauer recognizes that this kind of life is no longer fully available to the city-dweller: the possibilities that it offers for a humane life are destined to be wiped out by the further advance of the commodified world, an inevitability that determines this life as nothing more than a remnant of something past. There is therefore something shabby about this fading and faded world. Rather than truly being a fairytale world of fulfillment, "whatever is on hand" in the shops and at the street fairs is "limited and modest and somewhat vague, like bad photographs;" the faubourgs "are lacking in good fortune, in sensory splendor."[257] Clinging to this form of life means forgoing the splendor that is produced by commodity society, while the embrace of commodity society would mean the end of this traditional form of life.

Since this world is only a remnant, briefly standing out in contrast to the rationalized world before giving way to it, the truth of the era is found not on the outskirts of the city but rather at the city center, where commodities are on display in all of their glory: "[p]eople of every class are free to lose themselves for entire afternoons, contemplating the jewelry, furs, and evening attire whose unambiguous magnificence beckons promisingly at the end of dime novels."[258] The "splendor" that exists only vaguely at the periphery here comes into its own. What this splendor lacks, however, is humanity; objects exist for their own sake rather than for the sake of serving human life. Even the lights that allow the commodities to be on display at all times "have gathered for their own pleasure, instead of shining for man."[259] The city center, where the commodified world fully blossoms, is a world of glamor and of constant activity, but these are devoid of any human meaning or purpose. Kracauer, like Adorno, takes this to be the defining characteristic of the rationalized capitalist world; there is an inversion of means and ends, such that the human being, with its needs and interests, is not taken as the *end* of the capitalist world. Kracauer makes this explicit in "The Mass Ornament," where he writes that "the *Ratio* of the capitalist economic system is not reason itself but a murky reason. Once past a certain point, it abandons the truth in which it participates," this truth being the advance beyond merely natural life. "*It does not encompass man*. The operation of the production process is not regulated according to man's needs, and man does not serve as the foundation of the structure of the socioeconomic organization."[260]

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[256] "Analysis of a City Map," p. 42

[257] Ibid.

My interest in this short piece lies not so much in its juxtaposition of different forms of life, but rather in Kracauer's suggestion of the path to be taken in the attempt to restore or redeem the humanity of the world. The fading remnants of life at the periphery ultimately cannot be preserved; they will inevitably succumb to the dominant forces of the historical era. Hope for a restoration of humanity lies, therefore, not in a conservative attempt to cling to these remnants, but rather in the distorted world of the city center itself. This is the paradoxical conclusion that Kracauer draws in this piece—the hope for a humane world, if there is any, lies precisely in those aspects of the world that are *devoid* of human meanings, that banish humanity as part of their very principle. The final sentence of this essay can be taken as programmatic for the rest of Kracauer's work (and for Adorno and Benjamin as well): "the streets that lead to the center must be traveled, for its emptiness today is real."[261] That is, an abstract criticism of the rationality embodied in the city center, of its falseness and inhumanity, is not sufficient to combat this inhumanity; this world cannot simply be *rejected*, since it *is* in fact the world that exists for us today. The philosopher or cultural critic must, in a sense, allow him or herself to be swept up into the course of the rationalized development, and must immerse him or herself in the dominant rationality as it is embodied in its concrete products and forms of life. As Inka Mulder-Bach writes, "the social substance that has survived at the periphery can be saved only by penetrating this surface of the center and not by turning away from it in a naïve affirmation of anachronistic cultural values."[262] Kracauer's approach will therefore be to *embrace* (though not uncritically) the products of rationalization (photography and film for example). Although he does not want to provide an apology for the system that is responsible for bringing these products into being, he approaches these objects in his writings from the perspective of the possibilities that they offer for a changed world, the potentials that lie undeveloped within them, rather than seeing them as little more than extensions and reinforcements of the rationalized world (as Adorno often does). From Kracauer's perspective, if any possibilities still exist for a truly human world, they must be found *in*, rather than in

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[258] "Analysis of a City Map," p. 43

[259] Ibid.

[260] Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament,* p. 81

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[261] "Analysis of a City Map," p. 44

[262] Inka Mulder-Bach. "History as Autobiography: The Last Things Before the Last." *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991), p. 139-57

opposition to, the emptiness of the dominant form of life. This of course assumes, and herein lies the gamble at the heart of Kracauer's work, that the dominant form of life and its products are not *actually* devoid of human meaning. If this were the case, if the products of the rationalized world really are *only* hostile to true humanity, then immersing oneself in the products of this world would result in nothing more than a surrender to it, a capitulation to the inhumane rationality of the historical process.[263] I will now turn to some of his writings on the products of rationalization, in order to see what kind of possibilities or hidden meanings lie in these products, awaiting a possible actualization.

Photography and memory

Kracauer's account of the development and spread of photography in the nineteenth century places it firmly within the context of the rationalization of the world and the diminished form of subjectivity corresponding to this process. It was, according to Kracauer, the realist or "positivist" tendencies of the age that led to photography's popularity. Photography, as a technology peculiarly appropriate to a (sometimes naïve) realist view of the world "appeared at a time when the ground was well prepared for it;" its "inherent realist tendency...owed much to the vigor with which the forces of realism bore down on the romantic movement of the period. In nineteenth-century France the rise of photography coincided with the spread of positivism—an intellectual attitude rather than a philosophical school which...discouraged metaphysical speculation in favor of a scientific approach, and thus was in keeping with the ongoing process of industrialization.”[264] This “positivistic” attitude can be thought of in terms of Adorno's description of the rationalized subject: a recorder of facts, permeated in its everyday attitude and approach to the world by an abstract, scientistic attitude. Many people therefore saw this new technology as promising because of its ability to capture the world as it “really” is; photography, that is, was seen as capable of capturing a world purified of the arbitrary additions made by the perceiving subject, or of the meanings added to the world by artistic representation. It was therefore a technology in line with thought's “enlightened” tendencies. The camera allows the world to be seen more accurately, and it makes *more* of the world visible, capturing images not normally accessible to the human eye. The subject itself, with all of the negative connotations given to “subjectivity” by a naïve realism, could thus be eliminated from the process of observation, and replaced by the purely objective lens of the camera.

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[263] Adorno suggests that Kracauer's work does in fact tend toward resignation. See Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," in *Notes to Literature, volume two.* Tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992

Kracauer's 1927 essay “Photography” contains his earliest attempt to come to terms with the significance of this technology. As in the “City Map” essay, he organizes this piece around the contrast between opposing “worlds”: the “photographic” world, which comes into being as the result of rational technological developments, and the world of “memory.” These worlds represent conflicting ways of *knowing* the world that we inhabit, different ways of organizing the facts and events of the world outside of the subject. What characterizes photography's relation to the world is the way in which its images simply present a collection of *facts* about the world; photography records moments in time, stripped of any significance beyond their having existed as a spatial

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264 Siegfried Kracauer. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 5

configuration at a given moment. Of course, a person taking a photograph does not think of the medium in this way—the photographer does not see him or herself as merely cataloging the moments that have existed, but rather as recording a significant moment, person, or object. Kracauer's claim seems to be, however, that the *essence* of photographic activity is this drive to record moments in time simply for the sake of recording them—any further meanings that inhere in, or are attached to the photograph, are incidental to its essential drive or tendency. This is because the essence of photography, according to Kracauer, is to avoid making distinctions between the essential and inessential, the meaningful and the insignificant; it merely strives to reproduce the world as it appears. If there is a meaning attached to a photograph, this does not come from the camera itself, which cannot help but capture countless inessential elements along with its intended target (we can contrast this to a work of art, which contains *nothing* inessential or accidental—every detail is included by the artist for a reason).[265] This tendency toward the indiscriminate reproduction of the world can, I think, be seen even more clearly today than at the time in which Kracauer wrote this essay. Today we see a mania for creating photographic documentation of nearly aspect of life, a mania made possible by, and in turn reinforced by, the ready availability of photographic technology (think how many of us have the means to take a picture at any given moment with the cameras on our cell phones). This reproduction of the spatial configurations of the world becomes an end in itself without any claim to meaning *beyond* being the mere photographic record of moments in time.[266]

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[265] Of course a photograph can be staged in a way such that there is no accidental detail, nothing that the photographer does not want in the picture; Kracauer would claim, however, that this represents a departure from the nature of the medium, such that it could be said to no longer be truly *photographic*.

[266] This tendency could, I believe, be connected to another tendency that authors such as Adorno and

Even if we accept Kracauer's characterization of the photographic tendency, there is still the question of what implications this tendency might have for subjectivity. After all, our subjective activity extends well beyond that of taking or viewing photographs. Kracauer does not make this claim, but I think that we could extend his characterization of photography beyond this sphere and ascribe to subjectivity itself the features that Kracauer ascribes to photography, such that subjects could be described as "photographic" subjects. Subjectivity itself can be seen as taking on the determinations that Kracauer ascribes to photography, such as the indiscriminate recording of moments in time, the failure to distinguish between the essential and inessential, etc. Such an idea finds support in Adorno's idea of the diminished nature of the subject in the rationalized world, with the subject's role being reduced to merely registering the facts of the world and accepting them at face value, in order to adapt to the world. What I mean by the "photographic subject" may become clearer if we look at the approach to the world that Kracauer contrasts to photography. Memory, in the sense in which Kracauer uses the term in this essay, has the aim of creating meaningful totalities. It does not indiscriminately preserve anything and everything. Each item that is preserved or reproduced in memory is there because it contributes to a meaningful whole, and in turn derives its meaning from that whole. Memory is an integrative process, unlike the additive process of photography. We have, then, two different ways in which the subject can assimilate the objective world: "[a]n individual retains memories because they are personally significant. Thus, they are organized according to a principle which is essentially different from the organizing principle of photography...From the latter's

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Benjamin find in the rationalized world, namely, the tendency for meaningful communication to be replaced by the imparting of information. Here too, brute facts take precedence over meaning.

perspective, memory images appear to be fragments—but only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments. Similarly, from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage."[267] The photographic approach sees memory as fragmentary, as incomplete precisely because memory must make selections, must leave things out for the sake of the integrity of the whole. From the perspective of photography, therefore, the memory-whole cannot be an accurate picture of the world, while from the perspective of memory, the photographic record of the world is confused because its indiscriminate collection of images resists any attempt to integrate them into a meaningful whole.

In making this distinction between photography and memory, Kracauer wants to claim that this photographic approach to the objective world has in the twentieth century come to encroach upon, and even replace, the memory-oriented approach. It cannot be denied, of course, that we *have* memories (our time even seems to display something of an obsession with memory). I think that to make sense of Kracauer's claim here, we need to say, not that memory *itself* has been replaced by a different way of relating to the world, but rather that memory has come to take on a different quality. The kind of memory displayed by the contemporary subject could be described as a "photographic" memory, that is, as a memory that records events in the past just as indiscriminately as the camera records moments in space, retaining anything and everything without integrating them into a meaning-governed whole. The events recorded in memory become "photographic" insofar as memory comes to represent these events as discrete elements, as a mere *succession* of incidents and events, rather than determining them in relation to an overarching meaning. Memory records periods of life succeeding one another, periods that are perhaps separated by abrupt transitions, rather than exhibiting a meaningful continuity, even in change. The reasons for this change in memory would have to be traced to the nature of the contemporary world, which I will say more about below. For now, we should keep in mind that “photography” and “photographic” can refer not only to a subjective attitude toward the objective world, but also to the way in which the subject might relate to his or her past.

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[267] "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament*, p. 50-51

In Kracauer's account, photography and memory are not simply two *different* approaches to the world; he describes photography as being *hostile* to memory. Photography does not merely refrain from creating meaning, but actually comes to *replace* the meaning-creating memory-activity. Kracauer writes that “[n]ever before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense,”[268] a claim that is likely more true of our time than it is of Kracauer's. The result of this “being informed” is that “the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. The assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits.”[269] Just as the human life at the periphery of the city is swept away by the advance of the rationalized and commodified world, so is the life that creates meaningful wholes out of the data and events of the world swept away by the mass of information with which one is confronted. The subject's energy is devoted to absorbing this mass of information, rather than assimilating it into a whole. Again, however, it will not do to trace this mode of subjectivity to a deficiency in the *subject*; what subjective activity has become says something about the state of the objective world as well.

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[268] “Photography,” p. 58

[269] Ibid.

The “photographic face” of the world

In the first part of this essay, Kracauer compares photography unfavorably to memory; it is presented as a product of rationalization that serves to further the dissolution of the world into meaningless fragments. It would not be realistic, however, for Kracauer to simply suggest that at this point we need to somehow reclaim memory, through some kind of abstract negation of the tendency embodied in photographic technology. Although his language at times seems to suggest as much, it cannot really be maintained that this technology is *responsible* for the breakdown of memory, for the ever-diminishing ability to construct meaningful wholes out of our world. Photography has not *created* the situation in which real memory is no longer possible; it is only an expression or manifestation of an objective tendency that has *already* given rise to a world in which the meaningful whole that memory creates is not available to subjects. Although Kracauer does not stress this in the “Photography” essay, it is the objective world itself that has changed in such a way that subjects can no longer approach this world as they once did. Photography does not negate memory, but is rather what fills the void when memory is no longer possible.

For an explanation as to why memory, in Kracauer's sense, is no longer possible, we should recall Adorno's account of historical development and the subject's place in it. With the advancing rationalization of the world, the subject comes to experience the objective world as alien, as something not of its own making. Given this antagonistic relation between the subject and the objective world, it becomes increasingly difficult for the subject to experience him or herself as the master of his or her fate, as a true protagonist of his or her life story. The life of the individual comes increasingly to be determined by forces weighing down on it from the outside. This points to the inability to *experience* the world in any meaningful sense, a pathology of the modern world that appears repeatedly in the work of Adorno and Benjamin. Benjamin, looking at the events of the early twentieth century, writes that "never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power."[270] The experiences of the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, centuries have forcefully driven home the point that one is subject *to* the social, political, and economic process, rather than being the subject *of* these processes. These processes have achieved such an independence from individual subjects that they govern our lives, yet cannot be integrated into an experience that is truly the subject's *own*. The individual subject, that is, is simply not adequate to the immensity of the forces that stand over it. A subjective approach to the world that documents fragmented incidents and events without assimilating them into a unified whole, an approach that records one's own life as a succession of events that, to a significant extent, happen *to* the individual, does not indicate a merely *subjective* deficiency, but is rather a reflection of the objective tendencies of the historical process. Because of this, it could be said that the subject who experiences the world as a fragmented collection of data, as a series of events without a unified meaning, is actually experiencing the world *accurately*. This "photographic" subjectivity, then, does not simply destroy a more "authentic" subjective relation to the world, but rather shows the world as it has come to be.

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[270] Walter Benjamin. "The Storyteller," in *Selected Writings*, *volume three*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Tr. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2002, p. 144

What begins as a lament over the form that subjectivity has come to take in the modern world can now be seen to provide the means for a criticism of the kind of *objective* world that has arisen. The significance of photography for Kracauer lies not only in the way in which the subject comes to *receive* the world; it also serves to *reveal* what the world has become: the objective world itself is a collection of moments without an overarching or unifying human meaning. Thus Kracauer writes that "the world itself has taken on a 'photographic face;' it can be photographed because it strives to be absorbed into the spatial continuum which yields to snapshots."[271] Representing the world as a collection of discrete moments does not falsify it, but rather reveals its truth. It is no longer a matter only of the subject *representing* the world "photographically;" the world itself has become particularly amenable to being approached in this way.

If this is the case, then memory in Kracauer's sense is not only no longer possible, but representing the world in this way would actually result in a *falsification* of the world. A supposedly meaningful whole would be a *false* totality, and its creation would represent an attempt to *flee* from the reality of the fragmented world in order to avoid confronting it in its truth. Creating a story of one's life, for example, in which one is represented as a true subject, controlling one's destiny rather than being subjected to external forces that determine one's fate would be just as false as the meaningful *historical*

whole created by Hegel. It is with this recognition of the state of the objective world that we can begin to see the *productive* aspects of "photographic" subjectivity. First, it is productive (at least negatively) insofar as it can serve to disrupt *false* totalities of meaning. Photography “bursts asunder the false semblance of a purportedly significant history and leads us to an 'inert world,' a 'world of the dead' that exists completely independently of human beings.”[272] Through this indiscriminate cataloging of details, we are prevented from prematurely imposing a meaning on the world. We are left, rather, with nothing other than these fragments, these discrete details and moments in time.

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[271] "Photography," p. 59

Photography and ruins

The question at this point is, where is the “redemptive” potential in the representation of the fragments of the world? The answer lies in the fact that this world of ruins, of details and events that are not connected by any overarching human meaning, makes a kind of *claim* on the one who is confronted with them. Kracauer has certainly not given up on the search for meaning in the world, but meaning can only be arrived at through a confrontation with the world in its fragmented state. Although the photographic approach to the world tends to dissolve wholes, or to prevent them from being formed in the first place, it also has what we might see as a hidden tendency, one which reveals itself in the confrontation between the subject and the photographic data of the world.

This hidden tendency can be seen in Kracauer's description of what happens in looking at a photograph. He uses the example of people seeing an old photograph of their grandmother. The viewers of this photograph “laugh, and at the same time they shudder. For through the ornamentation of costumes from which the grandmother has disappeared, they think they glimpse a moment of time past, a time that passes without return."[273] There is, then, the experience of the foreignness of what is presented in the image. The viewer is confronted with something unfamiliar, the person that they thought they knew, pictured in an unfamiliar context and dressed in the strange fashions of the time. The memory-image that they had of the person is disrupted by the strangeness of this "moment of time past;" aside from the person represented, the photograph also reveals the *pastness* of that moment. This disruption of the memory of the person who was once familiar, through the representation of details that do not belong to the viewer's memory-image, results in a further dissolution of what is pictured; rather than persisting in the fullness of its meaning, as this person who we thought we knew, the image is resolved into its elements: "The smile is arrested yet no longer refers to the life from which it has been taken;" the woman in the photograph becomes nothing more than "an archaeological mannequin which serves to illustrate the costumes of the period."[274] The viewer is left with an experience of the strange details of this past moment, rather than with the experience of a moment in a unified human life. Photography thus reveals the *discontinuity* of the details that it presents, serving to alienate the viewer, to call into question what he or she thought they knew about the person pictured.

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[272] Gertrude Koch. *Siegfried Kracauer: an Introduction*. Tr. Jeremy Gaines. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 101

This alienation, the revelation of the foreignness of what was once familiar and accepted, is perhaps more forcefully illustrated by Kracauer's description of a viewer being confronted with aspects of one's *own* past. He describes the experience of viewing a film that depicts an era which one has lived through, pointing to the

> peculiar, often traumatic effect of films resuscitating that period...[Films] explore patterns of custom and fashion which we once accepted unquestioningly. Now that they resume life on the screen, the spectator cannot help laughing at the ridiculous hats, overstuffed rooms, and obtrusive gestures impressed upon him by the veracious camera.

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[273] "Photography," p. 49

[274] "Photography," p. 48

> As he laughs at them he is bound to realize, shudderingly, that he has been spirited away into the lumber room of his private self. He himself has dwelt, without knowing it, in those interiors; he himself has blindly adopted the conventions which now seem naïve or cramped to him. In a flash the camera exposes the paraphernalia of our former existence, stripping them of the significance which originally transfigured them so that they changed from things in their own right into invisible conduits.[275]

What is revealed in this experience is precisely the *discontinuity* of one's own life and the world that one has inhabited. This world bears similarities to a second nature, as evidenced by the experience of alienation when being confronted with a representation of it. The photographic record resolves this world into its elements that, in retrospect, cannot be embraced as meaningful, and must be disavowed precisely because of its strangeness, its lack of meaningful connection to the present. Thus, corresponding to the objective presentation of a fragmented and discontinuous world is a *subjective* alienation. "Alienation" in Kracauer's work does not have only negative connotations; it has a productive function as well. It is the subjective mode that allows the subject to confront the world *as* alien, as a collection of unconnected fragments. What is accomplished by photography is a shift in perspective, since the subject cannot help but be drawn to the strangeness of what was once familiar: "a shudder runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original, but the spatial configuration of a moment: what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her."[276] The person serves merely as a "mannequin," a prop supporting obsolete fashions. What is revealed through these obsolete details is transience; photographs that are intended to serve as a support for memory, that are supposed to gather past elements into the present by virtue of the

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275 *Theory of Film*, p. 56

276 "Photography," p. 56-57

meanings contained in them, play the opposite role and merely display what once was but is no longer, and their alienating effect allows the viewer to experience them *as* being no longer, as moments that have come and gone.

The question remains, however, how this presentation of the transience of the elements of the human world, and the ensuing subjective alienation, can point toward the *redemption* of this alienated world. If photography's function is to reveal this transient world of second nature, how can it contribute to *restoring* meaning to a world that has been revealed to have none? The role of “alienation” in Kracauer's work reveals another affinity between his work and Benjamin's. Alienation, for Kracauer, is closely related to the subjective state of *melancholy*; it is melancholy that produces the experience of alienation. For Benjamin, the state of melancholy is closely related to the “redemption” of the alien world of things. Melancholy, which involves a turning away from the world, a withdrawal, a putting the world at a distance from the subject, “betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them.”[277] One is no longer immersed in the world, and this makes possible an immersion in *things*, precisely because of the withdrawal from the world of *action*. Alienation, for Kracauer, performs a similar function; it allows the subject to separate itself from the world, to set it at a distance, which makes it possible to see it anew, without being burdened by the everyday meanings that things have accumulated, and the unreflective preconceptions that we bring to things. The alienation of subjects that is the result of the objective world thus makes it possible to see the world from the “allegorical” perspective, in a sense, which in turn allows *unresolved* or unfulfilled meanings in the world to become visible.

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[277] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 157

What is decisive in the confrontation with moments from the past is that the discontinuous, fragmented elements presented in the photograph are not *only* past. If they were simply past, then they would not have the power to disturb the viewer. These elements can provoke a disturbing experience in the viewer because they also impinge on the present. We cannot simply be done with this past moment and its meaningless contents; alongside the alienation provoked by the newly-unfamiliar world, the viewer will also be struck by the fact that these discarded moments still have something to say. That is, they *strive* to be meaningful, they make some sort of claim on the subject to recognize them as something *more than* their obsolescence. The elements of the objective world, for Kracauer, are not simply mute things; he ascribes to *objects* a desire to enter into a meaningful relation to human life. In the "City Map" essay, for example, he writes of the beautiful commodities on display that "anyone whom they might have would be the last to possess them."[278] The *commodities* themselves want to be a part of the human world through being used, through adorning a human being, but, in the case of the commodities on display, those who would be capable of entering into a meaningful relation with these objects, those who perhaps have not been fully rationalized and initiated into the commodified world, are the least likely to be able to afford them. Objects are therefore just as little fulfilled as are subjects. To understand what Kracauer is getting at with this somewhat strange claim, we should keep in mind that the material objects of the human world are not simply pieces of raw nature, but are rather *human* creations; they are repositories of human desires and intentions. It is in the nature of objects that they are *intended* to serve the human world, to improve it, even if this is not the purpose behind the production of objects as commodities. Even in a commodified society, however, this characteristic of objects remains, although in hidden form. We can therefore read Kracauer as conceiving of the objective world of second nature as being not *merely* dead; it also wants to be brought (back) to life. Thus the old dress that the grandmother wears in the old photograph "is recognized as a cast-off remnant that wants to continue to hold its ground. It dissolves into the sum of its details, like a corpse, yet stands tall as if full of life."[279] Something in the object wants to persist, despite its essential transience.

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[278] "Analysis of a City Map," p. 43

That these objects and images from the past can become something *more than* past, that they can make some sort of claim to being alive, can be ascribed to their belonging to a special category of past objects, that is, they are *ruins*. Kracauer writes that "[t]he tightly corseted dress in the photograph protrudes into our time like a mansion from earlier days that is destined for destruction because the city center has been moved to another part of town...It is only the very old traditional dress, a dress which has lost all contact with the present, that can attain the beauty of a ruin."[280] What seems to characterize the "ruin," as some piece of the past that impinges on the present, is that it has a status somewhere between "past" and "present," displaying features of both categories, but belonging to neither. We might describe the status of the ruin as "once-present," indicating that it is more than a leftover from an earlier time; it is also an embodiment of the desires, hopes, and wishes of the past, a past that *desired* and strove for permanence, but was not able to persist because it had to succumb to the movement of the historical process, just as the mansion succumbs to the movement of the city center. The ruin thus stands as a reminder of the *unfulfilled* wishes and desires of the past. It can neither be forgotten, since it obtrudes into the present as a reminder of its failure, nor can it be incorporated into a meaningful history, since the meaning that it had in its own time is, for us, absent or incomplete. Rather than being part of history, the ruin serves to *disrupt* history, by virtue of its reminding the present of its unfulfilled claim; we cannot be finished with it because the "ghost-like reality [of the ruin] is *unredeemed*."[281] There is a claim that is made on the present to redeem the past, that is, to restore meaning to it, to allow these elements from the past to find their place within a meaningful whole. The photographic orientation toward the world, therefore, not only allows us to recognize the unredeemed nature of these elements of the past, but also presents us with a task: "if the remnants of nature are not oriented toward the memory image, then the order they assume through the image is necessarily provisional. It is therefore incumbent upon consciousness to establish the *provisional status* of all given configurations, and perhaps even to awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature."[282] The fragments with which we are confronted, the brute facts of second nature that the human world is revealed to be through the photographic approach, must somehow be put back together, must be integrated into the "valid organization of things."[283]

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[279] "Photography," p. 55

[280] Ibid.

This task of finding meaning in the fragments of the world, of striving to create some kind of whole out of these discontinuous elements, carries with it the demands that consciousness orient itself toward a particular object of knowledge. The photographic approach is *not* oriented toward the same objective world that memory or history are. The photograph does not capture the objects that memory or history does; rather, it

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281 "Photography," p. 56
282 "Photography," p. 62
283 "Photography," p. 63

"captures only the residuum that history has discharged."[284] What the photograph records, although without being aware of it, are those elements of the objective world that would not have been integrated into memory or history, that is, the (supposedly) inessential details of the world in which we live. It is to this "residuum," the "sediment" of the historical world, that attention must be directed. The restoration of meaning to the world requires that thinking immerse itself in this world of the "inessential," since it is what is left to thought once the world has been stripped of the substantial meanings that are the objects of memory and history. Thought must (at least for the present) forgo the search for ultimate meanings to replace the ones that the world has been stripped of, and immerse itself in the unredeemed world of second nature. This is, I believe, the thought behind Kracauer's seemingly extravagant claim that "[t]he turn to photography is the *go-for-broke game* of history."[285] I do not think that the medium of photography itself can be said to possess the tremendous import for human history that Kracauer here ascribes to it; rather, we should think of "photography" here in the expanded sense that I have been trying to give it, that is, as a subjective orientation toward the world. This shift in orientation constitutes a "go-for-broke game" because it involves the renunciation of the search for ultimate meaning that has traditionally characterized philosophical activity[286] and taking the risk that an orientation toward the inessential, the ruins and detritus of the world, is the correct path to restoring meaning to the human world and to the human past.

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[284] "Photography," p. 55

[285] "Photography," p. 61

[286] Kracauer takes up this issue in his final book, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, especially in the final chapter.

Film and redemption

Over the decades following the "Photography" essay, Kracauer never abandoned this view of how the critical subject should approach the world, and the object to which it should orient itself. We find a similar position, although expanded upon, almost forty years later, in his *Theory of Film*. We can see this in his response to Paul Valery's criticism of film; Valery "insists that, because of its exclusive concern for the exterior world, film prevents us from attending to the things of the mind."[287] Film, this extension of photographic technology, captures only the fleeting and transient, the superficial and inessential, thereby preventing an orientation toward permanent and substantial meaning. (We should see in this criticism the similarity to the way that Kracauer had originally characterized the relation between photography and memory in the "Photography" essay.) Kracauer of course does not agree with Valery's criticism, as he sees film as a continuation, a next step, in the task that photography had presented for us. Valery's "argument would be tenable...only if the beliefs, ideas, and values that make up inner life occupied today the same position of authority they occupied in the past...Then indeed we might with justice condemn the cinema for alienating us from the higher objectives within our reach. But are they? But can it really be said that the relations between the inner universe and physical reality remain at all times essentially the same?...Perhaps, contrary to what Valery assumes, there is no short-cut to the evasive contents of inner life...Perhaps the way to them, if way there is, leads through the experience of surface reality? Perhaps film is a gate rather than a dead end or a mere diversion?"[288]

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[287] *Theory of Film*, p. 286

[288] Ibid.

Because film has developed out of photography, Kracauer claims that it shares the same tendencies and has similar functions. If the revelation of the human world as fragmented and ruined is accomplished by photography, then film should have this same tendency, while also going further. It is in film that Kracauer attempts to uncover a means to reconnecting the human being with what it has lost. Whereas photography contributes to the *disintegration* of the world that we thought was familiar to us, film is the technology that attempts to put these elements back together in a meaningful way. (Kracauer's idea of what film can accomplish is revealed in the subtitle of his book: "The *Redemption* of Physical Reality.") Miriam Hansen writes that "[i]f photography reflects the detritus of history in mere disorder, film has the possibility of advancing this disorder" by rearranging the material elements that are recorded, and reconfiguring the elements of the world as they appear to us; "film's capabilities of displacement and disjunction, of figuration and disfiguration, harbor a utopian possibility, true to the Messianic tradition."[289] Film has the ability to move toward the utopian (or messianic) "valid organization of things" that Kracauer had postulated as the task of thought in the "Photography" essay.

Film represents an advance over photography insofar as it has the ability to *reconfigure* the elements of the objective world. Benjamin's thoughts on this power of film are instructive here. That the camera person is referred to as a "camera *operator*" leads him to consider another kind of "operator," the surgeon. He contrasts the work of the surgeon to the work of a healing magician: the magician "reduces [the distance between himself and the person treated] slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient's body."[290] The painter, in representing reality, is analogous to the magician, as the painter "maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue."[291] It is this penetration that Kracauer sees as constituting the power of film, and the possibilities that it offers to the subject in its relation to the objective world, that is, in its attempt to overcome the separation between the two, the alienation of the subject from the objective, physical world.

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[289] Miriam Hansen. "Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture." *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991), p. 47-76

Although Kracauer's concerns in *Theory of Film* are largely continuous with those in "Photography," there is a shift in emphasis, or a different way of approaching the issues. In this later work, Kracauer examines the ways in which film can contribute to reconnecting human beings with the physical and material world from which we have been estranged. This estrangement is the result of "the rise of modern mass society and the concomitant disintegration of beliefs and cultural traditions."[292] These earlier systems of belief and meaning have given way to the forces that Adorno identified, particularly in his writings of the 1940s: the advance of the scientific worldview, and the ways in which it has come to condition even everyday thinking and perceiving. Our world is characterized primarily by its "abstractness": "Most sciences do not deal with the objects of ordinary experience but abstract from them certain elements which they then process in various ways. Thus the objects are stripped of their qualities."[293] What film can

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290 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings, volume four*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Tr. Edmund Jephcott et al. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2003, p. 263

291 Ibid.

292 *Theory of Film*, p. 169

293 *Theory of Film*, p. 292

accomplish is the disruption of the subject's abstract experience of the material world, leading the subject to reconnect with the material world and its *qualities*: “The remedy for the kind of abstractness which befalls the mind under the impact of science is experience—the experience of things in their concreteness.”[294] We can see the significance of attempting to counteract abstractness with concreteness if we recall the connection that Adorno makes between abstract, quantifying thought and *domination*. Kracauer claims that film is particularly suited for, and particularly drawn to, the material aspects of our everyday life that go unnoticed because of the prevailing “abstractness” of our world.

The way that film draws the viewer toward the neglected material world is by alienating the viewer from the everyday world that we inhabit and have come to take for granted, that is, the world as it conforms to our habitual (abstract) modes of thought and perception. The way in which the film camera captures the physical world thus serves the cause of subjective alienation in getting the viewer to relinquish those preconceived frameworks through which the world is seen and experienced. Kracauer's “tenacious insistence on the priority of physical reality has above all a negative meaning, that is, to negate the principle of self-assertion in the subject.”[295] The film camera, that is, does not simply *record* the physical world; just as important, if not more so, is its other function, that of *revealing* the physical world that goes unnoticed. Kracauer's account of film is therefore not the naively realist one that it might at first seem to be. He stresses the precedence that the filmmaker's “realist” tendencies should take over the “formative” tendencies, but this is not because Kracauer thinks that film should simply reproduce our world, functioning as a mirror that show us the world as we already know it. He stresses the importance of "realism" in film, but this is precisely because the "real" world of concrete physical reality is *not* our world; we have rather come to inhabit the *abstract* world of the scientific attitude. Thus, among the objects that film is properly oriented toward, Kracauer includes "phenomena which figure among the blind spots of the mind," which "habit and prejudice prevent us from noticing."[296] Among these "blind spots" he includes the "refuse" of the world, the revelation of which allows the viewer to experience things that we tend to overlook because of their apparent insignificance: "Many objects remain unnoticed simply because it never occurs to us to look their way...what we ordinarily prefer to ignore proves attractive to [films] precisely because of this common neglect;" a film may "offer the camera ample opportunity to satisfy its inborn curiosity and function as a rag-picker."[297] Kracauer uses the example (which has, I think, become a film cliché by now) of the "contrast between glamorous festivities and their dreary aftermath," that is, the juxtaposition of a party or celebration with its trash-strewn remnants after it has ended. Film is in this way capable of drawing our attention to elements of human activity that are usually neglected, and that can give a new or changed meaning to that activity.

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[294] *Theory of Film*, p. 296

[295] Heide Schlupmann. “The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer's *Theory of Film*.” Tr. Jeremy Gaines. *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991), p. 111-126

The significance of these characteristics of film is that they bring about some sort of subjective reaction within the viewer. Beyond alienating the viewer from the familiar everyday world, film can help to bring about new subjective feelings or attitudes toward the material world that is presented in film. The human being, Kracauer points out, is essentially a *physical* being, rooted in the concrete physical world; there is an essential

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296 *Theory of Film*, p. 53

297 Ibid.

connection between the two, despite the abstraction that has covered over this part of our nature. Thus Kracauer writes of the “psychophysical correspondences” that exist between the objective world presented on film and the subject to whom this world is revealed. The physical world may be alien to the subject, but this world is nonetheless imbued with subjective meanings and intentions: “Natural objects...are surrounded with a fringe of meanings liable to touch off various moods, emotions, runs of inarticulate thoughts; in other words, they have a theoretically unlimited number of psychological and mental correspondences. Some such correspondences may have a real foundation in the traces which the life of the mind often leaves in material phenomena; human faces are molded by inner experiences, and the patina of old houses is a residue of what has happened in them.”[298] The viewer, therefore, will not simply experience the aspects of physical reality as brute facts, but will rather experience *through them* their human significance, and the traces of human life that can be found in them. If a film deals with, for example, an injustice, it does not do so at an abstract or conceptual level; it will be presented through some presentation of physical pain or suffering. The viewer will be confronted with its rootedeness in *physical* despair. In this way film can reconnect ideas that have become abstract with the concrete world in which they are grounded and have their reality, and in which they leave their marks.

Film is particularly suited to bringing about these correspondences, Kracauer believes, because of the way in which the confrontation with the unfamiliar worlds that film opens up induces the viewer to relinquish conscious or intellectual control, and to connect to the film's images at a more visceral level. The film “leads the spectator away from the given image into subjective reveries...Once the spectator's organized self has surrendered, his subconscious or unconscious experiences, apprehensions, and hopes tend to come out and take over."[299] What Kracauer is pointing to here is the "utopian" potential of film. It can induce the viewer to leave the everyday world of fact, and "dream" toward what could be, or what should be, that is, what one *wants* the world to be. The confrontation between the viewer and the physical world leads the viewer to a world of neglected or forgotten *possibilities*.

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[298] *Theory of Film*, p. 68

There is, however, something strange about Kracauer's book. He wants to point to the "redemptive" aspects of film, but he does so at the expense of not paying sufficient attention to the other uses to which film may be put. If, for example, as Kracauer claims, the presentation of the physical world has the effect of allowing "unconscious apprehensions and hopes" to emerge, it seems that film is particularly suited not only to "utopian" possibilities, but also to more sinister ends, such as propaganda, or making the viewer more susceptible to subtle ideological messages. Kracauer does recognize this possibility, and in a short excursus he notes the effectiveness of film propaganda. But his failure to give these *other* potentials of film their due seems like a serious oversight. This is especially strange given that Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* pays particular attention to the ways in which unconscious hopes and apprehensions can be misused by film, or made to serve reactionary ends (he writes, for example, of the ways in which film serves to reinforce the post-World War I German desire for a strong authority, and of the ways in which films strove to dilute potentially revolutionary desires in this same period).[300] Even if Adorno perhaps goes too far in stressing the detrimental role of film and the film industry in society, Kracauer in his late work goes too far in not taking these uses of film into account (it certainly does not help that he isolates film as a medium from the film *industry*). For these reasons, I would suggest that we should take what Kracauer presents as a *descriptive* account of what film accomplishes and read it rather as a *prescriptive* account of what film *could* accomplish, under the proper societal conditions. It seems to me that this is the only way for Kracauer's book to avoid the charge of naivete that could be made, a charge resulting from his failure to consider the ways in which film and the film industry *actually* function in society.

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[299] *Theory of Film*, p. 165

[300] Siegfried Kracauer. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. On the ideological nature of film, see also "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies," in *The Mass Ornament.*

Again, however, I am not only interested in Kracauer's account of film for its own sake, but also for the ways in which his reflections on film can be extended to the ways in which we might approach *history*. It is in the realm of historiography, that is, that the redemptive potentials that Kracauer finds in film, the ways in which he suggests that the spiritual can be regained by going through the material, find their further significance.

Kracauer and history

Kracauer himself recognized that the ideas contained in his work on photography and film could be extended to the study of history. In his final (uncompleted) book, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, he comes to recognize that what is at issue in his earlier work is something more than the nature of these particular media. He explains that his interest in the philosophy of history developed, without his being aware of it at first, "because it enabled me to apply to a much wider field what I had thought before. I realized in a flash the many existing parallels between history and the photographic media, historical reality and camera-reality."[301] The parallels between these areas result from the fact that, as discussed earlier, it is not those media as such that his work is concerned with, but rather a particular kind of subjective approach to the objective world, a kind of perceiving and knowing that aims at "the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged."[302] The work of history, then, like the work of photography or film, is particularly suited to revealing those aspects of the human world to which we have been blinded because of our habitual ways of thinking.

Although historical study does not aim at establishing a relation to the same "physical" world that film is concerned with, it does aim at a reconnection with the hitherto uncomprehended *material* aspects of the human past that will point toward the possibilities for the redemption of that past. What film reveals is "a kind of life which is still intimately connected, as if by an umbilical cord, with the material phenomena from which its emotional and intellectual contents emerge."[303] History must orient itself toward a similar object, in order to reclaim the spiritual significance from the forgotten material aspects of the human past. Kracauer thinks that these elements have been missed, to a large extent, because of the ways in which the past has been approached. It should be looked at neither as the scientist looks at the natural world, nor as philosophers have tended to see human history, that is, as the realm of ultimate meanings (as, for example, Hegel does). Kracauer admits that we can find in history "regularities similar to those that make up the universe of the natural sciences,"[304]but it is a mistake to *reduce*

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301 *History*, p. 3-4
302 *History*, p. 4
303 *Theory of Film*, p. 71
304 *History*, p. 20

the human world to these regularities—the human world is not the same as the world of natural objects: "There are actions and emergent situations which so stubbornly resist a breakdown into repeatable elements or a satisfactory explanation from preceding or simultaneous circumstances that they had better be treated as irreducible entities."[305] The other approach to be avoided is the kind oriented toward "philosophical speculations with their wholesale meanings," such as we find in Hegel or Marx, in which the concern is to uncover some ultimate meaning to the historical process.[306] Although this approach, too, can potentially be productive in its ability to reveal aspects of the historical world that would otherwise remain unseen, this kind of approach is unable to grasp the real material of the historical world.

This is because the historical universe, to a great extent, eludes being grasped by laws, whether natural or philosophical, since it is "a material which is for long stretches inchoate, heterogeneous, obscure. Much of it is an opaque mass of facts."[307] If the function of the film camera is to reveal the obscure and opaque world, then we can think of the historian as having a similar function. And just as the revelation of this world that has become hidden from habitual modes of thought and experience was not an end in itself for film, we should think of the revealing activity of the historian as having a further aim as well, that of revealing this material in order to bring about some sort of "correspondence" between the material and the subject to whom it is revealed. The stuff of historical reality, like that of camera reality, will set off a subjective movement toward the "fringe" of possible unexplored meanings contained in the material. Kracauer thus provides us with some general ideas about the historian's universe and the historian's role.

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[305] *History*, p. 29
[306] *History*, p. 45
[307] *History*, p. 46

What his work does not provide, however, are more specific indications of how the historian would go about examining this mass of “inchoate” and “obscure” material, and how this would affect the subject in the present. This is precisely what Benjamin, however, does provide. I will now turn to his work in order to see how history (in its “subjective sense”) can contribute to the “redemption” of the past and what kind of subjective approach to history is necessary for this.

Chapter 5

The focus of this chapter will be the ways in which, for Benjamin, a subjective attitude or orientation toward the objective world can serve to reclaim lost possibilities from the past, leading to the possibility of the "redemption" of the historical world (what "redemption" might mean will be addressed toward the end of this chapter). I will look at *what* it is in the objective world that is to be redeemed, and *how* the subject contributes to this redemption. It is this "redemption" that will open up the possibility of thinking of the historical process as some kind of a unified whole, unified, that is, as a progressive realization of humankind's potentials.

Benjamin, like Kracauer, was drawn to the developing technologies of photography and film, particularly in regard to the possibilities that they held for opening up new domains of the objective world to the viewing subject. He writes, for example, of the "optical unconscious" that is opened up by film, drawing a parallel between psychoanalysis's discovery of a new domain of objects in mental life and film's discovery of a new domain of objects in the physical world.[308] Even the most mundane action or object can be captured by the camera in such a way as to reveal what the eye had never before been able to see. Prior to his engagement with film Benjamin had, like Kracauer, been drawn to photography. Contemporaneous with Kracauer's "Photography" essay is Benjamin's "Little History of Photography;" in this essay he is drawn to the way in which photography, despite its inherent tendency to "catalog" the spatial world of appearances

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308 "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," p. 266

(to put it in Kracauer's terms), is able to reveal something that *escapes* this attempt to fix the moments of the past in their place. The object as captured in the photograph retains something that strives to *engage* the viewer, something that does not allow itself to be completely fixed as a "fact" to be passively registered:

> No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.[309]

The intention of the photograph is unable to *exhaust* its object; something in it remains alive, some aspect that will not submit to being frozen in time. Benjamin illustrates this with a nineteenth-century portrait of a photographer and his fiancée, a woman with a troubled past. The portrait strives to present an image of bourgeois respectability and stability, yet something that belies this image sneaks into the portrait: "He seems to be holding her, but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance."[310] This "spark of contingency" that remains alive in the photograph counters the subjective intention to "capture" the moment, and this contingency becomes visible to the viewer who is attentive to the object itself, and what the object might have to say. We should recall here the importance that Adorno placed on the subject's attentiveness to its objects; the implications and significance of this attentiveness to objects will be filled out in what follows.

I am not going to pursue Benjamin's writings on photography and film, but his thoughts here provide us with a model of the kind of relation between the historian and his or her object that will point the way toward the *rescue* of moments from the past that

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309 Walter Benjamin. "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings*, *volume 2, part 2*. Ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. Tr. Rodney Livingstone et al. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999, p. 510

310 Ibid.

still contain unfulfilled possibilities. The task of the true "historian," we will see, will be to orient him or herself toward those "sparks of contingency" in the objects and images of the past, those moments within the past whose significance is not exhausted by traditional historical accounts, which fail to adequately account for their objects, and which therefore demand further interpretation. We can think of an approach to history that fixes moments in the past as something over and done with, something dead and gone, as analogous to the photographer who attempts to capture moments of the past in a way that fixes them in their place, and assigns them a permanent meaning.[311] The historian's task will be to recapture those moments of the past whose meaning has not been exhausted, and which for that reason have the power to call into question or to disrupt our understanding of objects and events from the past, and our understanding of the present as well.

In earlier chapters we saw the problems with thinking of history in terms of the development of free, self-conscious subjectivity; yet as I stated in the Introduction, there is a power to this idea that I would like to retain, which can be done if this development is thought of as a continuing *task* rather than as an accomplished fact. My goal in this chapter will be to see how the activity of the subject in the present can contribute to turning history, in a sense to be elaborated upon, into this development of subjectivity and self-consciousness, without simply imposing these interpretations on the material of history. I will devote most of this chapter to Benjamin's writings on various aspects of the nineteenth century, and will then toward the end turn to a more general account of historical time and historical cognition. I will begin with Benjamin's writings on

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[311] Kracauer draws precisely this parallel between photography and "historicism" in his "Photography" essay.

Baudelaire, the figure who, for Benjamin, most perceptively expresses the nature of the "commodified" world of the nineteenth century. My interest in Baudelaire thus lies in the way in which Benjamin's understanding of his significance helps us to get at the kind of subjective approach that is necessary in order to "redeem" the historical world.

Baudelaire, allegory, and progress

Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire focus on Baudelaire as an *allegorical* poet. We should therefore recall Benjamin's idea of allegory and natural history from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. What defines the artistic technique of allegory, for Benjamin, is the way in which it registers the world as a collection of ruins rather than as a coherent whole. We saw that the merit of Baroque allegory, its truth as an artistic technique according to Benjamin, lies in the fact that it was the form of expression and experience most appropriate to its historical era. As the form of expression in which the objective world found its truest representation, we can say, as Susan Buck-Morss writes, that allegory is a technique "which the objective world imposed upon the subject as a cognitive imperative, rather than the artist's choosing it arbitrarily as an aesthetic device. Certain experiences (and thus certain epochs) were allegorical, not certain poets."[312] Since Benjamin explicitly connects Baudelaire to Baroque allegory, the question that he must answer is, what is it about the world of the nineteenth century that renders it allegorical? Since allegory presupposes a "devalued" world, one without any intrinsic meaning, we must pay particular attention to what it is that has "devalued" Baudelaire's world, thus rendering it capable of being expressed allegorically. And, further, if the allegorical experience of the world is opposed to the "mythical," as Benjamin claims, then what sort of mythical structure underlies this era?

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[312] Susan Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989, p. 168

We saw that, for Benjamin, the death's head is the image that best exemplifies the natural-historical world; this image turns up again and again in Baudelaire as an emblem of the world around him. Benjamin quotes one of Baudelaire's contemporaries: "Finding the poet one evening at a public ball, Charles Monselet accosted him: 'What are you doing here?'—'My dear fellow,' replied Baudelaire, 'I'm watching the death's heads pass!'"[313] This is not merely an offhanded remark, but is representative of Baudelaire's experience of his world. For Baudelaire, the things of the world are not simply what they present themselves to be—they point beyond themselves toward some other meaning. We see this, for example, in what Benjamin calls his "[a]llegorical interpretation of modern clothing for men," where the men's fashions of the time constitute, in Baudelaire's words, "the necessary garb of our suffering age, which wears the symbol of perpetual mourning," with the "black suit and frock coat" as "an expression of the public soul."[314] It is important to note that, in Baudelaire's experience of the world, the emblems of death and decay do not belong to a world *beyond* or apart from the world of the living; rather, these elements are constantly obtruding into the world of the living, often appearing precisely in what is taken to be most *alive,* most youthful and carefree. In Baudelaire's "Danse Macabre," for example, we see a skeleton decked out as though for a ball ("The skull, coiffed with flowers...O charm of nothingness so foolishly got up!”).[315] If allegory, as Benjamin claims, “views existence...under the sign of fragmentation and ruin,”[316] then we need to ask what it is about Baudelaire's world that renders it susceptible to being represented in these terms. Why, that is, in a time and place that seems to represent a very real advance or improvement over earlier eras, one that seems to offer such *hope* for the future, could Baudelaire see only death and decay?

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[313] Quoted in *The Arcades Project*, p. 273 (J25,1)

[314] Quoted in *The Arcades Project*, p. 285 (J31a,3)

In Benjamin's discussion of the allegorical dramatists of the seventeenth century, he conceives of allegory not as a completely independent form of expression, but as one that derives its meaning, at least in part, from its being a *reaction* to the “mythical” world that provides the content of tragedy.[317] It is also as a reaction to myth that the true significance of Baudelaire's work can be seen. Benjamin characterizes Baudelaire as caught between these two possible ways of experiencing and representing the world: “It was owing to the genius of allegory that Baudelaire did not succumb to the abyss of myth that gaped beneath his feet at every step.”[318] The myth that Baudelaire avoids “succumbing” to is one peculiar to the nineteenth century: the world of the nineteenth century stands under the sign of “progress.” This world is *mythical* insofar as, despite the appearance of change, it is nonetheless static; even though change occurs, this change has the deeper structure of being only a *repetition* of what has always been, in particular, the domination of the subject by the objective order. The nineteenth-century representation of the world as one of progress serves to make the world, in thought, into a coherent whole, rather than a collection of discrete occurrences and events. The allegorical reaction to the myth of progress serves to disrupt this whole, to resolve it into ruins and fragments.

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[315] Charles Baudelaire. *The Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen*. Tr. William H. Crosby. Rochester: BOA Editions, 1991, p. 185

[316] *The Arcades Project*, p. 330 (J56a,6)

[317] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 62

[318] *The Arcades Project*, p. 268 (J22,5)

"Progress" in the Paris of Baudelaire's time was not simply an idea, but was *visible* in the rapid changes that the city was undergoing, through, for example, the massive building projects of Napoleon III and Haussmann; the city was being further transformed by the development of new means of transport and communication, with the development of the railroads, and new materials such as iron making new forms of construction possible. Baudelaire did not get swept up in the "progress" that all of these changes were supposed to represent; it was, rather, "precisely the splendor of the newly constructed urban phantasmagoria that elicited in him the most prototypically melancholic allegorical response."[319] In the face of the newest, the most up-to-date advances, he sees only what is *lost*, what is ruined by the march of progress. This experience finds expression in "The Swan." The poet "strolling through the new-built Carrousel," part of the physical transformation of the city, realizes that "Old Paris is no more":

> Paris Changes! but nothing in my melancholy
> Moves; new palaces and scaffoldings, new blocks,
> Old suburbs, all become for me an allegory,
> And dearest memories grow heavier then rocks.[320]

The experience elicited by these transformations is one of homelessness (the poem begins by evoking the image of a homesick Andromache). The poet lingers behind the forward march of the century, taking in the world that is destroyed by this advance; his is not a merely conservative reaction, striving to cling to what is being swept away, as he realizes that there *is* nothing of the old world left to cling to. The poet's experience is therefore one of not being at home, of being an exile in his own city. Even as new buildings and spaces are constructed, he dwells only among the ruins that are left behind.

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[319] *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 178

[320] "The Swan," in *Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen*, p. 165

The significance of *melancholy* here should not be overlooked; Baudelaire's melancholy and alienation should remind us of those features of the perceiving and experiencing subject that Kracauer had claimed were necessary for a true experience of the objective world, given that these states *distance* the subject from the things of the objective world. This distancing allows the world to be seen from the perspective of what is *incomplete* in it. We should think of Baudelaire's melancholy as well not merely as a subjective disposition, but rather as an epistemological perspective, one that makes possible the registering of the fragmented and ruined aspects of the world. Baudelaire's "allegorical genius" is, in Benjamin's words, "nourished on melancholy...the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man."[321] The feeling of melancholy could be seen as the manifestation in the subject of the gulf between the subject and the objective order, and the indication of some sort of (unconscious) resistance to this objective order. Melancholy does not point to a subjective pathology, but rather to the fact that the *world* fails to provide meaning, or a "home," for the subject—this world is not adequate to the subject's needs and desires. It is this distance that allows the melancholic to experience the world as it is in its truth, rather than as it is presented by the dominant spirit of the time.

This melancholic reaction to the state of the world thus reveals "progress" to be something other than what it presents itself as; Baudelaire himself notes that the idea of progress acts ideologically to obscure the true state of the world rather than to illuminate it: "The idea of progress. This dim beacon, and invention of contemporary philosophism, licensed without the sanction of Nature or God—this modern lantern casts dark shadows over every object of knowledge."[322] This is a perceptive description of progress, one which runs counter to the prevailing currents of nineteenth-century thought. The idea of progress attempts to make sense of the great changes and upheavals of the nineteenth-century world, integrating the events and phenomena of this world into a meaningful whole, yet Baudelaire sees this idea imposing a *false* unity or totality upon the world; his work therefore attempts to *dissolve* this illusion, this "shadow" that obscures the true state of the world. Although Benjamin characterizes allegory as a *destructive* technique, with its images resolving the world into fragments and ruins, what is destroyed is itself only illusion. In holding fast to the fragments of what is lost in the march of progress, Baudelaire is not simply *fleeing* from his time, trying to hold on to what is disappearing. He is, rather, confronting his time directly with what it *really* creates. Benjamin can therefore write of this destructive technique having a "progressive tendency," as "allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that proceeds from all 'given order,' whether of art or of life: the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem endurable."[323] So long as this attitude does not lead to resignation in the face of the ruined world, it carries with it the possibility of unleashing productive tendencies, a possibility that sets Baudelaire apart from the allegorists of the seventeenth century.[324] The aim here, then, an aim that Baudelaire himself is not conscious of, is not simply to reveal the true face of the world, but to *put a stop to it*: "Baudelaire's deepest intention," Benjamin writes, was to "interrupt the course of the world,"[325] to halt the destruction that takes place in the name of progress.[326]

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[321] "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," in *The Arcades Project*, p. 10

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[322] Quoted in *The Arcades Project*, p. 315 (J48,6)
[323] *The Arcades Project*, p. 331 (J57,3)
[324] Walter Benjamin. "Central Park," in *Selected Writings, volume 4*, p. 174
[325] *The Arcades Project*, p. 318 (J50,2)

The question is, then, what is it exactly that Baudelaire is trying to “interrupt”? If the presupposition of the allegorical experience of the world is a “devalued world,” one in which things are devoid of intrinsic and substantial meanings, then what is it that devalues Baudelaire's world? According to Benjamin, the world of the nineteenth century is devalued by the predominance of the capitalist commodity world. The system based on the production and consumption of commodities, with its constant emphasis on creating the “new,” presents itself as progress; there is a continual parade of new products, new technologies, while this society nonetheless fails to bring forth anything *qualitatively* new or different, merely producing and reproducing the same structure. The essence of this world is quantity, exemplified by the priority of exchange value, while the qualitative dimension of the world recedes: “The singular debasement of things through their signification, something characteristic of seventeenth-century allegory, corresponds to the singular debasement of things through their price as commodities.”[327] This world can be characterized as “mythical” in its structure, or as “atemporal” in a sense, since those things that pass for the “new” are merely new instances of things that embody abstract human labor, and thus domination. Despite the “progress” of the industrial world, there is not real change since the underlying structure remains the same. Thus Benjamin's characterization of the “dialectic of commodity production in advanced capitalism: the novelty of products—as a stimulus to demand—is accorded an unprecedented importance. At the same time, the eversame is manifest in mass production."[328]

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[326] *Real* progress, as we saw in Adorno's essay on “Progress,” might be seen precisely as putting a stop to the march of this false progress. Benjamin also expresses something along these lines: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on the train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.” (“Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'” in *Selected Writings, volume 4*, p. 403)

[327] “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1939 version],” in *The Arcades Project*, p. 22

The fact that it is based on commodity production renders the objective world of this era "allegorical," in the sense that it does not consist of a meaningful whole, but is rather a world of discrete and discontinuous elements, meaningless in themselves. Thus "[t]he commodity-form emerges in Baudelaire as the social content of the allegorical form of perception"[329]despite Baudelaire himself not being consciously aware of this. This deeper content of the world accounts for the experience of hopelessness amid the stream of luxuries available in Baudelaire's Paris: "The allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century."[330] We can think again of Baudelaire's "Danse Macabre," in which the hopelessness of the world appears in the skeletal figure that is fashionably and glamorously dressed up—no fashions or luxuries can conceal the vanity of the attempt to derive beauty and permanence from something inherently fleeting and abstract.

Benjamin devoted much of the work of his last few years to Baudelaire, so this is by no means a comprehensive account of Baudelaire's significance for Benjamin. My concern here has only been to get at certain crucial features of Benjamin's understanding of the commodity world of the nineteenth century. At this point we will have to move beyond Baudelaire, as he can only take Benjamin so far as a model of subjectivity with the potential to disrupt the dominant structure of that society (at least in thought, if not reality). Being unaware of the "social content" of his work, what the melancholic, allegorical mode of subjectivity that is embodied in his work lacks is a properly

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[328] *The Arcades Project*, p. 331 (J56,a10)
[329] *The Arcades Project,* p. 335 (J59,10)
[330] *The Arcades Project*, p. 328 (J55,13)

constructive moment subsequent to the *destructive* element of his allegorical experience and expression. What is needed, that is, is a kind of relation to the objective world that can attempt to piece together again the world that is shattered and fragmented by allegorical perception, an approach to this world that can derive meaning precisely from what the objective course of history and society has rendered meaningless. What Baudelaire lacks is a *conscious* subjective orientation to the ruins of the world; although attempting to put a stop to the course of progress in thought is, in a sense, productive or progressive, what is still necessary is a kind of thought that can not only put a stop to one course of movement, but that can, further, suggest *other* possible courses through an analysis of the commodity society and its products. As Max Pensky writes, the "explosive, redemptive force that lodges in the heart of the commodity still remains untapped in Baudelaire's lyric,"[331]because of the lack of a creative, productive moment. Pensky's description of this "redemptive force" is significant—it is not a force that is simply *opposed* to the commodity world, but rather lies *within* it. The commodity world itself, for Benjamin, contains energies that can be harnessed through cognition and interpretation, energies that can be put to work *against* this world. What is necessary for recovering these energies is for the subject to approach its object from a distance, as the historian approaches his or her object from a temporal distance. The properly progressive moment in the relation between the subject and the mythical totality of commodity society will come only in the meeting between two different *times*, namely, the historian's time and the time that he or she interprets. It is this kind of historical experience that will, for Benjamin, be able to set free the energy contained in the commodity world. This

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[331] Max Pensky. *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning.* Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p. 182

"energy" will be found in the different possibilities that lie concealed in the fragments of that world. In the material products of the nineteenth century, Benjamin looks to discover tendencies or potentials that point to other possible forms of life, a more rational and human order, but that have not been able to be recognized or developed; these possibilities, in fact, since they point beyond the existing society, must be *suppressed* in order for this existing form of society to continue to assert itself. The "unleashing" of these possibilities is the task of Benjamin's work in *The Arcades Project*, in which, in the words of Buck-Morss, Benjamin strives "to avoid...that political resignation of Baudelaire and his contemporaries which ultimately ontologizes the emptiness of the historical experience of the commodity, the new as the always-the-same. It needed to demonstrate that far more violence than Baudelaire's 'allegorical intention' was required in order to redeem the material world."[332]

The nineteenth-century commodity world; world exhibitions, Grandville

In the following sections I will attempt to articulate the theory of historical cognition and historical experience that is contained in the materials for *The Arcades Project.* Although we cannot ascribe to Benjamin any completed and coherent theory, given both Benjamin's philosophical style and the unfinished state of the *Arcades* material, we can nonetheless reconstruct a suggestive account of the role of the historian in relation to the past, and the historian's function in reconceptualizing the course of history. *The Arcades Project* deals, most generally, with the material life of the nineteenth century in areas such as fashion, art, architecture, and so on. That Benjamin focuses on this time and place (primarily the Paris of the Second Empire, but with material included from the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century) is not accidental or arbitrary. This era represents, in many ways, a transitional period. We see the development of new aspects of material life, such as the Paris arcades, those "center[s] of commerce in luxury items"[333] which constitute a "city, a world in miniature,"[334]and the development of new technologies and industries that transform the urban environment. What distinguishes this era, however, is that it is not only a time of new developments, but that many of the developments of this era are bound to become obsolete not long after coming into being. The arcades, for example, do not flourish for very long until they are surpassed by the department stores that are able to provide consumer goods in larger quantities; and the use of new building materials comes to be rationalized, eliminating the sometimes fantastic shapes and forms to which these materials give rise while still new. That the products of this era are bound, in their very newness, to become obsolete allows us to see a material world, and subjective experiences of this world, that are not yet *completely* under the spell of the commodified world. What this means is that we can see in the products of this world and in the subjective experiences of this world moments of resistance to increasing commodification, expressions of desires that run *counter* to this world. This era is the precursor to the completely commodified world that figures such as Adorno and Lukacs describe the twentieth century as having become; it contains within it, however, different possibilities, that is, tendencies that could have been developed in other directions but were not, yet which somehow *remain* in these materials in a latent state, waiting to be fulfilled or realized. Benjamin's reconceptualization of

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[332] *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 201

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333 "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 3
334 *The Arcades Project,* p. 31 (A1,1)

historical time will therefore be oriented toward reclaiming these possibilities that were denied by the further expansion of the commodity world.

Although the commodity is a central category of Benjamin's analysis of the nineteenth century, he makes clear that the *Arcades* material is not intended as an economic history of the nineteenth century; his concern with the commodity has less to do with the economic structure of the commodity world, and more to do with the ways in which economic life determines the particular *character* of society's material products. He writes that “Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible *Ur*-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century).”[335] We will see that he concern is not simply with the objective process of capitalist production, but rather with the subjective *reactions* to this process, that is, the ways in which subjects experience the objective processes of society and express these experiences in their concrete material products. Although Benjamin does not want to deny the priority of the objective process, it would not be sufficient for his purposes to trace the surface manifestations of life back to the economic process in a merely causal way; he wants to show how the objective process and the subjective reactions to this process interact to give rise to a unique configuration in which the subjective and the objective stand in a tension with each other. Benjamin is therefore less concerned with how the objective process serves to disfigure subjects and subjectivity, or how it restricts the possibilities for freedom and fulfillment (which Adorno focuses on);

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335 *The Arcades Project*, p. 460 (N1a,6)

rather, by looking at the interaction between the subjective and the objective, Benjamin will attempt to bring to view how these manifestations of the objective process contain something of subjectivity *within* them, a subjectivity that is more than just a distorted mirror of the objective economic process.

The commodity, for Benjamin, is this configuration of subjectivity and objectivity. The interaction between the subjective and objective gives rise to a number of tensions and ambiguities in the commodity (the commodity itself is, for Benjamin, not just a *thing*, but also the site where the tensions between the subjective and objective world play out and find expression). One of the tensions found in the commodity and the commodity form is the tension between different *temporalities*. The dominant temporality created by the commodity form, the one that has been victorious and continues to dominate to this day, is the mythical form of temporality associated with the "dialectic of commodity production" cited earlier: the pace of the objective world seems to accelerate, with the incessant demand for novelty, the continual introduction of new products and technologies. At the same time, however, what appears is not qualitatively new, but is rather the repetition of the domination that has always existed in some form, and of things reduced to abstract quantities as exchange value. This temporality conceives itself in terms of "progress," but Benjamin labels this the temporality of "hell." In "[t]he 'modern,' the time of hell," he writes, "[w]hat is at issue is...that precisely in that which is the newest the face of the world never alters, that the newest remains, in every respect, the same.—This constitutes the eternity of hell."[336] The repetition of the same, the mythical structure of the world, thus takes on a much more sinister face than that of mere "myth."

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[336] *The Arcades Project*, p. 544 (S1,5)

The commodity world, in presenting itself as progress and the production of the new, does not, however, simply *lie.* Rather, it makes a *promise* as well, albeit a promise that it cannot fulfill, one of change and improvement, such that it contains a *forward-looking* temporality within itself as well as its "mythical" or "hellish" temporality. The commodity world presented as progress is, in a sense, ideological, but this means that it should have, in some form, the same *future*-oriented aspect that we saw Adorno ascribe to ideology. Thus "[t]he commodity world is not so much that of an impoverished rationality," which is precisely what it is for Adorno, "but a world of enchantment which overlays everything with a spell promising profane enjoyment."[337] This is exemplified by the world exhibitions of the nineteenth century. The exhibitions originally arose as, and contained within themselves as an intrinsic part of their nature, explicit promises of a better future through industrial and technological progress. Philosophy's belief in progress is both reflected in and justified by these massive celebrations of new products and technologies that are, at first, put on display to be admired rather than to be bought and sold. That these exhibitions "enchanted" their audiences can be seen in the terms in which these displays are described. One contemporary writes of the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition that "it seemed a wonderland, appealing more to the imagination than to the intellect...It seemed that the world we knew from old fairy tales...had come to life."[338] Another observer is driven to poetry to express his feelings, combining the fairy tale image with a utopian image of a society in which the different classes come together in a unified whole, rather than existing in separation and conflict:

> Every industry, in exhibiting its trophies

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[337] Gyorgy Markus. "Walter Benjamin or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria." *New German Critique* no. 83 (Spring-Summer 2001), p. 3-42

[338] Quoted in *The Arcades Project,* p. 184 (G6, G6a,1)

> In this bazaar of universal progress,
> Seems to have borrowed a fairy's magic wand
> To bless the Crystal Palace
> .....
> Rich men, scholars, artists, proletarians—
> Each one labors for the common good;
> And, joining together like noble brothers,
> All have at heart the happiness of each.[339]

The fairy tale image was not merely an arbitrary subjective reaction, but was also an effect that the exhibitions themselves took pains to produce; in images made at the time, "[o]ne sees with amazement how the exhibitors took pains to decorate the colossal interior in oriental-fairy-tale style."[340] Technology is thus supposed to represent a new world, one that departs qualitatively from the familiar, the everyday—it promises a completely new and different order.

The celebration of technological progress is thus bound up explicitly with fantasy images of fulfillment and happiness. If it is technology and industry *them*selves that are celebrated, rather than what they can accomplish for human beings, then this is merely a fetishization of the *means* as the *end*. While technological progress certainly does bring with it the possibility of real progress, of real improvement in people's lives, this kind of development should not itself be taken as the end. By explicitly connecting the idea of progress with the *means* for the improvement of the world, the dominant system is able to justify the status quo, the continuing advance of commodity society, obviating the need for any radical change in the structure of society itself: "The message of the world exhibitions as fairylands was the promise of social progress for the masses without revolution."[341] With this, however, the idea of progress is betrayed. As Benjamin writes,

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339 Quoted in *The Arcades Project*, p. 176 (G10a,2)
340 *The Arcades Project*, p. 176 (G2a,7)
341 *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 86

"[i]n the course of the nineteenth century, as the bourgeoisie consolidated its positions of power, the concept of progress would increasingly have forfeited the critical functions it originally possessed."[342] "Progress," that is, no longer serves as a criterion against which the actual course of society can be judged; it becomes nothing more than a label that is uncritically applied to whatever is new (this is not to say that the idea of progress was ever *only* such a criterion—rather, it has always contained within itself as a moment ideological tendencies, thus serving to *justify* the existing world or existing developments).

This deification of the new as progress contributes in turn to the fetishization of commodities, as the stream of new and dazzling products comes to be taken as the very essence of the advance of the industrial world. This fetishization is reflected in the changes that take place in the character of the world exhibitions over the course of the century: they go from celebrating the new advances made in industry to celebrating the commodities themselves *as* commodities. What comes to be put on display as the exhibitions advance throughout the course of the century is not humankind's progress, but rather the commodity as exchange value. Rosalind Williams writes of the changing nature of the exhibitions that "the Crystal Palace exposition had been so innocent of commercial purpose that no selling prices were posted;" however, "[o]ver the decades the dominant tone of expositions altered. The emphasis gradually changed from instructing the visitor in the wonders of modern science and technology to entertaining him. More and more, consumer merchandise rather than productive tools were displayed."[343] The exhibitions thus perpetrate something of a bait-and-switch—rather than developing that

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[342] *The Arcades Project*, p. 476 (N11a,1)

[343] Rosalind Williams. *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 59

"fairy tale" tendency contained within these displays, thereby pointing toward an order that would have the happiness of human beings as its end, they remain in thrall to myth, and themselves contribute to this enthrallment. The exhibitions become "places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background," the use value which would be the foundation of any *real* progress, and "open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted."[344] As though in response to the dangers presented to society by the stirring up of utopian feelings, these displays altered their character in order to "distract" people from the fact that the progress being offered remained unrealized, and at the same time to teach people what is really important to commodity society: "The world exhibitions were training schools in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value."[345]

If what had claimed to be progress was merely an illusion covering over the unchanging, mythical structure underlying this world, then we should think of the history of the nineteenth century in terms of *natural* history. Further, we should be able to find some sort of experience of the world *as* natural-historical expressed within the time itself in its products. The work of Grandville contains this natural-historical experience of the world, although it is not consciously recognized as such by Grandville. His drawings provide a vivid representation of the products of human society in relation to the natural world, which has itself become commodified. "If the commodity was a fetish," Benjamin writes, "then Grandville was the tribal sorcerer."[346] In his work he represents the products of the commodity world as existing independently of human activity, with a life

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344 "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 7
345 *The Arcades Project*, p. 201 (G16,6)
346 *The Arcades Project*, p. 186 (G7,2)

of their own, rather than their being products of the human world. It is the interplay between the world of commodities and the natural world that attracts Benjamin to Grandville's work and gives it, in Benjamin's eyes, its significance in relation to its era. He writes that “[u]nder Grandville's pencil, the whole of nature is transformed into specialties,” “a category of goods which appears at this time in the luxuries industry.”[347] In one of Grandville's drawings, for example, he depicts a bizarre collection of marine life in the forms of women's beauty products, such as fans, wigs, brushes, etc.[348] The natural world itself comes to be marked with the same transience and disposability that defines the world of commodities. Nature, which might have served as a contrast to, or a refuge from, the commodity society comes to be represented as itself determined by the transience and impermanence of commodities; the devaluation of the world of human things is thereby extended to the world of nature.

The other side to this convergence of the natural world and the commodity world in Grandville's images is that the world of commodities is rendered utterly inescapable. The commodity world becomes, in Grandville's drawings, an order *independent* of human beings, rendered immutable and unchangeable through its being part of the natural order. The human and natural worlds thus converge in the commodity. This convergence, and the immutability of the commodity world, is extended to the very cosmos itself; in another of Grandville's images, Venus is represented as a brilliantly shining earring on a woman leaning over a balcony in the clouds. The very order of the cosmos is thus an extension of fashion. Through “Grandville's fantasies confer[ring] a commodity

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347 Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version],” p. 7

348 Reprinted in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 156

character on the universe," "[t]hey modernize it."[349] At the same time that the universe is "modernized," however, the commodity world becomes what is most ancient, part of the order that has existed since the beginning of time and thus lies completely outside of human control, ordering and structuring our lives, and to which we have no choice but to submit. Thus "the planetary fashions of Grandville are so many parodies, drawn by nature, of human history;"[350]they are parodies because they take what ought to be something created by human beings and present it as belonging to an order outside of our control. Benjamin stresses the naturalization of the human world and human activity, its reduction to natural history, by connecting Grandville's work back to the allegory of the Baroque: "Grandville's masking of nature with the fashions of midcentury...lets history, in the guise of fashion, be derived from the eternal cycle of nature. When Grandville presents a new fan as the 'fan of Iris,' when the Milky Way appears as an 'avenue' illuminated at night by gas lamps..., then history is being secularized and drawn into a natural context as relentlessly as it was three hundred years earlier with allegory."[351] History, through its being mediated by nature in this representation, becomes what is unchanging and unchangeable.

Although this expression of the natural-historical character of the nineteenth century is not Grandville's intention, his work, through this expression, has the merit of revealing the truth about the commodity world. For the Baroque, as we saw, the natural-historical world of transience terminates in representations of death; this is where Benjamin sees the commodity society ending up as well, as he links death to *fashion*, the height of the ever-changing commodity world. This society thus intersects with death precisely at the

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349 "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 8
350 *The Arcades Project*, p. 201 (G16,4)
351 *The Arcades Project*, p. 200-201 (G16,3)

point at which its true nature finds its purest expression: “Every fashion stands in opposition to the organic. Every fashion couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, fashion defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve.”[352] The commodity world, as represented by fashion, ultimately takes priority over living beings. The bearers of fashion become like mannequins, inessential vehicles for displaying the latest products. Rather than serving to accentuate the beauty of the living, the fashions exists for their own sake, and the living exist for the sake of the non-living commodity.

Blanqui

The works of Grandville seem relatively harmless, being on their face nothing more than playful representations of a humanized natural world. Benjamin, however, sees something much more sinister behind this. We can see where this tendency leads if we turn to another representation of the cosmos from the same era, a representation which paints a much bleaker picture than does Grandville's work. Over the course of the century, “Grandville's harlequinades turn into Blanqui's plaintive ballads.”[353] Blanqui's image of the universe brings out for Benjamin what exactly becomes of the human world in thrall to myth. This mythical world is significant for Benjamin, and for our analysis of human history and the subject's role in it, precisely because this mythical world is *not* historical. Benjamin emphasizes this in his discussion of Blanqui, particularly in the 1939 version of his expose to the *Arcades* material. Benjamin illustrates the temporality of “hell,” of the mythical commodity world, with Blanqui's strange book of cosmological speculation, *L'Eternite par les astres*, written in prison at the end of his life. This work articulates, years before Nietzsche, an idea of “eternal return” or “recurrence,” according to which nothing truly new ever emerges since the universe contains only a finite number of possible configurations of its elements. Benjamin reads these cosmic speculations as an allegory for bourgeois society; Blanqui thus eternalizes this society by projecting its order onto that of the universe. Benjamin claims that the mythical capitalist world finds its philosophical expression in the ideas of eternal return that emerged in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, as the “essence of the mythical event is return,”[354]the repetition of occurrences in accord with unchangeable laws. In Blanqui's account of this eternal recurrence of the same, “[t]he number of our doubles is infinite in time and space...These doubles exist in flesh and bone...they are the present eternalized;” in this play of repetition “there is no progress...What we call 'progress' is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it.”[355]

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[352] *The Arcades Project*, p. 79 (B9,1)

[353] *The Arcades Project*, p. 201 (G16,4)

This vision of the universe is significant not only because of its image of eternal repetition, but also because of its *source*: Blanqui, who had spent his life fighting against the existing society with the hope of bringing about something *better*, ends his life by expressing his capitulation to the existing order of the universe and, through this, the order of bourgeois society. There is no longer any hope of change, as anything that comes about is merely a repetition of what has happened before, and what exists is what will continue to exist for eternity: “This resignation without hope is the last word of the great revolutionary."[356] This becomes for Benjamin the ultimate expression of the state that history and bourgeois society had come to in the nineteenth century. Blanqui's reaction to this world, however, is not simply an idiosyncratic individual reaction, but speaks, in a sense, for the century itself: "The notion of eternal return appeared at a time when the bourgeoisie no longer dared count on the impending development of the system of production which they had set going."[357] Benjamin takes this idea to represent the resignation of the century itself in the face of an order that human beings had created, but that could not deliver what it promised. If what exists is eternal, then we need not worry about the limits of the present order, and what might lie beyond it. Faced with a choice between recognizing the limits of the present order in order to go *beyond* it or finding consolation for its limitations by positing it as eternal and unchangeable, the nineteenth century chose resignation.

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[354] *The Arcades Project*, p. 119 (D10a,4)

[355] Quoted in “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1939 version],” p. 26

Despite the hopelessness of Blanqui's expression of eternal recurrence, or perhaps because of it, it is for Benjamin actually one of the most advanced expressions of the historical situation of the time, as it gives the most forceful expression to the experience of being utterly at the mercy of an order beyond human control, and thus to the ahistorical nature of the world. In Blanqui's vision of the world, "[h]umanity figures there as damned. Everything new it could hope for turns out to be a reality that has always been present...Blanqui's cosmic speculation conveys this lesson: that humanity will be prey to mythic anguish so long as phantasmagoria occupies a place in it."[358] "Phantasmagoria" is a term that has particular meanings for Benjamin that will have to be addressed below. For now, let it suffice that this term refers, most generally, to those objects and images that present the face of progress, of the newest and most up-to-date, but in doing so merely cover over the stasis beneath. In Blanqui, we see the “image of progress” revealed to be the “phantasmagoria of history itself.”[359] It is this illusory newness and change that needs to be overcome for the sake of real change.

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[356] Ibid.

[357] *The Arcades Project*, p. 117 (D9,3)

[358] "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1939 version]," p. 15

Although Blanqui's expression of history represents a capitulation to bourgeois society as an infinitely superior power that he cannot hope to counter, it is a capitulation that is affecting enough to call the entire order into question. By projecting the structure of this society onto the very structure of the universe, Blanqui's speculation represents “an unconditional surrender, but it is simultaneously the most terrible indictment of a society that projects this image of the cosmos—understood as an image of itself—across the heavens.”[360] His surrender is, at the same time, an indictment of this society, as he gives us an image of subjectivity that, despite all of its attempts to assert itself against the overpowering objectivity through revolutionary activity, now gives itself over completely to the recognition of its powerlessness in the face of an order over which subjects have no control. There is, then, an element of cunning in Blanqui's resignation: he “yields to bourgeois society. But he's brought to his knees with such force that the throne begins to totter.”[361] That is, his resignation is so striking precisely because it does away with any vestige of human freedom or subjectivity, or any belief that human beings have a role in actively forming this society, or that this society exists for the sake of human beings rather than simply for its own sake. This is clearly different from a form of resignation that would consist in abandoning oneself to the commodity world while still maintaining the facade of the humanity of that world; Blanqui strips away this facade of humanity, revealing the inhumanity at the heart of the world. It is as though there is one act of subjectivity or freedom still possible prior to complete and utter resignation, namely, the assertion of one's own subjective *powerlessness*.

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[359] Ibid., p. 25

[360] *The Arcades Project*, p. 112 (D5a,6).

[361] *The Arcades Project*, p. 111 (D5a,2)

The Dialectical image

Benjamin's writing on Blanqui is perhaps the bleakest point of his *Arcades* material, and it is on this note that he concludes the 1939 expose, perhaps the last organized statement of how he envisioned the project coming together. The bleakness of this vision for the project becomes even more striking when we compare it to his 1935 expose, in which Blanqui does not even appear, nor is there any talk of "hell" or of humanity being "damned." What is even more striking is what the material on Blanqui in the later version *replaces* from the earlier version. Where the 1939 expose gives us hell and damnation, the 1935 expose gives us *hope*. The 1935 version concludes not with Blanqui and the temporality of hell, but with a vision of a different kind of temporality, one of true change or *advance*, with humankind "awakening" to the possibilities for a different kind of world. He ends this expose with the vision of one era giving birth to a new one, with the possibilities contained in the earlier era being unfolded in the later one. "Every epoch," he writes, "not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it;"[362] an era, that is, gives rise to another that is able to *realize* the possibilities that it develops but cannot bring to fruition. This dream "appears wedded to elements of primal history—that is, to elements of a classless society,"[363] utopia in the form of a pre-historical world, prior to a society divided into classes. This image, in spite of the appeal to elements of "primal history," clearly contains a time that moves forward, one that develops, with the progressive tendencies of an era being developed and actualized by the one that follows. We are faced with the question, then, of how to account for these changes. Why, in the space of only four years, does Benjamin go from presenting a hopeful account of the nineteenth century to a hellish one?

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[362] "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 13

One way to account for these differences is to read them as coming in response to Adorno's comments on the earlier expose, in which he criticizes Benjamin for seemingly abandoning earlier conceptions of the project in which the hellish aspect played a more prominent role (we will look at some of Adorno's particular criticisms below). What I would like to suggest, however, is that we should not approach these two different versions with the thought that the later one *supersedes* the earlier, or gives a more accurate indication of Benjamin's conception of the project. It is more productive, I believe, to consider *both* of these conceptions, the two sides of Benjamin's nineteenth century, as essential to the overall aims of *The Arcades Project*. That is, the differences that we find in these two texts point to the dialectical nature of commodity society itself; the hopeful and the hellish are intertwined aspects of the commodity world. The objective world itself contains both of these— while the hellish has certainly gained the upper hand and asserted itself over subjects, there remain traces of something different, of true subjectivity, in the past that can be rediscovered, and that can provide the basis for hope for the future.

Both of these aspects are therefore necessary for penetrating the commodity form that rules society. That the commodity society contains both of these conflicting tendencies becomes more understandable if we recall that, for Benjamin, the commodity is not primarily a *thing*, but is rather a confluence of *forces*, of different tendencies that lie beneath the surface of the material productions of the commodity-producing society. Fashion, for example, while giving priority to the inorganic and asserting the superiority of the commodity over the human being, can also serve as an expression of deeper subjective desires. One writer cited by Benjamin is struck by the "lightness of fabrics" used in fashionable clothing at a particular time, such that "[a]t the risk of losing their skin, women clothed themselves as though the harshness of winter no longer existed, as though nature had suddenly been transformed into an eternal paradise."[364] Here (and in many other examples collected by Benjamin) the desire for beauty ignores the human being's subjection to the elements, acting as though humanity and nature exist in perfect harmony. While this may be delusional, the important point is that we can find such subjective *desires* embodied in these products of commodity society.

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[363] "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 4

Technology and industry furnish important examples of the desires embodied in material products. For example, the introduction of iron as a building material gives rise to an explosion of different uses, with iron being used to create fantastic forms of architecture, and to create new forms of products in other branches of industry as well. The strange uses to which this material is put does not indicate, for Benjamin, that it is used *incorrectly* until its *proper* use is figured out. Rather, the very fact that there is no established use for it makes it all the more amenable to being used to give expression to subjective fancies. He writes that "[t]he effort to assimilate [new materials and technical processes]...led to mistakes and failures. On the other hand, these vain attempts are the most authentic proof that technological production, at the beginning, was in the grip of dreams."[365] That is, they present something of a blank slate on which subjective wishes and desires can find a material embodiment. That new technologies are "in the grip of dreams" can also be seen in the reactions of the *workers* in whose industries they come to be used. One contemporary of these developments writes that "[t]he associated workers of Brighton consider machines to be absolutely beneficial. 'But,' they add, 'they are fatal as applied in the current regime. Instead of dutifully serving, as the elves served the shoemaker in the German fairy tale, the machines have behaved like Frankenstein's monster.'"[366] The language used here is significant, as it borrows from another realm, a fairy tale world, suggesting that these new technologies should herald a completely new order, one that can only be expressed in these fairy tale terms because it would represent such a qualitative departure from the existing order.

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[364] Quoted in *The Arcades Project*, p. 37-38 (A2,8)

The work of Grandville provides us with another example of the conflicting tendencies arising out of the subjective relation to the commodity world. As we have seen, his work expresses the experience of the human world in terms of natural history, but it expresses at the same time other tendencies and desires as well. "Grandville's art," Benjamin writes, contains "a split between utopian and cynical elements."[367] We have seen the cynical side, but there is also something *utopian* about images that express the convergence of the natural and human worlds. One of his drawings, for example, depicts Saturn's rings as an iron balcony on which one can stroll; this could perhaps be seen as a kind of fantastic reconciliation of the natural and human worlds, in which technology allows us to make use of nature's potentials in a way that does not simply *dominate*

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365 *The Arcades Project*, p. 152 (F1a,2)
366 Quoted in *The Arcades Project*, p. 705 (a4a,3)
367 *The Arcades Project*

nature. The ambiguities contained in Grandville's work thus point to the ambiguities contained in the commodity world itself, which becomes a repository for the utopian wishes and desires of subjects. The commodity, Pensky writes, is for Benjamin "a moment in the relation between myth and anti-myth."[368]

Benjamin attempts to express this ambiguous nature of commodities in his concept of the "dialectical image." He writes that "[w]here thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears...It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest."[369] The "dialectical image" is an elusive concept that Benjamin never pins down and precisely defines, but we can think of it as designating an object or image that, apprehended in thought, reveals itself to be this site of tensions and ambiguities, the confluence of objective processes and subjective desires, as in the commodity, or potentially any other material product of society. The utopian aspect of the dialectical image is stressed in the 1935 expose: "Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, a dream image."[370] Although we cannot simply equate the dialectical image with the commodity, the commodity is a dialectical image; to be more precise, this term would apply to the commodity *as it is grasped in thought*, the commodity seen from the perspective of the different tendencies, and different possible temporalities (that of repetition, and the forward-looking temporality), contained in it. The fact that the commodity can become this dialectical image helps to explain the central position that the commodity form takes

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368 Max Pensky. "Geheimittel: Advertising and Dialectical Images in Benjamin's Arcades Project," in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Ed. Beatrice Hanssen. New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 113-131

369 *The Arcades Project*, p. 475 (N10a,3)

370 "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 10

in *The Arcades Project*, apart from its being a central category of early- and mid-twentieth century Marxist-inspired criticism. What Benjamin hopes to accomplish with this idea of the dialectical image is to conceptualize the nineteenth century starting from the point at which Baudelaire and Blanqui left off. He writes that it is "the inherent tendency of dialectical experience to dissipate the semblance of eternal sameness, and even of repetition in history;"[371] it is not sufficient to merely *express* this semblance, to bring it to consciousness—there must be an attempt made to counter it as well. Benjamin attempts to counter this semblance through looking at the commodity as dialectical image, as a thing containing within itself those energies that can break through the stasis and repetition of the commodified world.

It is this desire to discover and unleash these tendencies in the commodity that leads Benjamin to conceive of the commodity in a fundamentally different way than his contemporaries, such as Adorno. What Benjamin wants to accomplish by conceiving of the commodity in his own unique way is to show that the commodity society does not *only* create an objectivity over and against subjects and outside of their control; the subjective experience of this world is essential here, as this experience endows its products with unconscious images of happiness and fulfillment. This is why Benjamin's account of the commodity does not focus on the nature of their production, but rather on the ways in which they *appear* and are *experienced*. Buck-Morss writes that "the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore. Everything desirable, from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display that held the crowd enthralled even when personal possession was far beyond their reach."[372] That this aspect of the commodity takes on a new importance during this era can be seen, for example, in the arcades, which provide an arena safe from the elements in which people can browse the commodities displayed in the shops; individuals themselves become complicit in this, becoming commodities-on-display through wearing the latest fashions, etc. The important point here is that the commodity taken simply as the product of certain relations of production does not exhaust what it is, or its place in nineteenth-century urban society (or, presumably, its place in any era). To focus only on production is to eliminate the subjective aspect in favor of the objective which, for Benjamin, is to leave out a crucial element. If we are to try and find some spark of subjectivity in this era, something that escapes the domination of objectivity, then the subjective reactions to the commodity cannot be left out of account. As something *displayed* it takes on certain attributes arising out of this subjective element, in which commodities become objectifications of the society itself, part of which is the hopes and wishes that lie concealed within it. The significance of display for Benjamin can be seen in advertisements, which are "the ruse by which the dream forces itself on industry."[373] As Pensky writes, "one could say that Marx grasped the theological complexity of the commodity, but not the commodity's status as *phantasmagoria*; that is, as a delusional expression of collective utopian fantasies and longings."[374]

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[371] *The Arcades Project*, p. 473 (N9,5)

It is the change in perspective brought about by this orientation toward the subjective element, hidden and distorted as it is, that allows the commodity to appear as a dialectical image. Given the dominance of the commodity form in society, however, it is only here, in its very products, that these wishes and fantasies can find an outlet for expression, rather than in something *opposed* to this form of society. It is thus, for Benjamin, images from the "collective unconscious," images based in the unconscious experience of the utopian classless society (a claim which is obviously problematic), that find their way into the products of commodity society; the "experiences of such a [classless] society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions."[375] These utopian wish-images could be activated by the utopian *possibilities* contained in the capitalist world, that is, possibilities opened up by the productive capacities of industrial society. It is not accidental that the world exhibitions take on a utopian appearance, with their focus on the newest, and on change for the better. While these utopian images may seem, at first, to be a *fleeing away from* these possibilities, from the concrete steps that could be taken to harness these capacities for the wished-for better world, Benjamin suggests that these images do not represent a turning away from the present, but are rather the generalized form that the wish for happiness takes. Since the society as constituted prevents the possibilities for *real* change, desires and wishes are forced to find expression in distorted, hidden ways, or are forced to express themselves in terms of timeless utopian desires (we can think, for example, of the appeal to the desire for eternal youth and beauty found in cosmetics advertisements). As Richard Wolin writes, "the tendency for the modern to have recourse to elements of prehistory is no longer perceived simply as a regression, but rather, as a *prefigurement of utopia*: as the awakening of the collective unconscious memory of a 'pre-historic classless society.'"[376] Within the objects that embody the mythical ever-same, the overpowering objectivity that stands over and against the subject, there is also contained something that points beyond it, that is, a tendency that points in a the direction of a different future for humankind. These utopian images can be seen as the subjective reaction to the objective potentials in the products of the capitalist world, and to the objective failure to fulfill these possibilities.

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[372] *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 81-82

[373] *The Arcades Project*, p. 171 (G1,1)

[374] Max Pensky. "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Ed. David Ferris. Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 184

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[375] "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 4-5

There does seem to be real issues, however, with Benjamin's account of the utopian images in the products of capitalist society. First, it is clearly problematic for Benjamin to appeal to the images of a "classless society" contained in the "collective unconscious." It seems odd that Benjamin should turn to this as the source of utopian wishes. Wolin writes that Benjamin's "idealization of the past in this case is reminiscent of the neoromantic theories of Klages. In essence, Benjamin's draft aims not at the dialectical *Aufhebung* of commodity society but at an irrationalist regression to a mythical, pristine stage of civilization which has yet to be tainted by the capitalist division of labor."[377] It seems that what Benjamin is trying to account for is the fact that these wish-images *do* seem to rely on images from the past, whether a real or imaginary one. It does not seem, however, that we really *need* to posit images of some primordial classless society in the collective unconscious (whatever that would mean). It seems that we can account for this turning to the past in a different way. That is, wish images will express themselves in unrealistic ways given that there has been no *experience* of any kind of utopian society in the terms of which these wishes could be expressed; since there is no experience of this kind that desires can attach themselves to, it is not surprising that they will express themselves in terms of a state that has never existed.

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[376] Richard Wolin. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p.

[377] *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, p. 180

It also seems problematic, as Adorno points out in his criticism of Benjamin's draft, to write of these wish images as “dream” images. In his correspondence with Benjamin, Adorno takes issue with Benjamin's “transpos[ing] the dialectical image into consciousness as a 'dream.'” In doing so, he argues, the dialectical image is “deprived of that crucial and objective liberating potential that would legitimate it in material terms...The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; it is rather dialectical in character, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness.”[378] To approach the products of the capitalist world from the perspective of the *dream* images supposedly contained therein is to give priority to subjective consciousness over the objective forces at work. It is, however, precisely those objective forces that are primary; the contents of consciousness are merely reflections of the dominant order, so putting them at the center of theory runs the risk of failing to recognizing the objectivity at work within them, positing as independent something that is merely an epiphenomenon of the production process and its correlates in society.

Benjamin would not necessarily disagree that the commodity world does, to some extent, produce consciousness. It seems that he would want to say, however, that there is nonetheless something in the subject that escapes the influence of this objectivity, something in the subject or in consciousness (or the unconscious) that is not exhausted by, or reducible to, what merely reflects the objective state of the world. Benjamin has good reasons for not wanting to give a purely materialist account of the commodity; what the *Arcades* materials indicate is that there is a disconnect between the objective world and the subjective experience of this world. If we can find elements of the commodity world that contain these subjective wish images, as it seems that we can, then this suggests that the subjects who ought to be the *ends* of the objective process are not experiencing themselves as such. Without something that indicates a conflict between the subjective and objective orders, how can we say that there is necessarily anything lacking in the capitalist commodity world? These wish images are necessary for Benjamin precisely because they render the images of the capitalist world *dialectical*. As Buck-Morss writes, "[b]y attaching themselves as surface ornamentations to the industrial and technological forms which have just come into existence, collective wish images imbue the merely new with radical political meaning, inscribing visibly on the products of the new means of production an ur-image of the desired social *ends* of their development."[379] For those whose consciousness is created by commodity fetishism, however, these distorted images are the only way in which they can be expressed (at least for the mass of individuals; this does not mean of course that there are not individuals who do in fact set themselves in *opposition* to the existing order, and thus consciously formulate their wishes and desired ends). The power of thinking of these wishes as dream images lies in the fact that even for those who *consciously* identify with the existing order, something can be seen in them that *rebels* against this order; this suggests that this order does in fact fail on some fundamental level to meet the needs and satisfy the desires of individuals. Although approaching these materials as "dreams" is perhaps not rigorous enough to serve as the basis for an empirical social theory, it is nonetheless helpful insofar as it points to the importance of the "latent" material beneath the manifest contents of consciousness, something that demands to be interpreted rather than being dismissed.

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[378] Adorno, letter to Benjamin, August 5, 1935, in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence.* Ed. Henri Lonitz. Tr. Nicholas Walker. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 105

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[379] *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 117

Yet even if these “dream” images are a legitimate phenomenon, there is still the question of whether they are *necessary* for conceptualizing an era. That is, do they really add anything *essential* to an historical account? Their significance, I believe, lies in the fact that they reveal something that is important to both Adorno and Benjamin; they represent aspects of the past that have hitherto been left out of historical narratives. We could give an account of, for example, the Industrial Revolution and the development of commodity production throughout the nineteenth century, an account that tells this story from the perspective of those who were its *victims*, thus showing that these developments failed to accomplish what they ought to have accomplished. This kind of historical account, however, while avoiding the problem of simply giving a “victor's” history, a story of the march of progress that leaves out of account its casualties, would still be incomplete. It would be lacking precisely because of the way in which it would treat the victims of the historical process *solely* as victims. That is, we still would not have a true history of *humanity*, one in which human beings figure as agents of some kind rather than as the passive sufferers of the historical process. If we want to approach history as the history of *humankind*, then we must find something within history that allows us to ascribe some sort of subjectivity or agency to the human beings of the past. Even though history, Adorno and Benjamin would say, has *not* truly been the history of humankind, since it has not been our conscious production, we nevertheless cannot simply give up on the past and its victims as *lost*, and turn our attention to a future in which real history *would* be possible. What we find in Benjamin's idea of the “dream image” is a way in which we can find some sort of humanity, some spark of agency, however dim and distorted, in the past. In what follows, I hope to show how this is possible, and how Benjamin provides a way for us to think of an approach to history that *restores* some sort of subjectivity or agency to the human beings of the past even where it does not exist in explicit or actualized form.

"Awakening"

Benjamin's idea of historical knowledge represents a radical departure from traditional historiography. First of all, the *object* of history has changed; rather than being concerned with past *events*, the objects of a "redemptive" history are those dialectical images that are found in the past: "the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object."[380] In orienting itself toward a different object, history has a different aim as well. Historical study, for Benjamin, does not simply aim at giving us an explanation or narrative of some aspect of the past. History is not a disinterested, "objective" science; it should contribute somehow to the development of the possibilities of the past that have gone unrealized—history therefore has a *practical* aim. In his model of historical activity, the historian would not simply catalog the things of the past (including the "dream images" in the past), but would rather contribute to "awakening" from the dream in which past epochs have been enveloped. The historian's task is similar to that of the psychoanalyst; through "dream" interpretation, the historian makes conscious what lies in the past in an unconscious state. Bringing these unconscious elements to consciousness would constitute "awakening," which would mean the awareness and, ultimately, the development, of the latent possibilities that exist in the objects of the past. Benjamin describes this as an "awakening" because it would mean casting off the spell under which humankind lies as long as its world is still ruled by mythical powers, that is, powers outside of human control. Through the interpretation of the images contained in the past, the historian is contributing to the "awakening" from the "sleep" of capitalism.[381] This is, according to Benjamin, the implicit goal contained in the material of the past itself: "Every epoch...not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning."[382] Despite the unfortunate use of teleological language (which Adorno criticizes), what Benjamin is getting at here is that each era contains possibilities within itself in a latent state, and it leaves these behind in traces for the future to decipher, leaving their development as a *task* for the future, thus precipitating its "awakening." (It should be noticed here that "awakening" does not refer only to the *present* using the possibilities of the past to pull *itself* out of this "sleep," as we might expect—it seems to be the past *itself* that is to be awakened as well; we should think of this in terms of some sort of "messianic" intervention into the past. I will discuss in the last section of this chapter what this might mean.)

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[380] *The Arcades Project*, p. 475 (N10a,3). Benjamin's descriptions of "materialist" history, or his idea of the true historian as a "historical materialist," has little to do with how these terms are traditionally used, which should come as no surprise. What he means by these terms should become clear in what follows.

To return to the quotation from the paragraph above, however, we should note Benjamin's somewhat surprising mention of Hegel. His connecting historical "awakening" to Hegel's cunning of reason seems strange, as his approach to history could not be more different from Hegel's. What this indicates, however, is yet another way to think of the "cunning of reason." We have already encountered two ideas of this cunning; we saw, first, Hegel's cunning that was supposed to lead to the development of free, self-conscious spirit and, second, Adorno's idea of cunning, which led to the development of an order *hostile* to human beings as spirit. Adorno's "negative" cunning does not seem to be the last word; it seems that there is a way to rethink this as a force that has the potential to develop true universality out of particularity. Adorno writes that historical knowledge "should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by th[e] dynamic [of victory and defeat in history], which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic...What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with...opaque, unassimilated material, which...is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic."[383] It is precisely this "unassimilated" material that Benjamin is trying to salvage in *The Arcades Project*. We could think of the wishes and desires that are embodied in the material from the past, and are expressed in distorted forms as just such material. It could be said to have "outwitted" history's movement, since it has gone unrecognized, waiting for one who approaches the past "rationally," that is, with an eye toward a truly human world, to discover and make sense of them. It is a truly human reason that outwits history through cunning, expressing as it does the wishes for a world adequate to human beings. The task of the observer in the present is to interpret these materials in such a way that the merely particular wishes or desires are given their true, universal, significance. Buck-Morss writes that "[a]ccording to Hegel, reason becomes conscious by working its way 'with cunning' into history through the passions and ambitions of unwitting historical subjects. But in Benjamin's dialectical fairy tale, cunning is the capacity, through 'awakening,' to outwit history, which has placed a spell on the dreaming collective, and has kept its members *un*conscious. Hegel's 'cunning of reason' literally deifies history, affirming the myth of progress. For Benjamin, cunning is the trick whereby human subjects get the better of mythic powers."[384] There is certainly no *necessity* or *inevitability* of development out of such cunning. It provides, however, a way to give this mechanism of history a positive interpretation, one that suggests how history might progress *despite* what the reason actually operative in it has done to the human world, providing at least a spark of humanity in an inhuman world. We should not think of this "cunning" as something that simply happens on its own—it demands, rather, a continuous effort on the part of subjects to reclaim those scraps of history that have cunningly "outwitted" history's development.

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[381] *The Arcades Project*, p. 391 (K1a,8)

[382] "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [1935 version]," p. 13

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[383] *Minima Moralia*, p. 151

The present era and its precursors are therefore not simply *separated* by the distance between them; they are also *drawn together* by the relation between them; the relation between past and present is determined more by this connection than by the temporal distance that separates them. The past leaves materials to be developed by its future, while the present uses this material in order to determine how to change its *own* state. By looking at images from the era in which new technologies began to emerge at a rapid pace, for example, we can see the hopes that people at the time had for those new developments, how they were supposed to contribute to the welfare and happiness of humanity by working for the sake of human beings. This idea that industry and technology should serve *us* is something that we may not even think of anymore, or

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384 *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 273

recognize that this has not been accomplished, given that we stand at the end of a process in which technologies have taken on the character of ends in themselves. So the past tells us something about our own situation, it reveals something that we may have become blinded to, and gives us ideas about what, specifically, it would mean to "take control" of the historical process, to subject it to human agency. Wolin thus describes *The Arcades Project* as "Benjamin's own *Traumdeutung* in the service of emancipation, in the raising of historical life from the level of an unconscious 'natural process' to something consciously produced and lived."[385] This idea that historical life should be raised from being a natural process to being a consciously conceived and controlled process does not present us with anything different from what the previous authors we have addressed have claimed. What distinguishes Benjamin from those authors with similar concerns, such as Adorno, is that his idea of history as "dream interpretation" should also have the power to *redeem* the past. The aim of this interpretation of the past, as I will be discussing it here, is not only to contribute to the projects of the present; what is also at stake is the attempt to integrate the past into some kind of idea of history as a *unified* history of humankind, a history of subjectivity. Even though the greater part of human history has not been the result of a *conscious* production, it can at least be rescued from being a *merely* natural process, by having some semblance of subjectivity restored to it. Wolin writes that "[f]or Benjamin, the philosophy of history becomes...the history of salvation, and the task of the...historical materialist is that of rescuing the few unique visions of transcendence that grace the continuum of history."[386]

To accomplish this salvation, however, Benjamin needs to develop a conception of

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385 Richard Wolin. "Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*. Ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997, p. 93-122

386 *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, p. 48

historical time that departs from our usual ideas about history and time; he will develop this different conception of time based on the unique nature of the historical object to which his historian is oriented. The dialectical image contradicts the idea of a linear time that unfolds with chronological regularity. This is because of the tensions and ambiguities within the object, tensions which serve to contradict the very assumptions behind linear time. The past, as it is usually thought of, is simply *gone*, it is a moment fixed in its place in the past, where it can no longer be effective. What the interpretation of dialectical images thus accomplishes is to put a stop (in thought at least) to the forward movement of time, to the continuous, unidirectional development of history, and to force the interpreter to confront those aspects of the object that are *not* exhausted, not simply fixed in their moment in time. This represents more than just the *interpretation* of objects from the past, however, since the purpose of this interpretation is to recover those aspects of the object that can still potentially be *effective*, can have some influence over the present. As the interpreter recovers the unresolved tensions contained in the object, thought is forced to follow out the *alternate* paths that history could have followed if it had gone on to develop the possibilities contained in the object, possibilities that would depart from the *natural*-historical course of history. Thus, according to Benjamin, "only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images."[387] Since history, at least what we have come to call history, is best characterized as *natural* history, then what is *truly* historical are those objects that *cannot*, in principle, be incorporated into the accepted story of progress. They cannot be incorporated into such an account because their very nature is to point to what *could* have been but was not, that is, possibilities that could have been developed but that have gone unfulfilled. The historian's objects are essentially moments of *crisis*, moments that stand at the crossroads of different possible courses for their future; it is the historian's function to stop at these moments, to linger at this crossroads, and to bring this moment of crisis to consciousness.

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[387] *The Arcades Project*, p. 463 (N3,1)

What is needed, then, is a conception of historical time that does not consign the objects of the past to a realm of *dead* objects, events, and occurrences, but that rather allows us to see the moments of the past as still potentially effective, as still containing energies that can be harnessed and released. What the historian should be looking for are those moments that *interrupt* the course of history by refusing to be incorporated into the dominant historical narrative. Andrew Benjamin writes that "[i]nterruption as a figure in Benjamin's writings is linked to the dominance of historicism—the act that denaturalizes both myth and chronology is interruptive;" this interruption is accomplished through the orientation toward the "dead," the discarded materials of the past: "in the detritus of history, what has been cast out of epic history, there lies the potential to interrupt continuity—continuity may have been founded on just such an elimination."[388] That is, what Benjamin's historian turns toward are those aspects of the past that *have to* be forgotten or left out by "historicism," or by a history that gives a unified, continuous narrative whole. The mistake made by these kinds of histories is that they impose on the material of the past some concept (such as "progress") that then has primacy over the materials of the past; if something doesn't fit here, either because it contradicts this idea, or because it seen as irrelevant in relation to this idea, it will be left out. What Benjamin wants to arrive at is a notion of history that gives priority to the *object*, rather than to a subjective conceptual schema that is used to shape the material, spinning out of itself an

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388 Andrew Benjamin. "Benjamin's Modernity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, p. 109

idea of history to which the material is made to conform. This approach also avoids seeing time as an empty "container" of sorts, that is then filled up by events and occurrences; giving priority to the objects, allowing them to speak for themselves and express what they want to express, leads to a reconceptualization of time as something *qualitative*, rather than the merely quantiative addition and accumulation of moments for which it is often taken. Wolin writes that Benjamin "refers to his method as dialectic at a standstill. By this concept he intends a decisive break with the Enlightenment...notion of historical progress, which only recognizes an infinite series of empty, quantitative transitions, the homogeneous time of the always-the-same;" Benjamin's method "instead concentrates its energies on those focal points in history that are laden with now-time."[389] What Benjamin means to get at with the term "now-time" is that the crucial moments and objects of the past have a certain power to bring past and present together—there is a particular mode of time, one unrecognized by traditional historiography, that *combines* past and present, in a way that harnesses the unfulfilled potentials contained in the past. I will elaborate on what Benjamin means here through a discussion of his final known work, "On the Concept of History." We will see how, out of a criticism of the idea of progress, a new idea of history and historical time will emerge, one that is able to bring together the past, present, and future in some sort of meaningful unity.

Messianic Time, now-time, redemption

What is most striking about the "theses" that make up "On the Concept of History" is the combination of Marxist and messianic, or theological, perspectives. The complicated relation between these perspectives emerges in the first Thesis, with Benjamin invoking the story of the chess-playing automaton that is actually operated by a person hiding inside of it. He writes that “[o]ne can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called “historical materialism,” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.”[390] This immediately sets up a complicated relation between the two—is theology being given priority since it is the one really “pulling the strings”? If so, then what does this say about the role of historical materialism? What Benjamin wants to get at here is that theology, in a sense to be elaborated, is necessary to historical thought if historical thought is to avoid the traps of progressive, evolutionary historical understanding, which we find not only in Enlightenment historiography, but also in certain strains of Marxist thought as well. As Lowy points out, “[t]he use of quotation marks and the way this is phrased suggest that this automaton is not ‘true’ historical materialism, but something that is *given* that name. By whom, we ask. And the answer must be the chief spokesmen of Marxism in his period, that is to say the ideologues of the Second and Third Internationals. In Benjamin’s view, historical materialism actually becomes in their hands a method that perceives history as akin to a machine leading ‘automatically’ to the triumph of socialism.”[391]

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[389] *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, p. 49

Throughout the Theses, Benjamin will develop this critique of progressive thought with reference to certain strains of socialist thought; the progressive view of history that serves as an ideology for a false progress, that is, finds its way into materialist thought,

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392 Walter Benjamin. “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings, volume 4*, p. 389

393 Michael Lowy. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History.’* Tr. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 2005, p. 25

doing perhaps more damage to the cause of emancipation than it does as an ideology in opposition to socialist thought.[392] Benjamin's critique of the idea of progress thus has two targets: first, the idea that history *has* progressed, a view that he counters with the famous image of the "angel of history" that is turned toward the past and sees "what we call progress" as actually a "pile of debris" accumulating before it.[393] At the same time, however, he directs his attention toward the idea that history *will* progress, an idea that he finds in historical materialism's conception of the inevitability of the future socialist world toward which we are moving. Benjamin thus writes that "[p]rogress as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats…was considered inevitable—something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course."[394] What this presupposes, however, is an unacceptable understanding of *time*: "The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time."[395] Thinking of time in a purely formal way, as an empty framework that is then filled up with "things" (that is, historical events), is problematic insofar as it treats time like space. An event is consigned to its place in the temporal series, and cannot appear at any other point in that series, in the same way that a thing cannot be in two places at the

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394 Determining the role of Marxism in Benjamin's philosophy of history, especially the relation between the Marxist and theological aspects, poses a serious interpretive challenge. One strategy is to suggest that Benjamin's Marxist and theological vocabularies are merely different ways of expressing a single idea. Lowy, for example, suggests that "Marxism and messianism are simply two expressions…of a single thought" (*Fire Alarm*, p. 20). Such an interpretation, however, runs the risk of simply forcing Benjamin's theological formulations into Marxist terms, or vice versa. I am not going to pursue the question of the role of Marxism in Benjamin's philosophy of history; I will just say that his use of both of these vocabularies suggests that he is trying to get at a unique conception of history, one that is not reducible to either the Marxist or the theological elements in it. I think, rather, that each of these terms could be seen as providing a corrective to the other; the theological element forces an orientation toward the past rather than just the future, while the Marxist element brings the theological down to earth, in a sense, forcing use to conceptualize it as a force active *in* human history rather than in opposition to it. I will come back below to the question of what the "messianic" might mean.

395 "On the Concept of History," p. 392

396 "On the Concept of History," p. 394

397 "On the Concept of History," p. 394-5

same time. Benjamin, however, wants to allow for the possibility that moments from the past can obtrude into the present, rather than simply remaining in their places in the past. "Historical time," we will see, refers not simply to the time of the past, but is reconceptualized as an *action or an event*, as something that is brought about when the past and the present come together in a particular way. Historical time, that is, arises out of the historian in the present recapturing or releasing those energies that are contained in the unfulfilled possibilities of the past. The common understanding of historical progress, rather than *unifying* the moments of history, actually keeps them apart by rendering things from the past *as* past, as no longer effective. As Matthias Fritsch writes, "the guiding idea of linear time, and the notion of a final exhaustibility of historical objects…preclude the inheritance of promises from the past, promises that bind the past and the present to the future."[396] Any *real* progress would derive its force from a still-living past, and would include the past in a *real* whole, rather than in a collection of dead moments.

Supposedly "progressive" thought had, however, forsaken this idea, according to Benjamin. "Nothing has so corrupted the German working class," he writes, "as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving…This vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor scarcely considers the question of how its products could ever benefit the workers when they are beyond the means of those workers. It recognizes only the progress in mastering nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism."[397] This is merely

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398 Matthias Fritsch. *The Promise of Memory.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2005, p. 26
399 "On the Concept of History," p. 393

the nineteenth-century ideology of progress being taken up by those who should be *resisting* this ideology and its effects. Technological progress can bring about improvements of course, but if the structure underlying this movement is not changed, then the possibility of true and full happiness will remain unfulfilled. As Habermas writes, “Benjamin’s critique of empty progress is directed at a joyless reformism, whose faculties have been blunted to the difference between the improved reproduction of life and a fulfilled life.”[398]

Historical knowledge should not take as its object the continuity of history, which then allows the present working class to be tied to the ideology of progress; it should rather concern itself with the *discontinuity* in history, with what does *not* fit into the dominant story of progress and development. Thus “[t]he subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class—the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden;” this, for Benjamin, is the proper attitude toward the past, but the “Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.”[399] Any thought of genuine progress, that is, must be turned toward the past rather than to the future, since this genuine progress requires the recognition that what has occurred has *not* been progress; the actual state of those “enslaved ancestors”

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400 Jurgem Habermas. “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism—the Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*. Tr. Fredeerick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983, p. 58

401 “On the Concept of History,” p. 394

must be recognized— they cannot be thought of as merely the unfortunate victims of a process that *we* are escaping, or have escaped. As has been discussed in earlier chapters, our struggles in the present, our projects aimed at emancipation, are meaningless if they are not conceived in relation to the hopes and struggles of earlier generations. Christian Lenhardt writes that "[i]t is quite conceivable, albeit not likely, that Marx saw the solidarity of a liberated mankind simply in terms of an interpersonal principle of harmony amongst the members of [the generation of emancipated successors]. This would reduce the exploited predecessors…and those who struggle for the revolutionary cause…to the status of nonentities or dead wood in the evolution of mankind, primitive stages which had to be overcome, and whose existence had better be forgotten."[400] But this would be nothing more than the Kantian shrug of the shoulders at the fate of those previous generations who work for the future but do not benefit from their own work. If progress is not automatic, however, then this attitude will not do, since our efforts acquire their meaning and content only in relation to these past generations, to whom we are therefore indebted.

This "debt" to the past is connected to Benjamin's idea of the "messianic." Benjamin makes this connection in Thesis II, where he writes that "the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones?"[401] That is, there is no truly fulfilled present or future without what comes from the past—*our* fulfillment is

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402 Christian Lenhardt. "Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*." *Telos* 25 (1975), p. 133-154

403 "On the Concept of History," p. 389-90

at the same time the redemption of past hopes and claims that have gone unfulfilled. Thus he continues, "[i]f so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim."[402] This Thesis contains key concepts that obviously need to be unpacked, concepts that get at the heart of Benjamin's idea of historical thought and historical time. There is, he is saying, a connection between the hopes of the past and us in the present—although there may not have been any conscious recognition of this by the past, these hopes, as we have seen, have been left in the productions of previous eras and await restoration or reawakening in an era that is able to recognize the claim that is being made. If we think of the "messianic" power of the present in these terms, then we can perhaps understand Benjamin's claim that "[t]he authentic concept of universal history is a messianic concept."[403] Any possible universal history, that is, if any *is* possible, can be thought only in terms of the unity that arises out of the "messianic" intervention into the past; any other kind of unity ascribed to history will not be able to constitute a true universal history because it will not capture the real unity underlying this history, the real and living connections between past and present.

This idea of the "messianic," then, and its connection to the redemption of the past, is what sets Benjamin's approach to history apart from others that are concerned with bringing about change in the future. This also indicates that Benjamin's understanding of the "messianic" departs from the way that we normally think of this—its primary meaning is not the inauguration of a new order in the future, but rather the redemption of

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404 "On the Concept of History," p. 390

405 *The Arcades Project*, p. 485 (N18,3)

the past. What this indicates is that Benjamin's philosophy of history is motivated by an impulse to make history *whole*, to bring together into some kind of unity the moments that the objective course of history has rendered into discrete and disconnected fragments. The "messianic" designates not a *break* with the past and present, but is rather a mode of time that is brought about through the historian's activity, in which these discrete moments are brought together into a meaningful unity. Benjamin writes that "history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance."[404] "Remembrance" here does not mean simply bringing something to mind, making us in the present aware of something past; remembrance in this, its usual sense, implies a *separation* between the one in the present and the past object *as* something past. For Benjamin, "remembrance" bridges this distance between the past and present; it has the power to *alter* the nature of the past itself. The events of the past, that is, are essentially fragmented and incomplete because human history is the history of *failure*, that is, the failure to complete projects, to fulfill intentions, to actualize the hopes and wishes of people in every era. Remembrance, however, has a "theological" function in its ability to intervene in this history: "What science has 'determined,' remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts."[405] I would suggest that we think of this "making what is complete into something incomplete" in terms of the resuscitation of those hidden, scattered moments

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406 *The Arcades Project*, p. 471 (N8,1)
407 Ibid.

of subjectivity and agency from the past, moments that resist, or run counter to, the overpowering objectivity of the historical process. The past is made incomplete precisely through the recognition of those moments as moments of struggle against or resistance to the dominant rationality of history. It is made incomplete by recognizing it as part of an *ongoing* struggle, an ongoing attempt to create a truly rational human world. It is this kind of intervention into the past that, I think, might allow us to conceive of history as capable of being brought together into some kind of whole, unified through a continuity of human struggle and activity, as opposed to the unity of *objective* development that occurs in *opposition to* the desires and interests of subjects. Benjamin cites Hermann Lotze: "That in some mysterious way the progress of history affects [those in the past] too—it is this conviction that first entitles us to speak as we do of humanity and its history."[406] This is theology: the making whole of what is fragmented, the restoration of meaning to what has none. Another way in which we might think of this "making whole" is that of conceptualizing history in terms of the emergence of *true* spirit over the course of history. The at first indistinct, unconscious and distorted stirrings of the recognition that the subject and the objective world are not in harmony, and the desire to bring about their reconciliation, are taken up in the present, seen *as* striving for this reconciliation, and taken by the present as the *continuing* task of history. The past, through this intervention of the present, receives some sort of actualization, while the task set by the present becomes more concrete through its connection to the concrete hopes and desires of the past. Restoring this dimension of subjectivity to the past, that is, not only actualizes the *past* by allowing it to "speak," to say what it strives to say; this subjectivity of the past in turn intervenes in the *present*, allowing us to concretize our

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408 Quoted in *The Arcades Project*, p. 479 (N13a,3)

perhaps inchoate desires and projects. The historian could be said to "constitute" its objects, in the sense that it allows them to be what they strive to be, to express what they strive to express; as discussed at the end of Chapter Three, this constitution of the object by the subject has the effect of turning that *object into subject.* This, in turn, will have an effect of the subject in the present, insofar as it allows itself to be addressed by the object, thus bringing the two together into a real unity, one in which each reciprocally affects and determines the other.

Commentary on Benjamin's idea of "redemption" often focuses on the completion of past political struggles. Lowy, for example, refers to the "defeated of June 1848" as an example of those in the past whose failed hopes and efforts are to be redeemed by later generations.[407] While I would not deny that Benjamin is thinking of those moments of the past, the failed revolutionary struggles or actions that attempted to work toward a more rational human order and failed, I do not think that this is sufficient. The reason that I argued that the distorted "dream images" of the past can be read in terms of subjectivity trying to assert itself against a repressive objectivity is that it is not *only* those who fought and were defeated in revolutionary struggles that are deserving of "redemption." It is also those who did not take an active part in these struggles, those who simply went about their lives unobtrusively and anonymously, that must be taken up into a truly unified idea of human history. This unity of human history, if it is to be a real unity, must account for those who did not even *realize* that they were struggling for something. An account of history that leaves out these "victims" would be just as incomplete as one that leaves out those defeated in failed revolutionary struggles.

The question remains, however, *how* these connections between eras are forged in

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409 *Fire Alarm,* p. 32

thought. Is it simply a matter of creating a new continuous, progressive history? This cannot be, since such a continuous history does not exist; there is no developmental narrative available to us, given the actual course that history has taken. Any moment of the past that can contribute to progress exists in relative isolation, as a moment of *opposition* to the dominant course of history. The historian's task, then, is to seize on these moments, which are, according to Benjamin, available to certain presents that are *able* to recognize their significance. He writes in Thesis V: "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again."[408] We have seen that, for Benjamin, the historical object has changed; what the historian is directed to are those images from the past that are pregnant with possibilities for a specific present. He thus goes on in Thesis VI: "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger." The danger here is both for the present, in continuing the course of history, and to the past, which is faced with the danger of either being forgotten, or of being appropriated by the dominant course of history: "For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes."[409] The historian's task is thus to *protect* and preserve these moments of the past, to save them from what will otherwise be their fate if they are not taken up by the right kind of historical activity in the present; "[t]he Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly

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410 "On the Concept of History," p. 390
411 "On the Concept of History," p. 391

convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious."[410]

It is this intervention into the past that characterizes historical time properly speaking. There is something different about this time, however, which leads to Benjamin using a new vocabulary to describe it; it is a time, that is, in which the past is not left as it is, and neither is the present. They rather enter into a unity in which each, and both together, become something qualitatively new and different. Historical time, then, is given the name of "now-time." What defines this is that it is a "time" that runs counter to the time of traditional history; it is not so much a continuous time as a *stoppage* of time in a certain sense, that is, the stoppage of the mindless, destructive course of time. Thus, in Thesis XVI he writes that "[t]he historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing history."[411] For the true historian, that is, time's forward movement is stopped by his or her immersion in the object. This forward movement "comes to a standstill" as a result of the historian's immersion in, and bringing to light of, what exists in the past in a state of being not-yet-accomplished. The moment of the past is taken out of its place in the continuity of past events and is seen rather in isolation from the temporal series of which it is a part. That this is what true historical time means is something that Benjamin might say is felt instinctively in historical action. In Thesis XV he writes that "[w]hat characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode...In the July Revolution an incident occurred in which this consciousness came into its own. On the first evening of fighting,

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412 "On the Concept of History," p. 391
413 "On the Concept of History," p. 396

it so happened that the dials on clocktowers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations in Paris."[412] Given that the historical continuum is one of domination, of a repressive "progress," it follows that true historical thought or action, that is, thought or action aimed at introducing a new course, or stopping the actual course of history, would consist in resisting or disrupting this continuum, putting a stop to the false progress that has characterized human history.

This taking moments of the past out of their place or, rather, allowing them to emerge from their place in the past, touches on what Benjamin means by "now-time." As I said above, this term refers to those moments that still possess some undischarged energy, something unfulfilled, which prevents them from being obsolete. These moments therefore have the power to disrupt the continuity of the present as well as that of the past. Benjamin writes that "[h]istory is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by now-time. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress."[413] To say that Rome was "charged with now-time" for Robespierre is to say that it contained possibilities not just in general, but rather possibilities for a *specific* time. The possibilities contained in the past are not available to *any* present, but rather for the particular one that is able, by virtue of its own nature, to *recognize* those possibilities. We can think of "now-time" as the point at which these two moments, the past and the present that is able to recognize the energies contained in the past, intersect. True historical time, then, is not simply the

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414 "On the Concept of History," p. 395
415 "On the Concept of History," p. 395

series of events that have occurred; Benjamin writes in Thesis A that “no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time.”[414] History occurs precisely where two events, possible occurring at two very different times, are brought together in thought such a way that each is illuminated by the other, which each gaining a new significance through its unity with the other

The French Revolution, Benjamin is saying (leaving aside the problems with speaking of this as a single, unitary entity), was not simply *inspired* by the past. It rather aimed to *reenact* it in a sense, to bring it *out of* the past and into the present. A moment from the past is *able* to be reenacted because it did not exhaust itself and its possibilities in its own time—it was left incomplete, with possibilities that went unexplored at the time and therefore undeveloped. Benjamin's rather surprising transition from Robespierre and Rome to *fashion* is illuminating here. The “citing,” or resurrecting, of a bygone fashion provides a good illustration of how something from the past can be made *concretely* present again. Andrew Benjamin, in an essay devoted to Thesis XIV, writes that “[c]itation is decontextualization and thus recontextualization.”[415] A fashion that recurs, or is resurrected, will bring with it the meanings that it originally possessed, yet it will

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416 “On the Concept of History,” p. 397

417 Andrew Benjamin. “The Time of Fashion: A Commentary on Thesis XVI in Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,' in *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006, p. 33

also participate in the creation of new meaning by being brought into a new context in the present. The resurrection of something from the past is not merely a *repetition*, as it creates something new through its contact with the present, through being brought into a new context, a new set of circumstances.

If *true* historical time is now-time, that is, this meeting point between a particular moment of the past and a particular present, it follows that no event or moment from the past can be characterized as *historical* on its own. It requires being brought into the present through the intervention of the historian. Historical time occurs when *both* of these moments come together; the production of history, then, is not a one-way process, with the historian simply giving form to an inert material. Historical time rather depends on both sides, with each being equally important. We can see here one way in which some element of subjectivity is restored to the past. In being *receptive* to the past, the historian allows it to speak to him or her. Approached in the correct way, the past lets the present know what it has to say, what is still incomplete in it. The historian therefore does not simply affect the past; the past has the power to affect the present as well, thus potentially contributing actively (in a sense) to bringing about a different course for human history. In one of Benjamin's early essays he writes that "the exclusive task of criticism" is to "liberate the future from its deformations in the present by an act of cognition."[416] What he is working toward here is a form of cognition that has the task of "liberating" the *past* from its deformation in the *present*. The moments of the past, that is, have been deformed by the image of them that has been formed by traditional history, and by the failure to recognize the claims that they make, the unfulfilled intentions that they contain. To speak of the "liberation" of the past is to speak of nothing other than the

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418 Walter Benjamin, "The Life of Students," in *Selected Writings, volume 1*, p. 38

“redemption” of the past.

Yet I think the question remains of why, if as I am arguing, Benjamin's idea of the messianic does not refer to an order outside of, or different from, that of history, it seems to lend itself so well to that kind of interpretation. Why is any reference to the messianic even necessary? Gordon Hull suggests that Benjamin's use of “'messianic' does not provide a covert or replacement theology...Rather, 'messianic' refers precisely to Benjamin's attempt to rethink experience in terms that are not complicit with its Kantian devaluation,”[417] a devaluation that he focuses on in his earlier writings. The important point here is the suggestion that the use of terms such as 'messianic' is necessary because Benjamin is trying to get at something that falls outside of normal experience, in particular, a certain kind of historical experience. Hull goes on: “'Messianic' indicates an intensified present,” intensified through its connection to the past—“the re-emergence of historic events in constellation with the present is an interruptive recollection that disrupts the screening process of historicist consciousness;”[418] the coming together of past and present, reanimating the past, disrupts the historicist consciousness of history in which the past is simply done with, no longer able to exercise any power over the present. The “historical” and the “messianic” are only opposed to one another, representing fundamentally different orders, from the perspective of the *wrong* idea of what the historical is. What the messianic is opposed to is not history *as such*, but to the kind of history that Benjamin criticizes in his Theses, one that sees history simply as the process of filling up an empty time with events. Far from the historical and the messianic being opposed to one another, we might think of the messianic as referring to the *truly*

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419 Gordon Hull. “'Reduced to a Zero-Point': Benjamin's Critique of Kantian Historical Experience.” *The Philosophical Forum* (Volume XXXI, No. 2, Summer 2000), p. 173

420 “'Reduced to a Zero-Point,'” p. 175

historical world, a historical realm, that is, that arises from conscious human activity, and for the sake of creating a truly humane order.

Of course there are limits to our powers in bringing about this truly historical realm. This is why the present, for Benjamin, has only a "weak" messianic power—the present simply does not have the ability to bring about the full redemption of the historical world. Rolf Tiedemann, who interprets Benjamin's Theses from a materialist rather than a theological standpoint, with the task of redemption being assigned to the "historical materialist," goes so far as to claim that there is "no thought here of messiah in a religious sense."[419] Perhaps what would be *truly* messianic would be the full actualization and fulfillment of the possibilities contained in the past, and the making of the human world into a *completed* whole; we could, then, call this the end of history, in a sense, since a human world that does not require struggle and activity would not really be historical at all. This, however, would seem to require a power other than the powers that we possess. Apart from this completed redemption, however, there does not seem to be any problem with thinking of the messianic in terms of a power that human beings possess, and things that human beings can bring about. Benjamin does, of course, recognize the limits of our ability to relate to the past, and thus the limits placed on the possibilities of past and present coming together: "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again."[420] The creation of unity between past and present thus becomes a continuous task, one that we in the present must constantly strive to create anew, rather than it simply being present for us. The very attempt, however, ensures that the past *can* be

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421 Rolf Tiedemann. "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses 'On the Concept of History.'" *The Philosophical Forum* (Volume XV, Nos. 1-2, Fall-Winter 1983-4), p.

422 "On the Concept of History," p. 390

“awakened,” restored to life, and brought into a relation with the rest of the course of history. The past and the present both, then, gain their meaning from being part of a history of continuous struggle toward freedom, a history of the true spirit's attempt to bring about a world in which it can be at home.

Conclusion

The Introduction to this work began with the question of "progress" and its possibility, but this question, while remaining present in the background, has throughout these chapters taken a subordinate position to other issues. I would therefore like to take these last few pages and return to the question of historical progress, and bring out what has not always been made explicit in the preceding chapters. We ended the last chapter with the idea of the unity of the historical process, and, through Benjamin's work, how we can think of history as a unified whole. What I would like to do now is to suggest how this unity is related to an idea of progress that is stripped of its connotations of being an inevitable historical movement, or of the simple faith that what occurs later is more advanced than what happens earlier, simply by virtue of being later. I certainly do not want to suggest that there is any idea of progress that is unproblematic, or that human history has even necessarily progressed. My goals here are more modest; I merely want to suggest that *if* historical progress is to be possible, then there is a crucial role to played by the orientation toward the past that historical knowledge gives us, rather than being concerned exclusively with the present and the future.

In traditional ideas of historical progress, the unity of the historical process is a necessary presupposition; the stages of history are unified by their being taken as sharing an ultimate goal toward which they work. These stages further unified by virtue of later ones taking up the advances of earlier ones, and continuing to develop them further. With Benjamin too, as we have seen, some sort of unity of the moments of history is necessary for there to be any qualitative historical change to which we would want to assign the name of “progress.” We have seen Benjamin's understanding of the nature of this unity through his idea of “now-time.” It is this coming together of different moments of time into a unity of past and present that allows the full significance of each moment to be realized, and their potentials to be fulfilled. If we restrict ourselves for the moment to the present, then what the unity of past and present provides is a filling out of the significance of our current goals and struggles. We can take as an example the struggle for the rights of workers. Present goals tend to be limited to things such as negotiating increases in wages, benefits, etc. This is certainly important, and should not be taken lightly. Even while recognizing the importance of these things, however, it needs to also be recognized that struggles limited to these aims do not touch the status quo; what is not questioned is the fundamental relation of workers to business, the place of workers in the economic order. What could be said to be missing, then, is the energy and the broader goals that existed at earlier periods of labor struggle. The ideas that motivated labor movements at their beginnings (and I do not mean to suggest that there was ever a single set of ideas or forces motivating these movements, or that they were always coherently articulated) went beyond things like wages and working hours; there were also the tendencies that strove to express the idea that the worker's place in the economic order should be different from what it was, that the worker should have some control over his or her destiny; the energies arising from, for example, socialist or even utopian tendencies, pointed toward a *qualitative* change in the worker's role in economic life, rather than only striving for a *quantitative* improvement in the worker's conditions.

What Benjamin's idea of history points toward is the idea that, in order for real, qualitative change to come about, it is necessary for these energies to be recaptured, for those in the present to recognize the unity of struggles in the present with the struggles of the past, with each mutually illuminating the other. (This is an oversimplification of Benjamin's understanding of the relation between past and present, as Benjamin's idea of now-time relates to very particular moments of the past and present coming together; but in a very general way, this gets at what is at stake in Benjamin's "now-time.") This is certainly not to suggest that merely quantitative or incremental changes in the present are not valuable, or are to be dismissed or not undertaken if they do not lead to a radical transformation of the social or economic orders. These incremental changes are very real for the people affected by them, and should be worked toward. Yet the question is whether we can think of these kinds of changes as constituting "progress." While they do represent progress in one sense, I think that we should reserve the term "progress," in the broad sense of "historical progress," for something more than actions or occurrences that aim at making do in the world as it is presently constituted, or making the best of situations that exist. "Progress," I think, is a term that should be reserved for events that, in some way, go beyond what exists at present, something more than simply doing the best that we can within a given set of existing circumstances. If we do not reserve the term "progress" for this something *more*, then "progress" can give the illusion of fundamental change where there is only the perpetuation of existing circumstances; real progress would refer to this something more, or something beyond what exists at a given moment. The issue here, again, is that goals in the present, if they do not draw from the energy of the past, become merely a shadow of what they once were; if social or political struggles that aim at a different and better future are separated from their historical roots, then they persist only in name, but in weakened form, without attaining to the fullness of what they could and should mean. The need to avoid this weakened form of “progress” can be seen as an implication of Benjamin's idea of history as traced out in the previous chapter, as well as in Adorno's idea of the “nonidentical” discussed earlier, that is, the idea that it is necessary to recover the history embedded in concepts and ideas, particularly insofar as this history contains energies and tendencies that motivate struggles against, or reactions to, an objective world experienced as alien and hostile to the subject, or as failing to fulfill rational subjective needs and desires.

There is still the question, however, of whether it is possible to prevent an idea of unity or progress from becoming merely a different *positive* unity, a story of progress different from the one that has hitherto dominated historical thinking, yet which is subject to the same dangers. The problem is that if we merely replace one idea of a unified history with another, then we run the risk of falling into the same difficulties that would seem to plague any idea of a unified, progressive history. There is, for example, the problem that what has happened is the past might come to be seen as justified insofar as it constitutes a stage of progress; the struggles and suffering of those in the past would be justified by their contributions to the present and the future. In particular, the *sufferings* of the past may be justified, and thus forgotten. I believe that these dangers can be avoided, however, since, in the idea of historical unity that I have been trying to develop, it is suffering itself that gives history its unity. Different eras are connected by their being stages in the same history of suffering under the weight of a hostile objective world. What gives content to the struggles of the present is not so much a positive goal as it is the continuity of this suffering. The ultimate goal of course is to overcome the forces that cause this suffering, but the kind of idea of unity that I have been developing here, founded on these aspects of Adorno's and Benjamin's thought, puts this negativity at the forefront, ensuring that the suffering of the past cannot be forgotten or covered over by any positive goals or outcomes. A history unified by suffering, then, both gives our future-oriented goals fuller content, while at the same time ensuring that the true nature of the past will not be forgotten.

I have been suggesting that the ideas of history that we find in Benjamin and Adorno allow us to think of progress more radically, reserving it for actions that strive to introduce into the world something truly qualitatively new. Yet perhaps this constitutes not so much a more radical rethinking of progress, but only a recovery of the original intentions or energies behind the idea of progress. That "progress" had these more radical connotations as part of its meaning can be seen if we consider the ways in which the idea of "progress" arises in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries precisely as a way of expressing and coping with what was taken to be the introduction of the qualitatively new in nearly every area of life. This idea was meant to express these new developments, to come to terms with upheavals in political, social, and economic life, while at the same time providing a way of taking control of them, of interpreting them in terms of the development of the qualitatively new and *better*.

The idea of history that we find in Benjamin's work perhaps provides us with a way of reclaiming this more radical meaning of progress. Progress could no longer be thought of as simply meaning that later stages of history represent an improvement over earlier ones, as is the case with naïve ideas of progress (even those that we find in more sophisticated thinkers, such as Kant, contain tendencies in this direction). With Benjamin's idea of history, we cannot simply compare later stages of history to earlier ones, since historical time is no longer conceived of here as a linear, unidirectional process. Earlier stages of history, that is, cannot simply be taken as being "worse" or "less advanced" than later ones, because, first, this kind of judgment implies that the past is truly past and can thus be judged as a mere fact. In order to determine whether progress exists, then, it will not do to simply judge moments of history against one another. Rather, in order to determine whether a moment constitutes progress, it should be judged against the nature of history as a whole, that is, against the *mythical* nature of human history. An action or event could be said to constitute, or contribute to, progress if it somehow introduces something that contributes to combating this mythical structure, this world in which human beings are subject to forces outside of our control. A real concept of progress would thus deal not with comparing different stages to one another, since all stages of history, at bottom, share this mythical structure. It is this identification of the historical world as unified precisely by its non-historical or mythical nature that ensures for Benjamin that any true progress in its most emphatic sense, any truly qualitative change, would not be incremental, but rather explosive. This does not, I believe, have to mean that progress can only occur where entire social orders are overturned; it could apply to smaller scale, local actions, as long as they do something to contribute to the assertion of human control over the historical world.

Another way of saying this is that actions should be judged against the concept of the historical itself. Although we can no longer judge later stages against earlier ones, we can, perhaps, judge an act or event against its own concept, or against the concept of historical action as such—that is, an action or event could be said to be truly historical insofar as it contributes to the idea of humankind taking conscious control of the human world, subjecting the social, political, economic orders to conscious control, rather than their being merely the repetition of what has always been. The criterion, that is, is merely the concept of historical time or historical action themselves, rather than being any concrete stages of history, and improvement on these stages.

It should be pointed out here that this idea of progress that I am proposing diverges from what historical action usually means for Adorno and Benjamin. That is, they conceive of historical action not primarily as something positive, as this introduction of something new and better into the world; for them, historical action is first and foremost negative, a reaction against the dominant historical tendencies. We can see this, for example, in Benjamin's characterization of historical revolutions: “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.”[421] Progress, in our present state, is, in the first instance, only an attempt to halt the destructive course of history. This negative significance given to “progressive” historical action is essential, as any action or event that claims to represent progress in relation to what has been must be judged against the actual course of history and what actually exists, in order to determine whether it does truly go against this course. Further, it would be naïve to think that there would be a progress possible that simply runs parallel to the course that history has hitherto taken. If a historical action does not work *against* this course, aiming at stopping it, then it will inevitably be integrated into the dominant course of history, taken over for the historical trend's own purposes and thereby neutralized. We can think here of the way in which the very idea of progress is made to serve ideological purposes.

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[421] Benjamin, “Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'” in *Selected Writings, volume 4,* p. 402

If the course of history is allowed to go on undisturbed, then there can be no real, positive progress. The most urgent task for humanity, generally speaking, is putting a halt to the course that perpetually keeps human beings in thrall to powers that they do not control, and that prevent the development of human potentials and human happiness. This is why we see, in both Benjamin and Adorno, the idea that any advance is essentially negative, coming only as a reaction against the negative and mythically structured whole. And this negativity, again, serves as a hedge against the ideological misuse of the idea of progress, and the forgetting of the suffering that serves as its ultimate foundation. But this priority given to the negative should not be taken as the end of the story; the negative and positive are intimately related. Every action against the negative whole contains within itself an image of what true, positive progress would consist in, what a positive step would be, even if this positive step appears only in a deformed or damaged state. Progress as negative, that is, as a reaction against the existing state of the world, contains within itself at least an image of the positive, even if this image is not fully realized. A failed struggle that attempts to put a stop to some aspect of the world contains the negative of what the positive would be; the attempt to abolish some instance of unfreedom contains within itself, even if it is not coherently articulated, an idea of what real freedom would be. A merely negative action, a reaction against the existing state of the world, is full of potential, possibilities, but these possibilities need to be developed and articulated in a way that allows us to make a conscious plan that goes beyond simply striking out at a restrictive world which, even if motivated by genuine suffering and experience of unfreedom, will remain blind if not enlightened by the positive goal toward which it points. The very fact that people feel impelled to strike out against the whole, often in irrational ways, points toward the existence of a positive goal, and the need to give it some form, some articulation. And this positivity does not go unrecognized by Adorno. He writes that "[g]rayness could not fill us with despair if our minds did not harbor the concept of different colors, scattered traces of which are not absent from the negative whole."[422] The very fact of suffering, of a lack of fulfillment, contains the idea that there should be something else, some different state of things. Yet this something else requires interpretation, in particular, historical interpretation. Adorno goes on: "The traces always come from the past, and our hopes from their counterpart, from that which was or is doomed."[423] It is history that gives us insight into what else might be. This is because our suffering in the present is not new; it is a repetition, or a continuation, of circumstances that have existed before, or that have always existed.

One reason that talk of progress becomes problematic for Adorno and Benjamin is that the idea tends to be bound up with the idea of a universal history. I do not think, however, that this idea is beyond redemption. An idea of progress arising out of the connection of present struggles with the past could point toward a different kind of universal history, a universal history in which humankind is united not *only* by suffering and domination, as has hitherto been the case, but one in which humanity is united in the struggle that arises out of this suffering, the struggle to take control of our own destiny, to create a world in which human potentials can be fulfilled, in which true happiness becomes a possibility. Such a universal history certainly cannot be written at the present, since there is no end point in sight—it would be dangerous to create such a whole, as this would have to overlook what cannot be integrated into it. But perhaps this kind of approach to history that aims at recovering the lost or forgotten moments, moments with which the present can enter into a unity, represents a first and provisional attempt at writing such a universal history, or of taking a true universal history as its ultimate (and perhaps unfulfillable) goal. Benjamin writes that "[o]nly in the messianic realm does a universal history exist. Not as written history, but as festively enacted history."[424] A true universal history, that is, would simply *be*, it would be enacted in the lived aspects of a fulfilled world. But since this is out of our grasp, it is incumbent upon us to attempt to, if not write such a history, at least create a history in which our actions *could* be incorporated into such a written universal history.

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[422] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 378

[423] ibid.

This need for *writing* history brings us back to our point of departure in Hegel's work. For Hegel, again, the writing of history is a crucial aspect of the *realization* of human history. History is unified not only as a set of events, but as events grasped in thought; without this element of thought, we have merely causally connected moments, or moments without any real connection—it is the thinking subject looking at history retrospectively that forges the deeper connection between moments of time, connections that, while real, also require mental activity to bring these connections out, to make them actual as opposed to their being only implicit. We could see something similar in the ideas of history that we have developed out of Adorno and Benjamin. That is, advances in historical being require this look backward, this reading out of the past the things that were not consciously grasped at the time yet which, through their being consciously grasped in the present, is what forges the connections, the true unity of history.

Yet there is an obvious point of divergence between Hegel's idea of history and the one that I have been developing in the previous chapters. That is, there can be no actualized whole; such an idea seems so far-fetched that even as a goal it seems counterproductive, as our goals should be more limited, more specific. Perhaps this is why Benjamin connects the idea of universal history with the messianic realm. Only through a messianic intervention could such a unified and actualized history exist. But there is left to humankind the “weak” messianic power that Benjamin ascribes to us. That is, we have the power, in some limited sense, to forge these connections between moments of history, between disparate and scattered points in time. Although there is no completion possible for us, our self-conscious *activity* in the continual struggle to overcome the forces that stand over and against us and determine us could perhaps be taken as the actualization of historical activity. Universal history, then, could be thought of as the self-conscious struggle to *institute* freedom, to create institutions that allow our freedom to be fully actualized, a world in which we can feel at home. This activity, the very exercise of our self-conscious faculties, the setting and working toward goals, could be said to be the actualization that is possible for humankind. Our actualized Reason can only take the form of the exercise of our self-conscious faculties in the service of striving to create the *possibility* of freedom.

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[424] Benjamin, "Paralipomena," p. 404

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