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Adorno and Marx

The end of ideology critique in the era of culture industry

Abstract

This article reconstructs Adorno's engagement with Marx not as a retreat into cultural criticism, but as immanent critique – a transformative actualization of Marxian categories under late capitalism. It identifies four commitments Adorno both inherits from Marx and reworks: human beings as historically formed ensembles of social relations, alienation as a social pathology, the persistence of class antagonism despite waning class consciousness, and ideology as materially rooted misrecognition embedded in social practices. Late capitalist forms of domination are reproduced less by legitimation than by standardized cultural forms that discipline perception, desire, and judgment, rendering conformity “rational” and alternatives unintelligible. Ideology as doctrine becomes ideology as integration, supplementing the theoretical primacy of economic compulsion with the notion of a necessary subjective “surplus” to stabilize a society whose promises contradict experience.

Keywords

Immanent critique, Culture industry, Ideological integration

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Introduction

For a long time, Adorno's relationship to materialist social theory, and in particular to the critical philosophy of Karl Marx, has been the subject of controversy. Looking back at Adorno's work today – from his central philosophical writings to his lectures and letters – there is hardly any doubt about the fundamental importance he attributed to Marx for his own critical theory. Adorno's rich and expansive engagement with Marx's writings makes it clear that Adorno took the Marxian materialist critique of bourgeois society as the unsurpassed model for any critical analysis of capitalism's social totality and elementary contradictions – not only for the bourgeois period Marx analyzed, but also for the social conditions of the Western capitalist post-war period, which Adorno called "late capitalism"¹.

Comparing the bourgeois capitalist era with the 20th century, there are both changes and continuations worth pointing out. Due to technological progress as well as the colonial exploitation of cheap labor power – a fact that is painfully underdeveloped by Adorno – the standard of living in the hegemonic Western capitalist nations increased to a degree that "the proletarians today genuinely have more to lose than their chains, namely their small car or motorcycle as well" (Adorno 2019b: 38).

However, neither globally nor inside the Western capitalist nations would class antagonism be abolished, nor could the vast majority of members of the capitalist societies be considered free in a more than formal sense. Much to the contrary, according to Adorno, the intensification of social integration and normalization of consciousness under the late capitalist system of "culture industry" had reached a historically unparalleled fever pitch. Against this backdrop of a transformed yet persistent reign of social antagonism, systematic exploitation, and social reproduction under the spell of naturalized social laws and "mute compulsion", Adorno was just as eager as Marx to understand the particular set of ideological arrangement of ideas, institutions, and practices that would serve as the subjective "glue" holding the oppressive objectivity of the capitalist social order so robustly in its place.

Given that Adorno wanted his work to be understood both as a renewal and continuation of the project of Marx's materialist critique of

¹ As Giovanni Zanotti helpfully suggested in his comment on this paper at the 2025 international conference "Adorno &" (Bologna, 28 March 2025), Marx occupies a special place in Adorno's thinking, as his materialist approach serves as a lens through which Adorno critically evaluates other significant systems of thought.

capitalism, a natural way to approach their relation seems to be to ask whether indeed Adorno's critical theory of the late capitalist 20th century lived up to the project and method modelled in Marx's critique of political economy. Do we find in Adorno a continuation of the critique of political economy as paradigmatically outlined in the work of Marx? Or is Adorno to be reproached for, as Martin Jay sums it up, him (and Horkheimer) being "never really serious students of economics, Marxist or otherwise" (Jay 1996: 152)? Do Marx's central ideas – from the concept of capitalism as a structurally antagonistic social order, to the analysis of the reifying effect of the commodity fetish, as well as the underlying materialist epistemology which emphasizes the embeddedness of all thought and knowledge in the fabric of the social – find a suitable place in Adorno's thought? Or does the way Adorno seems to shift the emphasis from economic analysis to aesthetic and cultural investigations ultimately dilute the critical analysis they were meant to deepen?

However, my question here shall be less whether Adorno's writings contain an engagement with economics comparable to that of Marx (this has been thoroughly elaborated in Braunstein 2022). As has been reported, Adorno, who saw himself rather averse to economics, admired Marx, who – according to Adorno – was known for similar sentiments, but nevertheless "tackled exactly that which he found disgusting: the economy" (Adorno 2018: 164). Rather, the following thoughts shall primarily offer some reflection on how Adorno himself wanted his theoretical relation to Marx to be understood – even if this will also necessarily involve some reflections on Adorno's sense of the transmutations of the economic. The hypothesis I want to argue for, is that the most productive understanding of Adorno's reference to Marx is that of an *immanent critique*. Adorno's aim is not a mere adaptation of Marx's thought, but rather a critical continuation that strives to use the immanent potentials and contradictions of Marx's analysis to go beyond his critics as well as his devotees.

I will develop my argument in three steps. Firstly, I will give a terse overview of some of the key elements of Marx's critical theory of bourgeois capitalism that Adorno picks up upon (1). Secondly, I will reconstruct the method of immanent critique and its crucial methodology for Adorno (2). In the third and final step, I will outline how Adorno's *culture industry* thesis can be interpreted as immanent critique, i.e. as critical appropriation and expansive continuation of Marx's philosophical project (3).

1. *Elements of the Marxist critique of capitalism*

While Adorno never wrote a comprehensive interpretation of Marx, the countless mentions and references which can be found scattered through his oeuvre still easily transcend the scope of a brief summary. To explore the thesis that Adorno's reading is best understood as an immanent critique of Marx's philosophy, four core aspects of Adorno's affirmative references to Marx are worth highlighting: Marx's *formal anthropology*, which understands human beings as both the producer and the product of social reality (1.1); Marx's *theory of alienation*, which analyses the social conditions of bourgeois society as systematically blocking free democratic self-determination (1.2); Marx's concept of *class*, according to which class antagonism is the essential analytical category for understanding the capitalist social order (1.3); and finally, Marx's theory of *ideology*, according to which ideology is to be understood as consciousness rooted in the prevailing practices of bourgeois society, which systematically consolidates the reproduction of domination and injustice (1.4). Not only are these some of the most prominent aspects that Adorno repeatedly and affirmatively addresses in his references to Marx, but the very constellation of them forms a systematic context, which underlines the significance of Marx's thought for Adorno in terms of the history of ideas.

1.1 *An anti-humanist anthropology*

Marx famously thinks of the human being as a *zoon politikon* and an "ensemble of social relations" (Marx 1976a: 4). At its core, this formal anthropology is built on the assumptions that human beings are elementary dependent on other human beings, that freedom in an emphatic sense can only be conceived as social freedom, and that it would be a misapprehension not to think of human beings simultaneously as the producers as well as the products of their social conditions. While being weary of substantive anthropological musings, Adorno expresses in many places his agreement with this minimal social anthropology, e.g. when he underlines, that the individual is not a substance that precedes society, but "is determined by society down to his innermost composition" (Adorno 2019a; own transl.).

If there is anything to say about individual self-fulfillment, it is against the backdrop of the idea that the singular human being can only realize itself freely where it "determines [itself] in relation to other human

beings” (Adorno 2019a: 135; own transl.). Accordingly, Adorno shares with Marx a critique of the (modern) ideology of the individual as a *Robinsonade*, which takes its specific structure of needs and its relationship to itself and the world, as a precursor of society and history. Rather, the human being, as the subject of modern philosophy, is to be understood as the ensemble of a specific historical constellation, the formation of which does not constitute an external standpoint for society and history but is itself “a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present” (Marx 2010: 302). Consequently, for Adorno, any talk of substantial, supra-historical human needs is always suspect of being ideological (Adorno 2017). A look at the historically concrete form of the human being shows that its needs and categories of knowledge are not static, but always only appear in their dynamic form, and, when put under analysis, as mediated factors in the reproduction of the entire social life process.

1.2 Critique of alienation through the idea of a “natural history”

The second way in which Adorno’s thought continues Marx’s social critique concerns the idea of alienation. At its core, Marx’s theory of alienation states that bourgeois capitalist society is a non-functioning functional totality that is alienated insofar as the historically sedimented objectivity of its thought and action stands in the way of the free development and democratic autonomy of humanity. Contrary to its appearance, bourgeois society does not enable the universal realization of social freedom and communal self-determination but systematically sets limits to them. In bourgeois society, the appearance and reality of freedom are in stark contradiction to each other, in that the immediate oppression of people by feudal powers has been much less abolished than it appears. Rather, it has found a continuation by other means, as, for Marx just as for Adorno, bourgeois capitalist society, despite the establishment of formal equality, is still a metamorphosis of those oppressive relations under which the individual “is a debased, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being” (Marx 1975a: 137).

Crucial to Marx’s materialist perspective is the idea that the alienating relations of capitalism reproduce themselves through their essential institutions and practices – above all, through labor. Through the historically specific form of proletarian wage labor – here Marx has in mind primarily the factory labor of the 19th century – workers are alienated from the product of their labor, from their labor activity, from the human species,

and from other human beings (Marx 2010: 279 ff.). Through the logic of capital, which continually appropriates the surplus value of their labor, workers in capitalism create an ever-expanding alien “objective world” (Marx 2010: 341) but feel at home outside of work only because they deny themselves and their needs in work and develop increasingly instrumentally impoverished relationships with one another. In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx famously writes: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1979: 103).

From the perspective of alienation theory, this can be summarized as follows: freedom of political action can only ever take place under the given conditions of a historically sedimented objectivity. However, these objectified social conditions – such as the hegemonic social institutions and practices of the bourgeois capitalist society – can reach a point where they render people powerless to a detrimental degree.

As is important to note, this idea of alienation does not entail the romantic or even ontological fallacy of presuming a non-alienated past or a non-mediated access to nature, which would allow for understanding “true” needs or a “real” state of things. To the contrary, Adorno defends Marx time and again, both against his fierce critics, the “anti-Marxists”, and his devotees, the “Marxists”. According to Adorno, in fact, both sides often indulge in a surprisingly similar reductionist one-sided understanding of Marx, misconstruing his critical analysis of bourgeois economy as an “unreserved economic objectivism” (Adorno 2019b: 63). As a criticism of those Marx-interpreters who turn the idea of the materialist method into a dogma, Adorno in his lectures on *Philosophical terminology* elaborates:

There is no natural materialism or materialist metaphysics, that is to say, no doctrine of materialist principles; and this is not something external to Marx’s thought. [...] It is precisely this that constitutes a critique of total, conclusive thinking, which is much more the defining impulse of Marxian materialism than the assertion, so easily used in the debate, that being determines consciousness and not the other way around. (Adorno 2016: 257; own transl.)

Accordingly, in *Negative dialectics* Adorno puts much emphasis on the passage in *The German ideology* where Marx and Engels write: “We know only a single science, the science of history. History can be conceived from two sides, divided into the history of nature and the history of mankind.

Yet there is no separating the two sides; as long as men exist, natural and human history will qualify each other" (Marx, Engels 1976c: 28).

The seminal text in which Adorno picks up this idea of an unresolvable entanglement of human and natural history is his lecture *The idea of a natural history* (Adorno 1984). As Deborah Cook has pointed out, later in *Negative dialectics* Adorno follows up on his early attempt to understand Marx's and Engels' idea of the dialectically mediated relationship between human history and natural history by stating that the traditional dualistic or antithetical understanding of nature and history is both true and false at the same time (Cook 2006: 720 ff.). It is "true", in Adorno's words, "insofar as it expresses what happened to the natural element" – that is, nature has been epistemologically and practically negated by modern instrumental reason to such an extent that what now appears natural is actually social. At the same time, the antithesis between nature and history is "false" because of its obfuscatory positivist nature: "It apologetically repeats the concealment of history's natural growth by history itself" (Adorno 2004: 358).

Adorno's argument has both an epistemological and a practical historical perspective. In *epistemological* terms, we have to think of natural history and human history as inextricably intertwined, since it is only human history that produced the concepts from which history – of anything at all – can be understood. Seen in this way, the reconstruction of a non-human natural history, however it may be constituted, can only proceed through concepts that are already the product of human history and of the metabolism of humanity with nature for the reproduction of their species. From a *historical* perspective, both for Marx and for Adorno, the mediation of human history and natural history is itself subject to historical development. On the one hand, the sciences of nature, which aim to make raw nature, not (yet) affected by humans, usable as raw material, and to develop it both practically and conceptually, only emerge when nature has already been largely penetrated by culture and human history. On the other hand, both Adorno and Marx see the mutual permeation of human history and natural history as a rapidly progressing process, especially in modern times.

Accordingly, when Marx speaks of the "natural laws" of capitalism, Adorno interprets this not as some objectivist naturalism. Rather, Marx's critical claim here is that under the alienated conditions of capitalism the very *socially* produced forms of a history of domination are of a quasi-*natural* quality for those members of these societies. And it is this very

false naturalization of the social that a critical social theory has the task to once again denaturalize as second nature.

1.3 *Continuation and contestation of class antagonism*

Thirdly, Adorno's critical theory of society is influenced by Marx's understanding of class and class antagonism. The theory of alienation that Marx speaks of is not a description of a human condition, but a historically specific analysis of the social relations of bourgeois capitalist society. These conditions cannot be adequately described without recognizing that social forms and forces are determined by the fundamental class antagonism between capital and labor. Determined by their social positions in relation to the contradiction between capital and labor, the aims and intentions of individual members of society – whether capitalists or proletarians – are secondary and fundamentally limited. In the economic sphere, they function as “personifications of the economic relations” (Marx 1975b: 95).

As Adorno lays out in his numerous lectures which touch upon the subject of sociology, the category of class is indispensable for any attempt to grasp the social reality of any historic form of capitalism. No other concept than that of class allows a comparable depiction of the division of society into oppressors and oppressed, exploiters and exploited, up to the historical formation of “late capitalism”. From the division of manual and intellectual labor to the distribution of expropriation and profit, property and bondage, the concept of class denotes not just one structuring element of capitalism among many, but its “essential” feature (Adorno 2000: 25 ff.).

Accordingly, Adorno also defends Marx against all attempts of “bourgeois sociology” (Adorno 2003c: 101) to declare Marx's class theory obsolete. Rather, the frequently raised accusation that Marx's class analysis would have become “obsolete” has itself become “a piece of ideology” (Adorno 2000: 96), playing into the hands of the continuing class relations, insofar as it contributes to their invisibility in the realm of social analysis. If this critique wants to base itself on the lack of empirical evidence for “class-consciousness”, then this is a distortion of the fact that the category of class nevertheless shapes social reality in a way that becomes all the more robust the more it eludes the conscious experience of individuals (Adorno 2000: 23 ff.).

The overlap between Adorno and Marx regarding the difference between the social existence of class and the facticity of class consciousness becomes clear when Adorno writes: “Marx, and later Marxists in particular, were aware that class consciousness is not mechanically linked to the existence of classes, but must first be established” (Adorno, Jaerisch 1968: 184; own transl.). Here Adorno’s allusion to revolutionary class politics reveals a political streak in the very register to be found in Marx’s writings – a notion of politics that is antithetical to any determinist misreading of Marx’s and Engels’ materialist epistemology, according to which it is “life that determines consciousness” (Marx, Engels 1976c: 37), insofar as the “production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life” (Marx, Engels 1976c: 36). Again, it is Adorno defending Marx against his misinterpretations by Marxists and anti-Marxists, echoing Engels in his famous letter to J. Bloch, where he writes: “According to the Materialist Conception of History, the factor which is *in the last instance* decisive in history is the production and reproduction of actual life. More than this neither Marx nor myself ever claimed” (Engels 1890: 463).

What characterizes the challenge for revolutionary class politics under the social conditions of late capitalism is not the actual overcoming of class antagonism, but the waning of class consciousness and the corresponding decline in class solidarity. This is why both in theory and in practice, any critical theory with the systematic intention of contributing to overcoming of the social arrangements of exploitation and domination must be reflexively critical against signs of reification in its own theoretical structures: “Marxism as a critical theory of society means that it cannot be hypostatized, cannot simply become philosophy. The philosophical questions are *open*, not predetermined by a world view” (Adorno 2003b: 292; own transl.).

In this respect, the historical treatment of class antagonism and its structural change leads directly to the fourth aspect of Marx’s thought that was of fundamental importance to Adorno: the critique of ideology.

1.4 *Ideology: critique of the subjective surplus of structural domination*

The fourth aspect of Karl Marx’s thinking that Adorno affirms and adopts is his theory of ideology and thus the fundamental sociological question of the social determination of knowledge in general. More specifically, it

is the idea of “ideology” as a socially determined form of false consciousness, first explicitly developed by Marx and Engels in *The German ideology*, which supports and reproduces the hegemonic conditions of bourgeois capitalist society. While the doctrine of ideology itself looks back on a long tradition, for Adorno Marx’s understanding is the central reference. Fundamentally, two central aspects can be distinguished in Marx’s understanding of ideology, both of which are important to Adorno precisely in their context. On the one hand, Marx speaks of ideology when referring to a specific set of beliefs about the nature and the determining factors of social conditions and their development that corresponds to the thinking and interests of the ruling class, in that it obscures the essential contradictions of society and justifies the existing order. Adorno therefore speaks of a critique of liberal “legitimizing ideologies” (Adorno 2022: 176 ff.). The historical era of these legitimizing ideologies is the time of bourgeois society. While the ideological conceptions of the feudal epoch had the primary function of compensating for the injustices suffered, the era of legitimizing ideologies is that of a social formation that claims to be rationally justifiable: “Ideology in an emphatic sense can arise only where the claim to the rational, legitimate or justifiable character of society has already in some sense become universal” (Adorno 2022: 160).

The most significant ideologies of this period – the notion of exchange of equivalents, the idea of employment as a contract, and one between free and equal citizen – are caricatures and false justifications for social conditions in which people were supposed to be free and equal in name, but the realization of these values was structurally undermined. What distinguishes Marx’s theory of ideology in a decisive way from that of his predecessors, however, is that his concept of ideology is a “materialistic” notion that has always understood ideology as more than mere discursive justification. For both Adorno’s and Marx’s understanding of ideology, it would be reductive to think that ideological justifications are merely false justifications that distract from or shape real social conditions. On the contrary, in the alienated conditions of bourgeois society, ideologies do not merely have an external effect but permeate and structure social existence to its core. The paradigmatic example of the material life of ideology in Marx’s writings is in the chapter *Fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof* in volume one of *Capital*. Here Marx analyzes “the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” (Marx 1975b: 83).

As Marx points out, there is a structural misapprehension at play here: what in fact represents a specific constellation of human relationships appears as a purely objective quality of the commodity as a thing. In other words, the social reality of bourgeois society is constituted in such a way that “ordinary consciousness”, in its attempt to make sense of everyday conditions, is systematically misled by these conditions themselves into a consciousness that feeds back into the maintenance of these conditions. In *Negative dialectics* Adorno writes, following Marx: “Ideology is not superimposed as a detachable layer on the being of society; it is inherent in that being” (Adorno 2004: 354). Hence, ideology is the naturalization of material conditions embedded in the fabric of these conditions itself. Adorno therefore also speaks of ideology as a “second nature”: “The relations of production into which human beings are born and within which they act become a kind of second nature to them, and one which preforms all the categories through which they have now come to think” (Adorno 2022: 106).

In an almost literal adoption of Marx’s concept of ideology, Adorno sees the ideological formation of capitalist bourgeois society as one in which social alienation is maintained by a circle of ideological convictions and a lifeworld that itself has become to a vast extent a sedimented ideology. In other words, in a social order in which regulative illusions, such as the value of the commodity as a natural property or that of just exchange, determine the conditions of interaction and reproduction, it is to some extent natural that the dominant “current forms of thought” correspond “directly and spontaneously” (Marx 1975b: 542) with the material conditions in which they are embedded. Accordingly, Adorno, like Marx, sees the task of ideology critique as breaking through this veil of supposedly natural conditions – to denaturalize the conditions again – in order to demand the realization of those values which, although structurally already present in the conditions as justification, are at the same time systematically prevented from being realized. Thus, for Adorno, Marx’s critique of liberalism is “nothing but the ideology of that very society expressly contrasted with the reality” (Adorno 2022: 143). It seeks the realization of the rational content of ideology itself, i.e. the abolition of the deficient and contradictory present form of the “petrified relations” of the given, “by singing their own tune to them!” (Marx 1975a: 178).

The enlightening goal of this critique of ideology as deconstruction is to educate people about conditions of a form of life worthy of critique, the persistence of which is (also) due to the fact that these people have false ideas about the nature and genesis of these conditions. In this sense,

for Adorno as for Marx, ideology critique is a denaturalizing interpretation, a genealogical method of “reading nature from history and history from nature” (Adorno 2006: 134). The critique of bourgeois society ideology has the goal of showing people that the sale of labor as a commodity – while taking place under conditions of formal freedom – is structurally based on a historical constellation of inequality and domination. Marx’s analysis further deciphers that the commodity fetish, which makes the value of the commodity appear as something inherent and natural to the commodity, “is in reality nothing but society in a bewitched form” (Adorno 2022: 166). In this light, an ideology critique of legitimating ideology means “that exposing the difference between ideology and reality already serves and intrinsically implies the possibility that the criticized ideology not only fall away, but also that it be realized” (Adorno 2022: 156).

Considering Adorno’s affirmative reading of these cornerstones of Marx’s Critical Theory of the capitalist form of life, one might ask how much of a critical reading there even might be to Adorno’s interpretation at all. Before moving on to the disagreement, however, the next section shall give a quick draft of the basic understanding of interpretation as immanent critique.

2. *The method of immanent critique*

The idea of *immanent critique* is at the heart of Adorno’s negative dialectics and can be deemed as the lens through which he interprets Marx’s theoretical enterprise. Broadly put, the concept of immanent critique stands for a specific understanding of the (proper) relationship between the critic and the object of critique, on the one hand, and the process of critique, on the other. The basic notion is that the virtue of a convincing critique lies not merely in approaching the object of critique from the outside. Rather, what makes an object worthy of criticism is to be worked out by working through its immanent tensions and contradictions. Hence, the intention of the critique is to rescue or help to establish the potential that is already inherent in the thing itself and at the same time obscured by the initiation of a transgressive process.

It is impossible to overlook the close methodological *Familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance) between Adorno’s and Marx’s understanding of immanent criticism as the dialectical continuity in science by *via negationis* – that Marx himself critically adapted from the Hegelian concept of *determinate negation*. Accordingly, the principle that guides Marx’s en-

gement with the bourgeois economic literature of his days, as well as his critique of Hegel's thought itself, is the notion that "the goal of a critical scientific science is to free oneself from past inadequacies", and the conviction that the "only way to do this is to go to the heart of past or existing science and unlock the shackles of its logic" (Murray 1990: 21).

But what is to be understood by this transgressive potential, which is obviously the basic precondition of immanent critique? Adorno assumes that all intellectual products of value and magnitude are characterized by the fact that each of them "goes beyond that which it understands itself to be, and which it purports to be" (Adorno 2000: 121). Insofar as the object of critique is a product of intellectual activity, it will always turn out to be an entity that is not completely self-contained. Rather, it will form what Adorno calls a contradictory totality, i.e. a complex and extensive compound of various, sometimes opposing elements, some of which are more dynamic, productive and emancipatory in character, while some others are more limiting and static.

One of the most succinct formulations of the idea of immanent critique is Marx's famous dictum: "We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles" (Marx 1976: 144).

For Adorno, too, the core of productive continuity, which is designated by the term "immanent critique", lies in a creative appropriation, a qualitative transformation of what has gone before, which describes neither an abstract break nor a mere repetition. As developed by Rahel Jaeggi, immanent critique is an alternative to both "internal critique" and "external critique" (Jaeggi 2018: 173-214). External critique measures its object against an external standard, that is, it confronts the object of its critique with a normative resource that is not already inherent in the object of critique, but external to it. While this method may be appropriate or even the only one possible for some objects – Adorno stresses that the ideologies of fascism, in their ruthless irrationality, no longer offer any normative points of grounding for an immanent critique –, it also runs the risk of being external, abstract, powerless, because it lacks engagement with its object. On the other hand, the method of internal critique, which takes its object at its word and seeks to measure it strictly against its own explicit standards, is in danger of having a conservative-traditionalist streak. Adorno sees this as a central weakness of "positivism". By this he means a science which (in its own understanding) sets out only to establish empirically ascertainable facts, but which, in its attempt to avoid any inter-

pretative subjectivism, tends only to produce an implicitly affirmative doubling of the superficial features of its object of knowledge.

Internal and external critique have two central problems. First, they both have limited epistemic potential because of their biases. Herein lies the *epistemic* inadequacy of both methods. Second, according to Adorno, internal and external critique, too, have a problem of *reflexivity*, as they are based on a methodological self-misunderstanding. This is because both methods are implicitly based on the notion of an unmediated separation between the subject and the object of knowledge. In the case of internal critique, the problem lies in the abandonment of the subjective-cognitive aspects of the person doing the recognizing, which is intended to draw all critical power from the object that poses the problem. The subject is set aside in favor of an absolute “primacy of the object”. On the other hand, in the case of external critique, the exaggerated significance of a source that is normatively completely external to the object of critique places the idiosyncrasy of the object entirely in the shadow of what the subject brings to it. The autonomy of the object is leveled in favor of a hypostatized “preponderance of the subject”. Both forms of critique thus fail to grasp the mediation of subject and object in knowledge. They make it impossible to adequately characterize critique as an interpretive achievement in which subject and object of knowledge do not merely confront each other in the abstract in a reciprocal process of mediation.

But what can be the object of immanent critique? To understand, among other things, the methodological affinity between Adorno and Marx, it is crucial to see that the scope of immanent critique is not limited to aesthetic and intellectual formations in the narrow sense. The object of immanent critique can be not only works of art, aesthetic judgments, ideologies and other belief systems, but anything that can be described as “sedimented spirit”. This includes the many aspects and facets of the social whole, its institutions, practices, implicit and explicit self-understandings and conventions, in short: everything that is also “conceptually” composed in its material form. It is now clear that reading Adorno as an immanent critic of Marx has a very particular meaning, i.e. distinguishing the progressive aspects from the regressive ones in Marx’s own thinking, as well as Marxist interpretations, to actualize a Marxist idea of critical social theory beyond its limitations.

3. *Rethinking ideology critique in the age of culture industry*

As described at the beginning, I want to suggest that Adorno's ties to Marx should be understood as an immanent critique that continues the Marxian project beyond its own limitations. Having outlined in the second section what Adorno understands by immanent critique, I have already emphasized in the first part of my argument that Adorno's critical theory should be read as a thorough continuation of Marx's project in several elementary regards. Adorno shares with Marx: the idea of a formal, negativist anthropology, according to which the human being is not to be regarded as a substratum preceding society, but rather as an "ensemble of social relations"; the analysis of alienation theory, according to which bourgeois society, despite the gain in formal equality, is nonetheless a society that is dominated by falsely naturalized and obfuscated social laws; that this unfreedom is essentially determined by class antagonism, even if the members of society may largely lack "class consciousness" and – correspondingly – "class solidarity"; that the central category of analysis for understanding the reproduction of the "silent compulsions" of bourgeois society is that of ideology.

To get at my thesis of Adorno as an immanent critic of Marx's thought, the next and final step is to work out the extent to which Adorno, in the spirit of Marx, wants to go beyond the more regressive interpretations of Marx by actualizing his project in the shifted social conditions of "late capitalism". Using the example of the thesis of the "culture industry", which Adorno develops primarily with Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I will show how Adorno is concerned with both an *actualization* and a *correction* of Marx's thought: a transformative continuation of Marx's critical theory. The starting point to understand these two interconnected criticisms is a central problem, which both Adorno's and Marx's theory of ideology place at the center: the problem of integration.

Going back to the classical sociology of Weber and Simmel, Adorno supposes that the historical development of modernity represents an intensification of social integration, and that this intensified integration correlates with a historical tendency toward an increasing degree of independence, mechanization, and differentiation of social life all the way down. In his 1964 lecture *Philosophical elements of a theory of society*, Adorno says that "the integration of society has increased, in the sense of a growing socialization; the social fabric has become more and more tightly woven, there are ever fewer areas, ever fewer spheres of so-called

subjectivity that are not more or less taken over quite directly by society, that are not socialized in this sense” (Adorno 2019b: 64).

We can see here that Adorno’s analysis of integration is both a continuation of and a break with Marx’s analysis. On the one hand, in “late capitalism”, as Adorno describes the social order of his time, some of the essential forces that Marx already emphasized in his critique of bourgeois society continue to operate. As in bourgeois society, so in late capitalism there is a general compulsion to participate, since all human beings must submit to the law of exchange if they do not want to perish. In this sense, Marx’s primary focus on the economic sphere and the theories of the political economists remains undiminished, for “human beings continue to be subject to domination by the economic process” (Adorno 2003a: 116).

At the same time, Adorno’s continuation of this Marxian thought contains a description of a change in the form of integration itself. For it is precisely because of the expansion and intensification of the integration process that the essential antagonisms of society – above all class antagonism – become increasingly invisible. While the reproduction of society continues as ever “with grinding and groaning, with unspeakable sacrifices”, the specific form of integration does not have the consequence that while “solidarity should be their ultima ratio; conformity appears more rational to them” (Adorno 2003c: 97).

What, then, characterizes this new form of ideological integration? Adorno (and Horkheimer) used the controversial term *Verblendungszusammenhang* (context of deception) to describe the pervasive nature of modern integration and the related profound inability of subjects to grasp the essential forces and aspects of the social. Central to the idea of this systematic distortion of consciousness as a result of integration in late capitalism is the concept of the “culture industry”. The program of the culture industry is decisively determined by the economic powers of big business. Its purpose is to pacify social conflicts by (supposedly) relieving workers of their work and subtly accustoming them to the continuing harshness of late capitalist socialization.

Adorno distinguishes between the advertising of the culture industry and political propaganda as “pure ideology” (Adorno 2019b: 65) and describes how “the consciousness of countless people can be brought into line simply by the selection and presentation of news and commentary” (Adorno 2003a: 122). As Adorno emphasizes, the term “industry” here refers less to the real conditions of production than to the aspect of standardization and unification of products (Adorno 1975: 14). For while in Adorno’s view sophisticated avant-garde art is always situated as medi-

ated between the individual and the social, idiosyncrasy and economic utility, formal transgression and formal preservation, in the products of the culture industry all these relationships are completely one-sided: form and content are entirely at the service of ideological and economic usability. The formal principle is that of identity. Clichés and stereotypes are crucial, since the aim is always to produce only what the consumers of the culture industry already know. In this respect, the products of the culture industry are predictable and calculable – the mere repetition of what is. The freedom left to the consumer is the “freedom to be the same” (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002: 136).

In this respect, the culture industry thesis is but the central thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* applied to the realm of aesthetics: just as instrumental reason of bourgeois thinking is not simply the other of reason, it would also be too easy to regard the culture industry as the other of bourgeois aesthetics. Otherwise, the culture industry thesis itself would be little more than a bourgeois judgment of taste about mass culture. Rather, the dialectic of bourgeois aesthetics is evident in the products of the culture industry, whose own values – from reconciliation to style, catharsis, tragedy, autonomy, *l’art pour l’art* – are, as it were, realized in the culture industry (Hindrichs 2020: 120).

Precisely because the products of the culture industry do not represent a culture emerging from below, but rather the deliberate integration of its customers from above, any dialectic of the general and the particular comes to a standstill in favor of an overpowering general: the forms of reception, preferences, needs, self- and world-understandings of the customers of the culture industry become recordable, playable, and consciously manipulable. Pleasure, “to be amusement, it must cost no effort” (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002: 109), moving along with the “well-worn grooves of association” (*ibid.*). Advertising and products, with their “ideological clichés” (*ibid.*), are designed to evoke an “unbroken belief in the future: things would stay the same yet get better” (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002: 114 f.). What false consciousness can mean here goes beyond the simple notion of a collection of its bearers or of rational potentially transparent convictions. For Adorno, the era of the ideological formation of the culture industry is a paradigmatic shift for the theory of ideology, as it marks the shift of the social grounds and thereby the form of ideology itself – moving beyond what Marx could have theorized even if his theory still offers the elementary framework.

The social function of integration is no longer (primarily) operated through “legitimizing ideologies” but through the direct manufacturing of

conformity. In other words, ideology of form has taken over the role of ideology of content: “The power of industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness” (Adorno 1975: 17). It does not produce conformism by persuasion, but its patterns, schemes, and concepts are practiced into the most subtle stirrings of the soul of its customers. It appears as a psychologically ingenious apparatus that ties into specific anthropological dispositions.

As Adorno develops in his aesthetic writings – which must be seen as the backdrop to his descriptions of political alienation –, advanced art is characterized by the fact that there is always a surplus due to the non-identity of the already known and the new. In every great work of art, conventional form is both confirmed and transcended. The culture industry follows the contrary aesthetic principle: it has no potential to transcend the given.

There is a vicious circle between the production of the culture industry’s goods and their consumers: what is produced is based on the already existing needs of the customers. It does not go beyond these needs and thus becomes a factor that reinforces these preferences, desires and affinities. Thus, under the culture industry, the freedom of the individual is ultimately a pseudo-freedom, since it allows only a choice between a pre-determined selection of ideologies and identities: “All are free to dance and amuse themselves, just as, since the historical neutralization of religion, they have been free to join any of the countless sects. But freedom to choose an ideology, which always reflects economic coercion, everywhere proves to be freedom to be the same” (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002: 135 f.).

To return to the question from the very beginning, does Adorno’s analysis, which is intended to be a transformative continuation of Marx’s critique of capitalism through immanent critique, live up to this intention? Or do these aesthetic and psychologist extensions represent a departure from materialist theory?

In his discussion of Marx, Adorno often returns to the question of how to develop a materialist critique of society in contrast to the idealistic ideas of his philosophical opponents. Adorno had reservations about the concept of “alienation” because its subjectivist connotation runs the risk of obscuring the fact that the material contradictions of society are far less of a problem for the mind than are the objective dysfunctions of society. In this respect, Adorno shares the anti-psychological impulse of Marx’s materialism. Hence, just like Marx, he regards it as a theoretical flaw to assess social conditions solely under the “form of the object” and

not regard the societal fabric as one that is continually constituted by human beings as Marx's own social ontology demands. Therefore, according to Adorno, the critical theory of late capitalist society is forced, by the mere objectively shifted historical significance of cultural integration, through the culture industry, to include questions of cultural criticism in order not to fall victim to "economism" (Adorno 1983: 28).

If the culture industry thesis is to be seen as an immanent critique of Marxism, its goal must be understood to rescue the end of ideology critique against the deflated dogmatic interpretations that have turned Marx's materialism into a closed and dogmatic philosophical system. To understand the relationship between economic objectivity and the "subjective factor" as Adorno has it in mind, it is instructive to consider a letter to Horkheimer from 1969, in which Adorno relates his understanding of critical theory to Marxist thought in the form of a few theses. The first of the sketchy theses here reads: "Inclusion of the subjective factor. 'The glue'. Necessity of a psychological surplus over and above the objective economy to hold society together" (Adorno 2003b: 292; own transl.).

What is meant by this is the idea that ideological integration in late capitalism cannot be understood as an effect of social objectivity, in relation to which the subjective elements of consciousness and psyche are merely epiphenomenal. Rather, beyond economic coercion, it is precisely subjective integration, even where it supposedly opposes society, which constitutes the binding force – "the glue" – of the social functional context, the apparent "other" of the *Funktionszusammenhang* of the social life process, and yet not completely its other. From this point of view, the various facets of liberal "rugged individualism" – egoism, indifference, greed, illusions of sufficiency, a competitive social character, a narcissistic need for recognition *à la amour propre*, etc. – are precisely the principles that make social reproduction possible in the first place. Only based on this "subjective factor" – Adorno assumes – it can be explained

that, in the face of the divergence between what society promises its members and what it delivers to them, the system could hardly continue to function unless it had molded the people themselves down to their innermost being to conform to itself. If at one time the bourgeois era, with the awakening need for independent wage earners, had produced people who corresponded to the requirements of the new means of production, then these people, generated as it were by the economic-societal system, were later the additional factor that contributed to the perpetuation of the conditions in whose image the subjects were created. (Adorno 2005: 231)

This wide notion of materialism that is true to Marx, exactly because it simultaneously offers a criticism of “established Marxism”, can be understood as an immanent critique, insofar as Adorno merely takes up Marx’s often overlooked critique of mechanistic models of materialism and directs it against the primacy of economic explanations in the narrow sense. This diagnosis does not turn away from Marx’s emphasis on the analytical significance of the economy, but expands the consideration to include the mediation of the supposedly non-economic, which could not be grasped by the “unreserved economic objectivism” (Adorno 2019b: 63), that Adorno attributes to the Marxists who fail to capture the negative dialectical nature of Marx’s thought.

In this respect, the culture industry should indeed be read as a critical actualization of Marx’s critique of ideology: it develops the elementary idea of Marx’s theory of ideology – the problem of integration as a false reconciliation of class conflict – and, at the same time, modifies it with a view to a new historical terrain, for the ideology of the culture industry, “the most effective form of ideology today” (Adorno 2006: 78), is an ideology of a new type. It emerges in a social situation in which the public sphere is decisively structured in form and content by conformist media consumption, which, according to Adorno, limits the emancipative potential of spontaneity and hope far more effectively and profoundly than the classical “legitimizing ideologies” and justifications of the bourgeois era could have ever done. The position Adorno here takes has a defeatist tone that is hard to miss: “There are no more ideologies in the authentic sense of false consciousness, only advertisements for the world through its duplication and the provocative lie which does not seek belief but commands silence” (Adorno 1983: 34).

However, there’s a second immanent criticism of what has become of Marx’s thought in “established Marxism” that acts as a counterbalance to what might seem like an almost totalizing theory of ideological integration. This aspect of critique concerns some Marxists’ tendency toward reconstructing Marx’s thinking as a closed system of thought. Contrary to some of Adorno’s pointed formulations, which present society as a closed system, it is one of his basic socio-ontological views that the dialectical conception of society as a contradictory totality does not allow us to understand society as a self-contained and non-contradictory “pre-stabilized harmony”, nor to completely deny the tendency towards closure in the era of late capitalism and the “administered world”: “A dialectical theory overborne by the painful dominance of these laws does not glorify them

but criticizes them, just as it criticizes the illusion that individual and concrete facts determine the course of the world” (Adorno 2003a: 113).

While the experience of the subjects of late capitalism, which necessarily also inflicts itself on the production of a critical theory of society, is one of structural powerlessness, the dialectical imperative is not to reify this experience to an extreme. As shown above, Adorno clings to Marx’s idea that human beings are not only the producers of their inner nature, but also of the social conditions that shape their inner nature, even in the ever so integrated era of the late capitalist culture industry. Hence, for Adorno, society is to be understood as a self-reproducing process of life, even if the members of a society are rarely fully aware of the conditions of its reproduction. It would be a theoretical mistake – and here he fully embraces the basic idea of Marx’s analysis of the fetish character of the commodity – to treat the forms of practice and interaction of capitalist society merely as the objectified objectivity of an interlocking social functional context, forgetting that these conditions are still however mediated relations between people and not the natural qualities of things as they appear to be. Just as Marx, Adorno is convinced that the critical analysis of society can never achieve the observational distance of scientific research but is itself always a reflective interpretation. In this sense, Adorno’s reading of Marx’s materialist method of immanent critique is itself an actualization by transformation, that historicizes its analytical judgments and turns its dialectical moments against the reified readings of his dogmatic devotees – who according to Adorno do fall behind the complexity of Marx’s thinking, however not necessarily without picking up on more limited elements in Marx’s own thinking. Adorno’s critical reading to the contrary tries to resist any reductionist approach even to its most influential thinkers. It “takes dialectics incomparably more seriously than established Marxism” (Adorno 2003b: 292; own transl.) to rescue Marx from the ossifications of Marxism.

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