

## Theodor W. Adorno: With Hegel Against Capitalism

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How and why does Theodor W. Adorno use the philosophy of Hegel in order to strengthen his Marxist theory and its perspective? This is the question that this essay will try to answer. Against the background of an outline of Adorno's thinking, as far as it is Marxist, the purpose is to reconstruct in what way he is using essential aspects and concepts of Hegel's thinking in order to develop his own philosophical contribution to Marxism. The main thesis, which will be constructed around Adorno's ambivalence towards Hegel, is that Adorno uses his own critique against Hegel's system of identity in his critique of the principle of capitalism, and that, when doing this, Adorno harnesses his adapted version of Hegel's notion of non-identity as a critical tool against both Hegel's identity system and the system of capitalism. This means that, with help from Hegel, Adorno secures a possibility of criticizing Hegel and capitalism (as well as Marx's own tendency toward closure), doing so from a Marxist and system-critical perspective.

In quite different ways, the philosophies of Hegel and Marx play a crucial role for the Western Marxism of the Frankfurt School, of which Adorno is one of the most prominent members.<sup>1</sup> Marx's thinking was a cornerstone already when the institute was founded by Felix Weil,<sup>2</sup> that is, at an earlier stage than when the now most famous members joined. For Max Horkheimer, who became the head of the institute in 1930, Marx played a significant role in the formation of a critical theory that avoided becoming a scientific theory adequate to and the preserve of modern capitalist society.

<sup>1</sup> See Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995) and Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 9ff.

The aims of critical theory were rather to contribute to societal change. Horkheimer wrote about this in his programmatic text on “Traditional and Critical Theory” from 1937, giving the thinking of the Frankfurt School its name: Critical Theory. Horkheimer’s text contains explicit Marxist leanings, it is steeped in Marxist concepts and perspectives (i.e. class, capital, labor, etc.), and is versed in the promise that theory can lead to the demystification of society.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel’s influence is not equally significant for the institute as a whole, but rather a very crucial source of inspiration for some of the members, such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse wrote two books on Hegel, and the second, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941), is especially worthy of mention, for it is in this text that Marcuse argues how Hegel can be regarded as the foundation for a critical and dialectical theory of society.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Marcuse was always more affirmative toward Hegel than Adorno. While Marcuse embraced Hegel’s total system of thought, Adorno in general was suspicious toward Hegel’s, and Marx’s, proclivities for system-building—as far as both can be said to have totalizing tendencies—even if he still uses both thinkers in his own critical philosophy.

Those writings of Adorno relevant for this text are those that deal specifically with Marx and/or Hegel, and in particular those that can be said to set out on a Hegelian Marxist direction. In most cases, one of these dimensions is mainly emphasized. Adorno’s more systematic work on Marx and Hegel—that is, in the sense that it can be viewed as itself a form of Hegelian Marxism—is mainly concentrated to the later phases of his thinking, in contrast to, for example, Marcuse, who, from an early stage of his thinking, sought to articulate Marx with Hegel.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to Marx, Adorno’s understanding was greatly informed by both Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch.<sup>6</sup> However, it was not until he returned to Germany after his time in the USA during the second world war that Marx plays a more expli-

<sup>3</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory, Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See for example the chapter on Hegel’s logics: Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), pp. 121-168.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 5, 9, 14, 17 and 18.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 59-61; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977), pp. 25ff. and Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 8ff.

citly significant role in his publications, for example in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and some of the sociological writings, although present earlier.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Adorno's Marxism can be understood as a form of Western Marxism, with no direct connections to party politics. The same goes with Adorno's Hegel interpretation. It is only later, when Adorno deals with the question of identity,<sup>8</sup> that Hegel becomes more systematically important for his thinking. The preponderance of the identity-question in Adorno's later work is crucial here for the formulation of Adorno's Hegelian Marxism.

Several essays and books of Adorno will not be discussed here since they are not directly relevant for our present aims, even if they are very important writings for Adorno's thinking, as a whole: "Die Aktualität der Philosophie" (1931), "The Idea of Natural History" (1932), *Kierkegaard* (1933), *Minima Moralia* (1951) *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* (1956) and *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964). And while his *Aesthetic Theory*, and his other aesthetic and musicological texts often adopt a Marxist perspective,<sup>9</sup> there will be no room for a discussion of these either. Instead, the most relevant texts for the theme addressed here are *Hegel: Three Studies* (1963), *Negative Dialectics* and several of the sociological essays published in the volumes *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I-II* and *Soziologische Schriften I-II*. Furthermore, Adorno's lectures on negative dialectics, philosophical terminology, moral philosophy and sociology are relevant and will be consolidated, but only as a compliment. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which Adorno co-wrote with Horkheimer, focuses neither on Marx nor on Hegel, but uses several Marxist categories, such as reification, the role of capital and the negative logics of civil society and money. But one important theme in this book that will be of significance is the theoretical connection that Adorno and Horkheimer make between the critique of capitalism and the critique of the instrumental reason of science, and I will have reason to discuss this later.

Published debates surrounding Adorno's relation to Hegel and Marx are comparatively high in number.<sup>10</sup> And yet there has not been much written

<sup>7</sup> Dirk Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), pp. 43ff.

<sup>8</sup> Anke Thyen, *Negative Dialektik und Erfahrung, Zur Rationalität des Nichtidentischen bei Adorno* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), pp. 102ff.

<sup>9</sup> See Oskar Negt, "Adorno als Marxist", in Joachim Perels (ed.), *Leiden beredt werden lassen: Beiträge über das Denken Theodor W. Adornos* (Hannover: Offizin, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> When it comes to Adorno's relation to Hegel, these contributions can be mentioned: John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros & Sergio Tischler (eds.), *Negativity and Revo-*

about Adorno's combined reception of them in terms of his possible contribution to Hegelian Marxism.<sup>11</sup> What could be the reason for this? It cannot be regarded as entirely unproblematic to deal with Adorno in terms of Hegelian Marxism, since his critique of Hegel appears so fundamental. This is an issue this article will broach directly.

The text will begin with a reconstruction of the Marxian concepts used by Adorno, showing how his thinking is Marxist. Thereafter, Adorno's relation to Hegel will be reconstructed, and both his critique and reception of Hegel will be presented. Finally, I will formulate in what way Adorno develops the Hegelian concept of non-identity such that it becomes an indispensable tool in his critique of capitalism.

### Adorno's Marxism

In what way is Adorno's thinking Marxist? Adorno can be understood to have assumed central parts of Marx's theory of society and the critique of

*lution: Adorno and Political Activism* (London: Pluto; 2009), Natalia Baeza, *Contradiction, Critique, and Dialectic in Adorno* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 2012) and Dimitri Vouros, "Hegel, 'Totality', and 'Abstract Universality' in the Philosophy of Theodor Adorno", *Parrhesia*, No. 21 2014. Among earlier studies, these are worth mentioning: Thyen, *Negative Dialektik und Erfahrung. Zur Rationalität des Nichtidentischen bei Adorno*, Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Mauro Bozzetti, *Hegel und Adorno* (Freiburg & München: Alber, 1996). When it comes to the relation to Marx, these can be mentioned among the newer contributions: Sybe Schaap, *Die Verwirklichung der Philosophie* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), Simon Jarvis, "Adorno, Marx, Materialism", in Tom Huhn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Christoph Ziermann, "Dialektik und Metaphysik bei Marx und Adorno", in Wolfram Ette (ed.), *Adorno im Widerstreit: Zur Präsenz seiner Denkens* (Freiburg & München: Alber, 2004), Negt, "Adorno als Marxist", Hendrik Wallat, *Das Bewusstsein der Krise: Marx, Nietzsche und die Emanzipation des Nichtidentischen in der politischen Theorie* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), Holloway, Matamoros & Tischler, *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*, Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Baeza, *Contradiction, Critique, and Dialectic in Adorno*, Christopher Cutrone, *Adorno's Marxism* (Chicago, Illinois, 2013) and Werner Bonefeld, "Emancipatory Praxis and Conceptuality in Adorno", in Holloway, Matamoros & Tischler (eds.), *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*.

<sup>11</sup> Here Nigel C. Gibson, "Rethinking the Old Saw: Dialectical Negativity, Utopia, and Negative Dialectic in Adorno's Hegelian Marxism", in Gibson & Andrew Rubin (eds.), *Adorno: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) and Robert Lanning, *In the Hotel Abyss: An Hegelian-Marxist Critique of Adorno* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) can be mentioned. But these texts do not develop this theme in an elaborated sense. The latter does not read Adorno as a Hegelian Marxist, but rather develops a Hegelian-Marxist critique of Adorno. But Gibson adequately defines Hegelian Marxism as a Marxism that "both emphasizes the Hegel-Marx relationship and uses Hegelian categories to creatively reactualize Marxism within their own context" (p. 286).

society, and to have made those into motivating driving forces in his own theory. Even if Adorno did not publish any particular work on Marx, Marx and his critical impulse are present in Adorno's work in a continuous way. As already mentioned, Adorno discovered Marx early through the contrasting interpretations of Lukács and Bloch. My intention is not to present an entire image of Adorno's Marxism, but rather to focus on those Marxist elements that are important for his Hegelian Marxism. The main purpose here is to connect Adorno's questioning and critique of identity with the Adornian critique of capitalism. Dirk Braunstein, for one, supports the importance of this connection in Adorno.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless he does not discuss this in terms of Hegelian Marxism or in relation to Adorno's reception of Hegel. Nevertheless, Adorno's critique of capitalism is held together by a dismissal of capitalism as a phenomenon that erases differences and creates conformity. The unique character of the singular is grinded down, reduced to an object possible to smoothly handle on the market. But Adorno's critique of capitalism presupposes and thus requires his critique of identity. Adorno's critique of capitalism problematizes capitalism as identity.

Adorno's Marxist way of engaging with Hegel must be related also to other understandings of Marxism during his own time and the critiques he leveled at them. As Braunstein shows, the Frankfurt school had already criticized Marxism's approach to Social democracy and it had also distanced itself from the image of Marxism as a general science of the laws of nature and history, which seemingly turned into a forever valid theory of the absent revolution.<sup>13</sup> In relation to this, Adorno shows how the materialism in Marx never can be reduced to an anti-philosophical doctrine of nature. Adorno criticizes the way in which Marx's materialism "in the East" was transformed into a vulgar materialism, degrading the very idea of a materialist point of view. Moreover, Adorno finds in Marx a critique against any philosophical attempt to derive abstract principles, out of which it is possible to deduce reality. A crucial moment in Marx's thinking is the relation between theory and praxis, and Marxist theory can therefore never only be a theory about reality as it is, it must transform it.<sup>14</sup>

The following parts of this section will: (a) present three Marxist concepts which are especially important for Adorno; (b) continue by way of

<sup>12</sup> Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 255ff.

the utopian and the ban on images, and finally (c) account for Adorno's materialism. The latter themes are important because it is out of these that Adorno can be said to develop a novel Marxist perspective.

a) *Marxian concepts*

Marx's influence on Adorno is extensive, using many concepts that are traceable back to Marx. Some of them are used in a crucial and programmatic way, while others do not have quite the same essential function for his negative dialectics, although often they are used frequently. Some of these concepts that do not have such systematic significance are ideology,<sup>15</sup> class,<sup>16</sup> labor,<sup>17</sup> reification,<sup>18</sup> and fetishism.<sup>19</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains several Marxian perspectives and they are essential for the argument of the book, even if it is difficult to decide if they derive from Adorno or from Horkheimer, who co-wrote the text. In any case, the dimensions of classification, calculation and domination over nature are presented therein as instrumental reason and connected with the capitalist principles of civil society. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* therefore suggests an alliance between the calculations of science with the power-logic of capitalism: what makes these spheres similar is their way of leveling out what is otherwise different and unique.<sup>20</sup> Both calculative capitalism and rationalizing science are criticized by Adorno (and Horkheimer) as examples of forms of identity. Already here a seed can be found for a critique of capitalism made possible through a critique of identity. But at this point, this mode of critique has not reached its point of maturity.<sup>21</sup> I will start by presenting Adorno's usages of three concepts that are especially important for Adorno: *capitalism* (and the

<sup>15</sup> See Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I* (GS 8) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 457-477 and *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 197ff.

<sup>16</sup> See Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory" ([https://plattypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/readings/adorno\\_classtheory1942.pdf](https://plattypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/readings/adorno_classtheory1942.pdf)).

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 17ff. and *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 167ff.

<sup>18</sup> See for example, Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 189ff., and Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 35ff.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 11ff. and 83ff., and Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 17 and 28.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 6ff., 16ff. and 29ff.

<sup>21</sup> See Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 188.

critique of capitalism), societal *antagonism* and societal *principle of barter* (or exchange).

There are of course other themes strongly connected to Marx's philosophy—such as, for example, the dimensions of history and dialectics—but it seems more accurate to localize these themes to Adorno's work on Hegel. At the same time it seems reasonable to view his Marxism and materialism as historical-materialism.<sup>22</sup> Even if the theme of history will not be crucial here, it still indirectly plays an important role in several regards, for example in the historical reconstruction and the critique of the development of the domination over nature and subjectivity as well as in Adorno's critique of Hegel's preoccupation with the eternal in contrast to the temporary. In his text "Progress" (1969), Adorno sketches an inverted idea of history in contrast to the traditional idea of historical progress that for Adorno contains within it a destructive logic. Indeed, for Adorno, historical progress will not occur until the identity principle, which degrades and destroys all that is heterogeneous, is broken. Therefore real progress would mean the exit from the curse of progress; progress will not be progress until progress ends.<sup>23</sup> Here, dialectics will play an even more important role than history, and will, in the shape of his concept of non-identity, be presented as the main resource and precondition for his critique.

I will now address the concept of capitalism as well as the critique of capitalism in Adorno. Adorno often uses the concept of "late capitalism" instead of capitalism, which means that he (like many others at the time) historicizes the analysis of capitalism, such that capitalism is now regarded as entering its late phase, and perhaps close to its ruination. Still, Adorno is cautious about providing prognoses about this ruin. In his text on Adorno's critique of late capitalism, Fabian Freyenhagen notes how, in the eyes of Adorno, it is an essential characteristic of late capitalism that it has integrated the proletariat (and thereby defeated its revolutionary potential), making individuals conform with the economic principles of society and suffocating all critical possibilities from inside.<sup>24</sup> In his text "Late Capitalism

<sup>22</sup> Willem van Reijen, *Philosophie als Kritik: Einführung in die kritische Theorie* (Königstein: Hain, 1984), pp. 90 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 150.

<sup>24</sup> Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Critique of Late Capitalism: Negative, Explanatory and Practical", in Karin De Boer & Ruth Sonderegger (eds.), *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), p. 176; see also Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007).

or Industrial Society?” (1968), Adorno discusses if the concept of capitalism (and thereby Marx) is obsolete and if we should address society as an industrial society. In response, Adorno underlines that there are societal phenomena that only can be analyzed in a very superficial and arbitrary way if one lets go of the concept of capitalism, because societal power to a very large extent is channeled through economic principles. Society, when it comes to the stage of its modes of production, cannot be understood as an industrial society.<sup>25</sup> Adorno therefore argues that we need to hold onto the concept of capitalism for critical purposes; otherwise it will appear as if we have overcome capitalist domination. But according to Adorno this is not the case: human beings are still—perhaps even more than Marx stated in the mid-1800s—appendices to the economical machinery.<sup>26</sup>

The notion that capitalist society essentially (and not accidentally) has an *antagonistic* character and tears itself apart at the same time as it presents itself as cohesive precisely through the principle of its disruption is an insight that Adorno takes from Marx. Hendrik Wallat highlights the importance of this Marxian understanding of society in his book *Das Bewusstsein der Krise: Marx, Nietzsche und die Emanzipation des Nichtidentischen in der politischen Theorie*. The experience of an existing rupture between philosophy and the world and that both philosophy and the world are disrupted within themselves is according to Wallat an essential and motivating point of departure for Marx’s thinking.<sup>27</sup> In Adorno’s short text on “Gesellschaft” (1965), the antagonistic nature and the inner contradictions of society are in focus. Society must, according to Adorno, primarily be understood in terms of a process, and one understands society better through the analyses of its principles of development than by looking at polished, isolated and (posited) invariant attributions of society.<sup>28</sup> Adorno also writes that the self-formatting process of society is not being fulfilled beyond or despite the inner conflicts and antagonisms of society but precisely because of and through them, which at the same time risk to tear society apart.<sup>29</sup> Capitalist society is being formed and upheld through this inner tension, but also faces the risk of self-destruction. In the text “On the Logic of the Social

<sup>25</sup> Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?”, p. 4 (<http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/AdornoSozAddr.PDF>).

<sup>26</sup> Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?”.

<sup>27</sup> Wallat, *Das Bewusstsein der Krise: Marx, Nietzsche und die Emanzipation des Nichtidentischen in der politischen Theorie*, pp. 23 and 34.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I* (GS 8), p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I* (GS 8), pp. 14-15.

Sciences” (1962), Adorno writes that society is, on the one hand, to be understood as contradictory and irrational, but on the other hand as rational.<sup>30</sup> The point is that society, despite its destructive character, is not entirely chaotic. Instead, capitalism must be viewed in light of the enlightenment, science and reason. The tendency of capitalist society is precisely reason becoming unreason; through societal antagonism, counter-images against capitalism are being kept alive by capitalism itself. In functioning through this contradiction, capitalism prevents society from becoming entirely homogeneous. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno essentially emphasizes the contradiction between the common and the individual as yet another crucial aspect of the antagonism of society. Adorno criticizes the attempts in both politics and science to reduce the contradictions pregnant in the social realm to one common denominator. Any attempt to homogenize everything individual, integrating it into the systems’ way of functioning, will fail.<sup>31</sup> For civil society exists through the tension between the common and the individual. Thorsten Bonacker describes this tension in a precise manner, when, in his text on Adorno’s concept of the individual, he writes that the difference between pre-modern and modern societies lies in the fact that the individual only becomes a challenge to society in the case of the latter. Modern society exists by producing the individual, which on the one hand propels its development, but on the other is that which remains non-identical with society and that on which it is impossible to get a proper grip. The individual is thus a threat to society.<sup>32</sup> The system therefore keeps that very thing alive which for it is both a threat as well as the source of its existence. Precisely in this way the concept of non-identity, essential for Adorno’s philosophical system, is preserved within it, as both a challenge and as a productive resource. Moreover, it is this principle that Adorno will use against Hegel.

The social antagonism is according to Adorno reproduced through the principle of barter,<sup>33</sup> a principle essential for capitalist society. The question of the rise of this principle plays a significant role in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Exchange as a societal principle is, according to Horkheimer and

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, “On the Logic of the Social Sciences” (<http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/positivismusstreit/adorno-logic.html>).

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 10ff.

<sup>32</sup> Thorsten Bonacker, “Ohne Angst verschieden sein können: Individualität in der integralen Gesellschaft”, in Stefan Müller-Doohm (ed.), *Die Gesellschaftstheorie Adornos: Themen und Grundbegriffe* (Darmstadt: Prius, 1998), pp. 141-142.

<sup>33</sup> Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I* (GS 8), p. 15.

Adorno, produced because of the development of the law of equivalence: “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities”.<sup>34</sup> In order to be able to exchange things, to buy and sell them, everything has to be made comparable, even if such equivalence is impossible. But with help from a difference-erasing and monetary standard (money) the process of equalization is possible, draining nature of its quality with the natural world and becoming increasingly dependent on human exploitation and ownership.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the specific and diverse needs of individuals are themselves equalized. The principle of barter is thus established as the general rule by which things and humans are mediated in civil society. At the same time, things and humans are kept apart through this principle; it is thus a process that further accentuates alienation. Human beings and all their relations are mediated by this capitalist logic and its murderous potential.<sup>36</sup> This reduction of differences with help from universal concepts and frameworks is a phenomenon that Adorno criticizes as identity thinking. Adorno especially highlights this as the main problem of societal and scientific systems: they erase differences. Still it is important to recognize, as Christoph Ziermann points out,<sup>37</sup> that Adorno holds on to the positive possibility inherent in the ideal of a free and just barter. Adorno holds onto its inherent promise, while he is categorically clear that this promise is not being fulfilled in capitalist society.

*b) Theory and praxis, the utopian, and the ban on images*

The motivation for societal change is a decisive driving force for the Frankfurt School in general. This impulse is influenced by Marx and his injunction to transform fundamentally and revolutionarily capitalist society. Adorno’s version of this transformation, although closely related to the Marxist tradition, is far more cautious with respect to a prognosis surrounding the possibility of such change. The relation of theory and praxis is a central question for Adorno, and it is one closely connected to the realization of philosophy. While, on the one hand, it is false to claim that Adorno thinks that the notion of praxis is impossible in the alienating and antagonistic world of capitalism, it is nonetheless true that he does not take

<sup>34</sup> Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> See Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 350.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 22ff. and 292ff., see also *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), pp. 74ff.

<sup>37</sup> Ziermann, “Dialektik und Metaphysik bei Marx und Adorno”, pp. 43ff.

this possibility for granted. According to Joan Alway, for example, Adorno is hesitant about the possibility of the rise of a proletarian subject as the agent of revolution.<sup>38</sup> In his text “Resignation” (1969), Adorno writes that the paths to a genuinely society-changing and oppression-negating praxis are almost entirely blocked within late capitalism.<sup>39</sup> The main reason for this is, for Adorno, society’s ability to channel and disarm resistance.<sup>40</sup> But in so highlighting these obstacles for praxis, Adorno is not necessarily pulled into the direction of declaring praxis as impossible, as many commentators have claimed.<sup>41</sup> Adorno’s critical theory aims rather at the discovery of available possibilities for free and non-reified praxis, but since these in many respects seem foreclosed, theory becomes (alongside art) a main reserve in which the hope for freedom is kept alive.<sup>42</sup>

This does not change the fact that, as Russell Berman writes in his essay “Adorno’s Politics”, it is a main theme of Adorno’s thinking to ask the question how resistance can be thought within the tension between subjectivity and objective social forces.<sup>43</sup> It is for Adorno important not to be seduced by pseudo-activism.<sup>44</sup> As Adorno states in “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (1969), theory is already in itself praxis, maybe it is the only critical praxis possible in this dissimulated society. Regarding his own philosophical praxis he writes: “Wherever I have directly intervened in a narrow sense and with a visible practical influence, it happened only through theory”.<sup>45</sup> Revolutionary praxis is obstructed, but theoretical praxis is being kept alive by not forcing itself into a pseudo-activity. The first words of *Negative Dialectics* outlines Adorno’s view on the situation for philosophy: the philosophy which once seemed obsolete is kept alive because its moment

<sup>38</sup> Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), pp. 64ff.

<sup>39</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, pp. 290ff.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, pp. 291ff.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Lanning, *In the Hotel Abyss*, p. 2, Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 106, Inge Münz-Koenen, *Konstruktionen des Nirgendwo: Die Diskursivität des Utopischen bei Bloch, Adorno, Habermas*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), p. 123 and Ulrich Müller, *Theodor W. Adornos “Negative Dialektik”* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), p. 126.

<sup>42</sup> See Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Russell Berman, “Adorno’s Politics”, in Gibson & Rubin (eds.), *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, p. 114.

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, pp. 290ff.

<sup>45</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 277.

of realization has been missed.<sup>46</sup> Because the realization has not been actualized, critical thinking now finds itself in a situation in which it reflects on the question why the anticipated revolution has not arrived.

Nevertheless, Adorno almost only broaches the theme of such a utopian state of society in negative terms. He seldom gives expression of a more positive vision of the utopic, and on the few occasions he does he is very cautious, using the subjunctive mood: what would a better society be like?<sup>47</sup> A crucial concept in this negative circumscription of utopia is the concept of non-identity, which he receives from Hegel. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno's develops this concept in a way that differs from Hegel, turning it into a critical concept. This concept plays one of its most significant roles within the Hegelian critique of capitalism I am claiming Adorno develops. The non-identical is that which cannot be integrated into, or reduced to, mere moments within a closed system, neither as an individual within a given political system nor as particular things and humans within philosophical or scientific systems. Because it cannot be subsumed under common concepts or be explained systematically the non-identical also presents the impossibility for systems to be closed entities. The non-identical stands for a critique of the identical and the logic of identity, which, according to Adorno, is the principle of homogeneity that erases differences.<sup>48</sup> This critique of systemic domination over the non-identical allows for the utopic task of rescuing the non-identity from the claws of identity. More strongly put, the recovery of the non-identical would here not only be the negative counterpart to the identical, rather it would open up for the possibility of developing its own positive end as a unique singularity.<sup>49</sup>

A main reason for why Adorno claims that it is necessary to address the utopian in negative terms is that he sees danger in trying to grasp the new in the terms that already predominate within society. Such an approach runs the risk of asphyxiating the new immediately.<sup>50</sup> Instead Adorno tries to release a positive force through the employment of negative formulations.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 3 ff., see also Schaap, *Die Verwirklichung der Philosophie*.

<sup>47</sup> See Anders Bartonek, *Philosophie im Konjunktiv: Nichtidentität als Ort der Möglichkeit des Utopischen in der negativen Dialektik Theodor W. Adornos* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), p. 227.

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 3ff.

<sup>49</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 6ff.

<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 204ff.

<sup>51</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 80.

He has two sources of inspiration for adopting such cautiousness. One is the Jewish ban on images, which, together with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he invokes in the following way: "Jewish religion allows no word that would alleviate the despair of all that is mortal. It associates hope only with the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as the infinite, lies as truth".<sup>52</sup> The danger is to present that which is not utopian *as* utopian and thereby hindering the utopic from coming into life. The other source of inspiration is the philosophy of Marx, and Adorno is referring to his refusal to deliver positive and specific images of the classless society.<sup>53</sup> Adorno suggests that Marx secularizes the theological ban on images, so as simply *not* to prevent the transformation of society. For Adorno, this ban avoids any counterproductive sliding into a defense of pseudo-activity.

### c) Materialism

The concept of materialism plays a significant role in Adorno's negative dialectics, and Marx is again a primary source for Adorno here. Materialism has two major dimensions for Adorno. On the one hand, it points to how society, far from being a harmonious whole, is constructed through disruptions and antagonisms. On the other hand, a materialist standpoint shows in what ways the objective and material are impossible to reduce to the ideal and identical. Accordingly, materialism serves as a way of critiquing both political systems and identity-systems.

On the relationship between societal antagonisms and Adorno's materialism, Mauro Bozzetti, for example, writes in his book, *Hegel und Adorno*, that Adorno uses materialism as an indicator for society that is both discontinuous and dialectical in itself.<sup>54</sup> On this interpretation, Adorno is closer to Marx and his critique of Hegel's idealistic philosophy. Adorno develops his critique of philosophy in connection to Marx's materialism.<sup>55</sup> This materialism consists in Adorno's attempt to give the objective and non-identical—that is, the material that thought encounters—protection in relation to instrumentalizing and subsumptive thinking. Hegel's idealistic philosophy gives priority to thinking over the material: thinking is what forms and gives determination to the real. For Adorno, this means that thinking must

<sup>52</sup> Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 277.

<sup>54</sup> Bozzetti, *Hegel und Adorno*, pp. 210f.

<sup>55</sup> Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, Bd. 2, p. 255 and *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 204ff.

be self-critical. Adorno adopts the role of the defender of things, choosing to speak in terms of a preponderance of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*). This request for thought to respect the object means resisting the subsumption of the object under thought's concepts. Thinking, therefore, should not force things into its nature-dominating patterns.<sup>56</sup> Precisely, only a thinking that prioritizes the object can be materialist, a mode of thinking, moreover, that sees in things themselves a resistance toward idealistic abstraction.<sup>57</sup> It is here that, arguably, Adorno's materialism transcends even that of Marx.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that these dimensions of materialism are connected. Underlining the disruptive nature of society and the materialistic critique of idealist philosophy are two sides of the same coin. According to Adorno, any materialism worthy its name must not only critique idealism, but it must also, and essentially, present a critique of existing societal reality that demands political transformation. This parallel critique of society and philosophy plays an important part for Adorno's critique of capitalism with help from Hegel, for his Hegelian Marxism. Adorno uses the same "weapon" against both: the concept of the non-identical.

### Adorno's Hegelian Marxism

Adorno's relation to Hegel is ambivalent. On the one hand he criticizes fundamentally Hegel's construction of a closed system-identity—the most elaborate version of such a system within the tradition, starting from Parmenides' identification of being with itself.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, Adorno receives his most important critical tool and concept from Hegel's identity system.<sup>59</sup> The importance of the concept of non-identity for Adorno should not be underestimated. In Hegel, non-identity is a concept that refers only to a productive negation for and within the system.

Adorno's reformulation of the concept of dialectics, from the Hegelian positive version to his own negative redescription of it, is programmatically addressed in his book *Hegel: Three Studies*. However, things are developed in a more elaborate fashion three years later in *Negative Dialectics*. In the Hegel-studies he writes that the purpose of the book is the preparation of a

<sup>56</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 139ff., see also Thyen, *Negative Dialektik und Erfahrung*, pp. 207ff. and Simon Jarvis, "Adorno, Marx, Materialism", in Huhn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*.

<sup>57</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 192ff.

<sup>58</sup> See Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, pp. 40ff.

<sup>59</sup> See Bozzetti, *Hegel und Adorno*, pp. 9ff and 55ff.

transformation of the concept of dialectics,<sup>60</sup> and in the preface to *Negative Dialectics* he formulates his ambition as wanting to release dialectics from its traditionally affirmative meaning. Adorno refers to Plato's philosophy in which the principle of dialectics contains the negation that is supposed to lead to the creation of something positive.<sup>61</sup> On account of Adorno's critique of an affirmative dialectics, it seems problematic to say, as Yvonne Sherratt does, that a positive dialectics is still retained by Adorno, even if it is true that Adorno's thinking is not purely negative.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, dialectics is a main theme in Adorno's philosophy, and for two reasons. First, dialectics is an object for philosophical critique; Adorno criticizes the reduction of the singular to common concepts, an operation carried out by positive dialectics as well as by the productive version of negation that constitutes the cornerstone of all systems. Second, dialectics is in itself a critical tool for Adorno. For this critical purpose Adorno's remodeled version of Hegel's concept of non-identity becomes essential for Adorno's critique of capitalism. Importantly, Adorno also criticizes Marx's philosophy for having problematic Hegelian characteristics: Marx accepts, for example, Hegel's idealism in the sense that he sees Hegel's thinking as an embodiment of the consciousness of the prehistory of liberation. Marx accepts this big dialectical picture and even time receives a subordinate place in the dialectical system of history.<sup>63</sup> In this manner, even Marx becomes problematic from the vantage point of Adorno's non-identity thinking.<sup>64</sup>

The main argument in what follows will be that Adorno, with help from the conceptual tool received from Hegel (the concept of non-identity), and which he gives a Marxist and system-critical direction, has the ambition to criticize closed systems in a philosophical (mainly Hegel) and political sense (capitalism). He criticizes both Hegel and the capitalist system with help from a Hegelian concept. The concept of "non-identity" will be the most important dimension here in order to formulate Adorno's Hegelian Marxism, that is, how Adorno mobilizes his thinking "with Hegel against capitalism". Of

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. xxxvi.

<sup>61</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. xix.

<sup>62</sup> See Yvonne Sherratt, *Adorno's Positive Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>63</sup> Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory" ([https://platus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/readings/adorno\\_classtheory1942.pdf](https://platus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/readings/adorno_classtheory1942.pdf)), pp. 94ff.

<sup>64</sup> See also Tischler's Negative-Dialectical Critique of Marx in Connection to Adorno; Tischler, "Adorno: The Conceptual Prison of the Subject, Political Fetishism and Class Struggle", in Holloway, Matamoros & Tischler (eds.), *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*, pp. 103ff.

course, already Hegel was a critic of raw capitalism within civil society,<sup>65</sup> but nevertheless his political system ends in a typical form of closed identity (the state). Adorno criticizes both the identity of the common, which Hegel arrives at, and capitalism. He differs from Hegel in that he does not understand capitalism as an anti-universal principle; rather, capitalism embodies a system that gives priority to the common before the singular.

In the following, I will start by (a) presenting Adorno's critique of Hegel, but then also (b) show how and why Adorno holds onto Hegel, in order to, finally (c), develop the argument of Adorno's Marxist critique of capitalism through Hegel.

### *a) Hegel as a problem*

I have already pointed to Adorno's critique of Hegel's idealistic thinking and system, but here Adorno's critiques of the common, idealism and identity thinking will be presented in a more elaborated way. It is first against the background of this critique that Adorno's use of the concept of the non-identical, as well as his critique of capitalism, can be understood.

How are we to understand Adorno's claim that Hegel's system prioritizes the common over the singular and why is this a part of Hegel's idealism? Adorno's negative dialectics, which he also calls an "antisystem", consists in the attempt to uncover and criticize the appearance of a reality-constituting subjectivity.<sup>66</sup> For Adorno the task of thinking should itself be to question the idealist tradition by challenging the supposed ability of subjectivity to form reality. But this critique of thinking can also, according to Adorno, be directed toward philosophical traditions that are otherwise not idealist, such as positivism, as well as phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology.<sup>67</sup> This critique of the dominant way in which thinking relates to reality impresses on thought that things neither can nor should be subsumed under their concepts.<sup>68</sup> The role of dialectics comes to develop and present the difference between the singular and the common, a difference the common has kept concealed within its claimed identity.<sup>69</sup> Despite this critique, Adorno emphatically holds on to the very thinking he is criticizing, since it

<sup>65</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §§ 182-208.

<sup>66</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. xx.

<sup>67</sup> See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* and *Hegel: Three Studies*.

<sup>68</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 3ff.

<sup>69</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 6ff.

is only possible to criticize thinking with thinking itself (there is only one thinking, one reason). This is also why thinking, despite its necessary self-critique, sticks to the hope that in some way or some form it is able to reach a knowledge of reality that at the same time does not distort reality. Programmatically, Adorno writes that the utopia of knowledge lies in an opening up toward a non-conceptual conceptuality to which reality would not need to conform.<sup>70</sup>

In order to stay within Adorno's critique of Hegel the following questions can now be posed: according to Adorno, how does Hegel construct his identity system and what part does the non-identical play? Finally, what consequences follow from the way in which the Hegelian system relates to the non-identical? Adorno starts by writing that the tendency toward identification is an inherent dimension within thinking itself: to think means to identify.<sup>71</sup> This is one reason why he localizes the challenge within thinking: thinking turning itself against itself (and the identity-principle by which thinking is bound). Thinking is identification. But, at the same time thinking is dialectical, and therefore it has the ability to confront itself and become the negation of identification within thinking.<sup>72</sup> The problematic dimension of identity thinking lies in the fact that it tends to reduce all singularities to common concepts as well as turning them into mere moments of the system. Anke Thyen suggests, in her book on Adorno's negative dialectics and the concept of experience, that it is possible to locate a distinction between identifying something "with" something and to identify something "as" something. The oppressing form of identification would in this case be the first, through which a thing is reduced to its likeness with other things and therefore robbed of its uniqueness. The latter form must, in contrast, take into account the thing's specific content.<sup>73</sup>

But the primacy of the concept and its power over reality is still predominant. This principle of identification derives according to Adorno from the history of the domination over nature and the reign of subjectivity, a history that is reconstructed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The relation between the enlightenment, science and the capitalist economy to nature—both outer and inner nature—is characterized by a categorizing, classifying and calculating as well as an instrumental reason, and is initiated as well as

<sup>70</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 10, see also 15.

<sup>71</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 4ff.

<sup>72</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 135ff.

<sup>73</sup> Thyen, *Negative Dialektik und Erfahrung*, pp. 115ff.

developed and refined through the exploitation of nature. This dominating and instrumental relation to nature and reality is in *Negative Dialectics* addressed by Adorno as the problem of identity thinking, that is, the critique of the “subsuming cover concept”,<sup>74</sup> which degrades the non-identical. For Adorno, this identity and its domination over non-identity is both real and mere appearance at the same time. Where on the one hand the identity thinking as well as the economical praxis within civil society and scientific activity really have had a negative effect on reality, things and humans, on the other hand the non-identical as such embodies the general impossibility of a closed system, in which the conformity of all things is established. In this sense identity is just an appearance.<sup>75</sup>

For Adorno, the non-identical cannot really be subsumed under identity, for it resists integration. The non-identical therefore contains those aspects in a thing that are insoluble within the classification schemes that attempt to subsume the thing.<sup>76</sup> This means that the non-identical embodies the contradiction within identity systems or rather it shows that identity cannot hold itself together as a closed system. The problem of non-identity, however, can only come forth in relation to identity, as a divergence. Instead of forcing the non-identical into the pattern of identity, thinking should, according to Adorno, develop a consequent awareness of the problem of non-identity.<sup>77</sup> This requires that thinking affirms its identity character, precisely in order to be able to identify the problem of identification.

### *b) Hegel and the critical potential of dialectics*

Without dialectical and therefore identity thinking it is not possible to address the problem of identification and then a recovery of the non-identical would not be possible. The task that Adorno issues to thinking is that it changes the direction of its concepts. It should no longer prefer and prioritize the identical, the eternal and common, but negative dialectics must rather focus on the non-identical and its constitutive meaning in and for thinking. It is important to be aware of the fact that thinking is essentially formed by the non-conceptual; only by force can thought claim to be independent from reality.<sup>78</sup> This mediation of subjectivity and objectivity,

<sup>74</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 408.

<sup>75</sup> See Adorno, *Critical Models*, pp. 245ff.

<sup>76</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 148ff.

<sup>77</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 4ff.

<sup>78</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 13ff.

which is not the same as an identity, prevents thinking from dominating a nature apparently outside itself.<sup>79</sup>

The tragic moment for Hegel, which for Adorno is positive, is that Hegel is forced to keep the non-identical alive as a constitutive moment in his system that may irrupt as a threatening negativity. Without the negativity of the non-identical Hegel's system would stagnate and die, incapable of confronting new challenges and integrating them in his expanding realm. Out of necessity Hegel must hold onto non-identity, and yet Adorno will force the non-identical from out of the hands of Hegel, converting it into a weapon against identity. Non-identity is transformed into a critical tool against the system. Hegel is thus turned against Hegel. Instead of being a part of the system or even helping to generate it, non-identity cracks the system open.

First and foremost Adorno means that thinking neither should nor can negate the existing state of society by offering constructive suggestions of how the utopian should be, but practices what Adorno refers to as the determinate negation. A negation should in this sense question the positively given in order to open up for the possibilities of something new, without sketching out the nature of this novelty. The negation is determinate because it seeks to negate something very specific and concrete, that is, the existing society.<sup>80</sup> In *Hegel: Three Studies*, Adorno formulates the function of determinate negation as the nerve of dialectics as a method. Determinate negation seeks to release a force in a certain thing with the purpose of directing this force against the thing (in a critical sense) but also for the sake of the thing as empowerment. The thing is assisted here because it is now able to take the first steps toward self-determination, it is hindered however because no longer can it go on like before with a reified existence.<sup>81</sup> Determinate negation thereby mobilizes the non-identity in the thing against the thing, in order to break with the identical, but indirectly it also has the task to open a potential new future.<sup>82</sup>

But Adorno writes also positively and directly about Hegel's contributions, not only indirectly, with respect to his dialectics. In many ways Hegel's thinking already contains the courage to acknowledge the negativity

<sup>79</sup> See Adorno, *Critical Models*, pp. 249ff.

<sup>80</sup> See Elizabeth A. Pritchard, "Bilderverbot meets Body in Theodor W. Adornos Inverse Theology", in Gerard Delanty (ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno*, vol. 1 (London: SAGE, 2004), p. 191.

<sup>81</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, pp. 80ff.

<sup>82</sup> See Bartonek, *Philosophie im Konjunktiv*.

in society and to follow it through to its most destructive and risky consequences. In the Hegel-studies, Adorno writes:

These days it is hardly possible for a theoretical idea of any scope to do justice to the experience of consciousness but the embodied experience of human beings, without having incorporated something of Hegel's philosophy. But this cannot be explained in terms of the trivial apercu according to which Hegel, the absolute idealist, was a great realist and a man with a sharp historical eye. Hegel's substantive insights, which extended to the irreconcilability of the contradictions in bourgeois society, cannot be separated from speculation—the vulgar notion of which has nothing to do with the Hegelian notion—as though it were some kind of troublesome ornamentation. On the contrary, those insights are produced by speculation, and they lose their substance as soon as they are conceived as merely empirical. The idea that the a priori is also the a posteriori, an idea that was programmatic in Fichte and was then fully elaborated by Hegel, is not an audacious piece of bombast; it is the main-spring of Hegel's thought: it inspires both his criticism of a grim empirical reality and his critique of a static apriorism. Where Hegel compels his material to speak, the idea of an original identity of subject and object "in spirit", an identity that becomes divided and then reunites, is at work. Otherwise the inexhaustibly rich content of his system would remain either a mere accumulation of facts, and thus pre-philosophical, or merely dogmatic and without rigor.<sup>83</sup>

Adorno underlines Hegel's courage to devote himself to the dynamic dialectics of reality, and he shows how Hegel is very far from both establishing a static view of the empirical and advocating a static aprioristic theory. One must not misunderstand Hegel like this, but rather see his ambition to mediate reason and reality through the labor of spirit, which only can be done if reason hazards itself in reality. But this does not change Adorno's critique of Hegel and his integration of reality into his own philosophical system. Through a more radical negativity, dialectics must instead mobilize reality against reason in order to negate the negative and the dissimulated image of society that has subsumption as its principle.<sup>84</sup>

### *c) Hegel as a capitalism-critical weapon*

In order to return to Adorno's Marxism, the connection (from the perspective of identity thinking) between philosophy/science and politics/economy

<sup>83</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>84</sup> See Bonefeld, "Emancipatory Praxis and Conceptuality in Adorno", pp. 141ff.

that he establishes must now be clarified. Identity thinking takes shape both philosophically and politically, and it is this connection that makes his Hegelian Marxist critique of capitalism possible. Adorno's argument regarding this connection is constructed around their common history surrounding the domination of nature. The principles that characterize reality and that make it antagonistic are the very same principles that through the spirit of science cut through nature and humanity with calculative rationality and classificatory schemas. In both cases, domination over nature is at play and both science and capital expand their power over humans through the identity-principle. Through this principle, reason embraces everything external to itself and makes all identical with itself.<sup>85</sup> Society is torn apart in atomized individuals, things alienated from one another, but at the same time the diversity of things remains controlled by a common denominator. This connection between societal-capitalistic-equivalence and philosophical instrumental reason as two forms of nature domination is something that Horkheimer and Adorno already established in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Against the background of a historical breaking-point between subject and object, through which the subject (seemingly independent from reality) became able to dominate the objects, this domination becomes a scientific as well as societal (economic) reality.<sup>86</sup> The later Adorno writes, in the text "On Subject and Object" (1969), that critique toward society is a critique of knowledge and vice versa.<sup>87</sup>

But the decisive formulation in this matter, on which I am grounding my argument of Adorno's Hegelian Marxism, can be found in *Negative Dialectics*:

The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no barter; it is through barter that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.<sup>88</sup>

Here Adorno shows how, on the one hand, the principle of barter fundamentally is related to the principle of identity, but also, on the other hand,

<sup>85</sup> Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Bartonek, *Philosophie im Konjunktiv*, pp. 83ff.

<sup>87</sup> Adorno, *Critical Models*, p. 250.

<sup>88</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 146.

that the principle of identity has its societal form in barter, and finally, that barter would not exist without the principle of identity. Adorno interprets the societal principle of barter and thereby also the fundamental principle of capitalist society in terms of identity. The principle of barter is a form of the identity-principle, which also takes shape in philosophy, science and enlightenment. In the quotation above, the principle's effect on the non-identical is also underlined: through this principle, singular and non-identical things are made comparable with each other and reduced to a common denominator as well as to the identical.

This means that Adorno with help from the concept of the non-identical criticizes the identity-principle both in philosophy, science *and* in capitalism. Hegel therefore becomes the main resource for Adorno's critique of capitalism. The non-identical reveals the oppression of philosophy and capitalism. But since he has adapted the concept of non-identity and holds onto his critique of Hegel as a thinker of totality,<sup>89</sup> his position should be considered as "Hegelian" Marxism, that is, with quotation marks. Even if Adorno criticizes capitalism through the question of identity and Hegel, Adorno turns the argument around, for example in his Hegel-studies, and writes that the falseness of society is a sign of the falseness of Hegel's philosophy. The conditions of civil society, which Hegel integrates and subsumes in his system, is a sign of the untruth in Hegel and that his system oppresses the non-identical in its totality.<sup>90</sup> This aversion of Adorno towards the concept of totality differs him from Lukács, who was more affirmative towards Hegel's conception of it.<sup>91</sup> Returning to Adorno's "Hegelian" Marxism once more, we can say that he uses the identity-concept to understand capitalism and the concept of non-identity to criticize it.<sup>92</sup> But what would the utopian be in relation to this critique? Expressed negatively, as a determinate negation, freedom would be the freedom from capitalism and its alienation; and for the non-identical, it would mean no longer being *for* the system. The system is questionable not least because it is defended in the

<sup>89</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 245 and 261.

<sup>90</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 24.

<sup>91</sup> See Adorno, *Philosophische Frühschriften* (GS 1) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), and also Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 12ff., and Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 34.

<sup>92</sup> See also Vouros, "Hegel, 'Totality', and 'Abstract Universality' in the Philosophy of Theodor Adorno", for a discussion of Adorno's Hegel-inspired "anti-method" as a critique of capitalism, but which does not focus on the concept of identity.

name of the common, but, moreover, it is always to the benefit of a particular and powerful agent. Or as Adorno puts it: “The Hegelian subject-object is subject”.<sup>93</sup>

This connection between Adorno’s critique of capitalism and his identity critique is addressed by a number of commentators, but mostly only in passing, without specifically discussing the relation between them.<sup>94</sup> Braunstein is one of a few discussing this relation in greater detail and also points to how best to understand Adorno’s critique of capitalism in the light of the question of identity.<sup>95</sup> He does this, though, without a reference either to the question of Adorno’s Hegelian Marxism or to the relation between Hegel and Adorno. This may account for why Braunstein is somewhat unclear about the connection between capitalism- and identity-critique. At one point he suggests that the identity question is derived from the question of capitalism and exchange,<sup>96</sup> but in other passages he claims that the identity-perspective is the tool for interpreting the principle of capitalism.<sup>97</sup> Despite these interpretative ambiguities, Braunstein raises an interesting detail when he refers to a protocol from a seminar on economy and society 1957–1958 in which Adorno took part. Here a discussion is documented on the question whether the principle of barter comes out of an existing principle of thought directed towards the domination over nature, or if the opposite is the case: are the forms of thinking and their relation to nature determined by the principle of barter? But according to this source, Adorno argues that this way of putting the question is undialectical.<sup>98</sup> By only choosing one of these options, the question of their mutual influence is ignored. Braunstein himself also seems to suggest they are developed in a parallel way.<sup>99</sup> The question raised is whether a one-sided answer ignores how the principles have interacted dialectically and historically. But this is not all, one also runs the risk of ignoring their inseparability. This seems to be a significant argument against my presentation of Adorno’s Hegelian Marxism as foun-

<sup>93</sup> Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> See for example: Gibson, “Rethinking the Old Saw: Dialectical Negativity, Utopia, and Negative Dialectic in Adorno’s Hegelian Marxism” and Henry W. Pickford, “The Dialectic of Theory and Praxis: On Late Adorno”, in Gibson & Rubin (eds.), *Adorno: A Critical Reader*.

<sup>95</sup> See also Sangwon Han, *Konstitutive Negativität: Zur Rekonstruktion des Politischen in der Negative Dialektik Adornos* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), pp. 97ff.

<sup>96</sup> Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, pp. 389 and 395.

<sup>97</sup> Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, pp. 195, 388 and 390.

<sup>98</sup> Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 274.

<sup>99</sup> Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, p. 396.

ded on the application of identity-critique on capitalism. But it does not change the fact that Adorno uses the concept of identity to criticize identification on the societal level.<sup>100</sup> Even if capitalism and identification are historically intertwined, Adorno primarily understands capitalism through the concept of identity and not identity through capitalism. Identity is not primarily being criticized as capitalism, but capitalism is mainly being criticized as identity.

In summary, Adorno can be understood as a Marxist critic of capitalism equipped with Hegelian tools. He addresses the problem of capitalism with help from his critique of identity systems, in which the non-identical is oppressed and where Hegel turns it into a constructive but subordinate moment within his system. In contrast, Adorno remodels the non-identical so that it becomes a system-critical concept, by virtue of which capitalism and Hegel are criticized in the same way. Both contain the problem of subsuming reality under criteria of identification. At the same time, Adorno understands the capitalist system as the most fundamentally idealistic form of identitarian thinking, historically derived from the thinking of ancient Greece. Here it becomes reasonable to interpret capitalism through the problem of identity, although it is important not to ignore the historical and dialectical meditations at play between capitalism and identification. Since Adorno criticizes Hegel's all-embracing system in the same way as capitalism, his Marxism can only be cautiously described as "Hegelian". One goes too far if Adorno is called a Hegelian. He devoted much of his work to fight against what Hegel stands for. Nevertheless, he defends much of Hegel's thinking as well, and is the beneficiary of much of Hegel's critical energy when Adorno develops his own critique of capitalism.

<sup>100</sup> See also Vasilis Grollios, *Negativity and Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 135.