

The Future of Saying No

The Non-Identity and Incompatibility of (Critical) Theory

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For the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, at least for the first generation of Max Horkheimer and his co-members, the question of theory and praxis was essential. And subsequently, in his text on “Traditional and Critical Theory” from 1937, Horkheimer fashioned the concept of Critical Theory precisely as consisting of the ambition of theory not to stay within its own abstract realm and borders, but to lead to a change of the false society of capitalism and fascism. In the words of Horkheimer, Critical Theory therefore is a theory “dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life”.¹ Horkheimer continues:

Traditional theory may take a number of things for granted: its positive role in a functioning society, an admittedly indirect and obscure relation to the satisfaction of general needs, and participation in the self-renewing life process. But all these exigencies about which science need not trouble itself because their fulfillment is rewarded and confirmed by the social position of the scientist, are called into question in critical thought. The goal at which the latter aims, namely the rational state of society, is forced upon him by present distress. The theory which projects such a solution to the distress does not labor in the service of an existing reality but only gives voice to the mystery of that reality.²

Critical Theory is not identical with or a defendant of existing reality, and unlike traditional theory should not copy and imitate the falseness of this society, but make visible its problems and hopefully lead to its fundamental transformation.

The Frankfurt School had no direct connections to political parties or organisations. It seeks, first of all, to address and localise the problems of society theoretically, so as then, secondly, to provide openings and possibilities for radical action. The early members of the Frankfurt School are therefore no political activists, though they are political and theoretical thinkers of political problems and possibilities. They are more akin to theoretical activists. This

¹ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972), 199.

² *Ibid.*, 216–217.

sounds like a contradictory, maybe even a ridiculous, formulation. However, as we will see, it takes much courage and strength to resist the societal coercion to act practically in certain pre-given forms. And this coercion comes both from capitalistic dimensions of society as well as from the left itself, e.g. Theodor W. Adorno's confrontation with the students, who condemned theory for not obeying the need for praxis. According to this general view, the only thing that matters is what one does. In this, capitalism and the student movement were allies. An important characteristic of the early Frankfurt School is precisely the double nature of, on the one hand, designing a theory that has as its ultimate goal the transformation of society, and, on the other hand, criticising the pressure to act within existing society—actions that are parts of the society in need for change.

Adorno is the member of the Frankfurt school who to the greatest degree represents this double-sided attitude. This essay will accordingly be about Adorno and his understanding of theory and of its relation to praxis and society. In Adorno, the relation between theory and praxis is even more cautiously formulated than within the tradition of Critical Theory generally construed. Indeed, Adorno is very ambivalent on the matter of praxis, and much of his work can be seen to dwell on the tension between, on the one hand, the absolute necessity of a transformative praxis, and, on the other, his analysis of how society blocks every form of such praxis, reducing it to mere forms of pseudo-activity. The necessity of social transformation does not make praxis possible, while the difficulty of reaching a genuine political praxis makes it no less needed. And the cunning dimension of society is precisely its character of simultaneously forcing human beings to be practical as it blocks radical and liberating praxis.

Here, one can refer also to Herbert Marcuse (another of the most famous early members of the Frankfurt school) on society's ability to block as well as render harmless political praxis. In his late and maybe most famous book *One Dimensional Man* from 1964, Marcuse distinguishes two central but contradictory tendencies in industrial and capitalist societies. First, as Marcuse writes, "advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future". But on the other hand he claims that "forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society".³ This points towards a general problem surrounding radical action, broaching its very possibility. There are possibilities for change in society, but society also has methods for undermining this change. In general, I think, Adorno would agree

³ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society* (London: Sphere, 1968), 13.

with Marcuse's sentiment, even if Adorno is more cautious about the possibilities for social transformation. He is more focused on not giving in to the temptation of pseudo-activities, which, precisely because they are pseudo-activities, appear more fruitful and effective than they actually are. Such actions do not change anything. Adorno is not saying that political praxis is impossible. Were this the case he would have refrained from writing entirely. Rather, Adorno is critical towards anything that can be understood as the wrong way forward, and that would strengthen the existing state of things because it suggests that change, or the possibility for it, is already here. The list of such missteps is long: pop music, jazz music, some classical music (for example Stravinsky); the practical ambitions of the student movement in Germany, as well as Heidegger's philosophy. Adorno's thinking can be seen as highly politically motivated even when addressing themes not immediately of a political nature, and I agree with Espen Hammer's claim that Adorno "invented a form of philosophical reflection that at every step is politically oriented and critical".⁴

Adorno's principal object of critique is, as already mentioned, modern capitalist society. But it is decisive that Adorno adopts a critical stance from the viewpoint of capitalism's identity principle, something he originally diagnoses and criticises within both the scientific and philosophical traditions of the west.⁵ Both in society and in science the principle of identity is all-pervasive. It consists in the activity of reducing all individual human beings and things to a common denominator and an all-embracing system as well as conforming them and robbing them of their uniqueness. Therefore, Adorno criticises capitalist society with help from his critique of identity within philosophy, and he uses the concept of identity in order to describe the problem of capitalist society, mainly as a system of exchange. And this would then be the task of theory: to transcend this principle through thinking and to create a platform for thinking beyond this conforming principle of identity. Theory seeks to reject identity.

And although political praxis is in many ways the main goal for Adorno's thinking, the problems of society and the difficulty of praxis lead him to a certain understanding of Critical Theory. What is required for Adorno is not an abandonment of theory in the struggles for praxis, but rather a deepening of theory. The existing state of society makes the need for theory even more acute, and the theory required is not simply the servant of praxis, but is acknowledged as an activity in its own right. Adorno writes:

⁴ Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2006), 178.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), 146.

Praxis is a source of power for theory but cannot be prescribed by it. It appears in theory merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with what is being criticized.⁶

So, the distance between theory and praxis is again essential. Theory can only indirectly lead to praxis by not immediately trying to prescribe what is to be done. Theory is obsessed with the objects it criticises, and precisely in this critical reflection on society Critical Theory has its potential. Adorno thus protects theory from becoming instrumentalised by political actions while at the same time he seeks to turn it into a powerful source for future praxis. Praxis is always an issue within theory, but only as a “blind spot”, indirectly deriving from the critical and negative work of theory.

The concept Adorno uses in order to bring forth the position of theory is the concept of non-identity. As non-identical, theory is connected to society and yet not entirely subsumed by it. While theory is not identical with society, not entirely consumed by it, it nonetheless has a critical connection to it, and is thus not isolated from it. The precise mode of this connection between theory and society—connected to and mediated by society, and yet with a critical distance to it—is essential for Adorno’s understanding of Critical Theory. The distance represents its relative freedom and its contact represents the very possibility for critique. And it is because Adorno constructs his critique of capitalist society through the concept of identity that he can understand theory as being potentially non-identical.

However, there seems to be a risk inherent in Adorno’s theory. The ambition not to accept any of the problematic and false dimensions of society, in combination with the difficulty of generating a true praxis in capitalist society, risks ending up in an incompatibility between theory and society.⁷ Thus theory loses its critical contact with society. But the positive dimensions of such an incompatibility must be understood from within Adorno’s own refusal to deliver some constructive critique in order to improve capitalist society, which would delimit the possibilities of Critical Theory.

And it is this tension between theory’s non-identity and its incompatibility with society that I want to discuss. I will criticise both an understanding of Adorno as resigning from political hope altogether and the view of Adorno’s emphatic negativity, which, in those moments when it seems to dominate his

⁶ Adorno, *Critical models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1998), 278.

⁷ See also Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi, “Adorno as Marx’s Scholar: Models of Resistance Against the Administered World”, in Giacchetti Ludovisi (ed.), *Critical Theory and the Challenge of Praxis* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

argument, judges it to be an easy way out or a form of resignation. To give an example: in Robert Lanning's book *In the Hotel Abyss: An Hegelian-Marxist Critique of Adorno* one finds both. According to Lanning, Adorno does not expect any change to happen within capitalist society and therefore "a perspective on actual politically-driven change is absent in Adorno's work".⁸ And later in the book, Lanning argues that when he abjures from becoming involved in actual political activity, Adorno chooses a safe and easy path. According to Lanning, political action for Adorno "do[es] not yet have the capacity to result in a full-scale development of revolutionary and conclusive possibilities".⁹ Lanning then goes on to write: "in Adorno's case, such rigidity—the sense so often of absoluteness—is a point of departure toward safer sailing away from the shop and street wars of the actual proletarian struggle, with an approach that affirmed the separation of theory from practice".¹⁰ Even if this critique of Adorno's absolute demand might have plausibility, my argument is that Adorno is not abandoning the hope for political change. Rather, he is doing everything possible and fruitful for its prospect. And even in formulations that seem most pessimistic, this is not to be understood as an easy way out. It is never easy to say no under such circumstances.

Against this background, the first part of this text will deal with the non-identity of Critical Theory in accordance with Adorno's thinking. In the second part, I will address the risk of Adorno's thinking ending up in a position of incompatibility with society, according to which the distance to society as an object of critique becomes so big that any critical contact tends to get lost. For this purpose, I will refer to Adorno's late philosophy, mainly his book *Negative Dialectics* from 1966 and the text "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" from 1969.

Theory as Non-identical

In this section I will address what Adorno meant by the concept of non-identity, in what way theory is non-identical, and what it means for theory to be non-identical regarding the possibility of praxis. To begin with, what is non-identity and the non-identical in Adorno's philosophy? Adorno's concept of non-identity has three main dimensions.¹¹

⁸ Robert Lanning, *In the Hotel Abyss: An Hegelian-Marxist Critique of Adorno* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014), 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Anders Bartonek, *Philosophie im Konjunktiv: Nichtidentität als Ort der Möglichkeit des Utopischen in der negativen Dialektik Theodor W. Adornos* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 57–88.

First, we have non-identity between subject and object, between thinking and reality, or the non-identity between theory and praxis. This aspect of non-identity underlines the fact that subject and object are not identical, at the same time as it contains a critique of certain philosophical and political traditions that claim they are one with their objects. In reality such positions only turn objects into slaves under their own mastery. Thus, this dimension of non-identity has the purpose of defending reality from theory. And this of course is an integral part of Adorno's reflections on the possibility of radical action: theory must not be instrumental, not even for the sake of freedom; it must develop a self-critical stance towards its oppression of reality in order to think beyond a stagnated society.

Second, we have non-identity within the subject or theory itself, highlighting that the subject is not a closed unity or system, but rather in itself contains this conflict between subject and object. Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a good example of this when they show how Odysseus' subjectivity depends on his control over his inner nature.¹² Along with this, capitalist society forces human beings to instrumentally suppress their inner nature in order to be functioning members of society. Subjects become non-identical with themselves.

Third, we have non-identity within the object and reality with itself. In this case Adorno points to how reality and individual things are hindered in capitalist society, due to its domination over nature, to develop themselves on their own terms. For example, the inner nature of Odysseus is blocked from developing and flourishing. As a consequence, the object, or in this case, inner nature, is not identical with itself, it wants to become something else.

Here, the first two dimensions of non-identity are of most importance. According to the first, theory, as a subjective dimension of society, is non-identical with the objective reality of society, meaning that it is a part of society but also ungraspable for society. If theory is critical, it is non-identical. Regarding the second dimension of the non-identity of the subject itself, one can highlight the possibility for the subject to become aware of its domination over nature and thus realise how deeply connected it is to nature, although this inner split of the subject is initially what makes the mastery of nature possible. But ultimately this non-identity within the subject is what accounts for the subject's ability to transcend society whose principle is the domination of the natural world.

¹² Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), 43ff.

This makes clear how theory is connected to society at the same as it has a critical distance to it. And this is the “positive” aspect of the domination over nature: it has created a distance to objective reality which now can be used in a critical sense against capitalist society. But might it even achieve more? As I have argued in another context, non-identity is the place for thinking the possibility of the utopian, although there are of course no guarantees for practical success.¹³ But by reaching a position of being non-identical, I think this is what Adorno is trying to say: theory has the double role of criticising itself and society; of being the place for thinking and for opening up the possibility of the utopian. Adorno’s theory is mainly negative, but contains also this more positive dimension, which undoubtedly has political and emancipatory ambitions.¹⁴

But this possibility is a very fine line. And, as Sullivan and Lysaker put it in their “Between Impotence and Illusion: Adorno’s Art of Theory and Practice”: “The question is: how is thought to function in the attempt to overcome alienated life without becoming a co-conspirator in the practice of domination?”¹⁵ For Pickford, in “The Dialectic of Theory and Praxis: On Late Adorno” the critical activity of Adorno can be viewed as an “intervention by problematisation”.¹⁶ And the experience of theory “consists in the awareness of the negativity between the emphatic concept and its present unfulfillment”. Sangwon Han understands Adorno’s thinking as a philosophy of saying no and tries to give the radical negativity of Adorno’s thinking a “constitutive” function for a true future positivity, which transcends the mere destructive dimension of negation.¹⁷ But maybe this is to go too far: can negativity really transcend its character of parasite-like criticism and thereby create a negative void for a possible better future—a position I would personally subscribe to—or can it even by itself be constitutive of this positivity? I would precisely question this alternative. Han’s argument is more affirmative than my suggestion, namely that the non-identical is a negative place for an indirect possible development

¹³ Bartonek, *Philosophie im Konjunktiv*.

¹⁴ See also Joan Alway, *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities* (Westport: Greenwood, 1995) and Russell Berman: “Adorno’s Politics”, in Nigel Gibson & Andrew Rubin (eds.), *Adorno: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

¹⁵ Michael Sullivan & John T. Lysaker, “Between Impotence and Illusion: Adorno’s Art of Theory and Practice”, *New German Critique* 57 (1992): 94.

¹⁶ Henry W. Pickford, “The Dialectic of Theory and Praxis: On Late Adorno”, in Gibson & Rubin (eds.), *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, 333 and 327.

¹⁷ Sangwon Han, *Konstitutive Negativität: Zur Rekonstruktion des Politischen in der Negativen Dialektik Adornos* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), 14–15, 29ff, 255.

of a better future, but not that negativity in itself can secure a constructive function within such a development.

The utopian possibility must therefore not be overestimated. This was, for example, according to Adorno, the case with the Student movement in Germany. The students, according to Adorno, turned the idea of radical action into a compulsion to act. This only resulted in pseudo-praxis that turned into a denunciation of theory and made the problems worse and harder to identify. Fabian Freyenhagen also defends Adorno's critique of the actionism of the student movement in his text "Adorno's Politics: Theory and praxis in Germany's 1960s", referring to how "Adorno suspects that actionism is actually a vain attempt to compensate for both (1) the fact that revolutionary activity is blocked and (2) the disintegration and paranoia of individuals by engaging in largely blind activities for their own sake".¹⁸ Adorno himself writes about the danger of desperate action and how it tends to make things worse:

The dialectic is hopeless: that through praxis alone is it possible to escape the captivating spell praxis imposes on people, but that meanwhile as praxis it compulsively contributes to reinforcing the spell, obtuse, narrow-minded, at the farthest remove from spirit.¹⁹

Although the need for radical action and change is extremely acute, according to Adorno "[f]alse praxis is no praxis".²⁰ And the denunciation of theory becomes a weakness in praxis, because desperate action is irrational. The students again are an example of this:

Today once again the antithesis between theory and praxis is being misused to denounce theory. When a student's room was smashed because he preferred to work rather than join in actions, on the wall was scrawled: 'Whoever occupies himself with theory, without acting practically, is a traitor to socialism.' It is not only against him that praxis serves as an ideological pretext for exercising moral constraint. The thinking denigrated by actionists apparently demands of them too much undue effort: it requires too much work, is too

¹⁸ Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics: Theory and praxis in Germany's 1960s", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40 (2014): 882; see also James Gordon Finlayson, "The Question of Praxis in Adorno's Critical Theory", in Giacchetti Ludovisi (ed.), *Critical Theory and the Challenge of Praxis*.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Critical models*, 262.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 265.

practical. Whoever thinks, offers resistance; it is more comfortable to swim with the current, even when one declares oneself to be against the current.²¹

Theory as such is already a praxis of resistance. Accordingly, we do not need less theory, but more. And also, in Adorno's view, on those occasions where he himself had any impact on society, it happened through theory alone. This notion of theory, which is non-identical with reality and which refuses to engage in praxis for the sake of it, turns theory into a saved and unrealised promise. In the beginning of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno formulates his diagnosis of the state of philosophy:

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried. [...] Perhaps it was an inadequate interpretation which promised that it would be put into practice. Theory cannot prolong the moment its critique depended on. [...] Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself.²²

Theory is seemingly waiting for its moment to have an impact on society. And this might be the dilemma of theory: it needs to become identical with reality at the same time as it must protect itself from becoming realised in the wrong way. So, Adorno needs to seek openings for action, but also to close itself off, in order to survive as long as radical action is not possible. This is the dilemma of the all or nothing. In this sense Adorno risks becoming entirely incompatible with existing reality, losing the non-identical contact with it. This may result in a mutual lock-out of theory and reality. But maybe this is not entirely bad? Is the future of Critical Theory a future of incompatibility? Is it a future of saying no?

The Incompatibility of Theory

As non-identical, theory conquers a position from out of which the critical view on society and on itself is made possible. Moreover, as non-identical, this critical position, which for the most part is a negation, also represents the possibility of creating a space for thinking the utopian, what in the subjunctive mood would be a better society, for instance a society in which it would be possible to

²¹ Ibid, 263.

²² Ibid, 3.

live together without fear. Now, for Adorno the choice between being too close or too far away from the criticised society seems easy—if he must choose. Rather than formulating a constructive critique towards society and its way of life and seeking to achieve “Anschluss” to society and it discourses, therefore arguably keeping more than just the baby when emptying the bathwater, Adorno would choose to avoid any form of conciliatory approach to society. But the reason for this “choice” is, in Adorno’s eyes—and I have mentioned this before—that society is largely blocking the possibility of its fundamental transformation. In “Marginalia” he writes that “[w]hereas praxis promises to lead people out of their self-isolation, praxis itself has always been isolated; for this reason practical people are unresponsive and the relation of praxis to its object is a priori undermined”.²³ At the same time this creates hate towards those not accepting the offered platform, and forces critical thought, in order to suffocate it, to choose between the inside or outside: you are either in or out! In “The Essay as Form”, Adorno describes the choice in these words:

The person who interprets instead of unquestioningly accepting and categorizing is slapped with the charge of intellectualizing as if with a yellow star; his misled and decadent intelligence is said to subtilize and project meaning where there is nothing to interpret. Technician or dreamer, those are the alternatives.²⁴

In German the words being used are *Tatsachenmensch* and *Luftmensch*, between which one has to choose, that is, between being a human being of facts or a human being of air. So, either one accepts the rules and platform of established society and sticks to the facts, or society will try to exclude you and turn your transcending and critical thoughts into nothing else but air, seeking to rob it of its critical contact with reality. Because of this, Critical Theory becomes incompatible with society, for society it is nothing but air. But for Adorno’s thinking it is no option to become a theory of facts in order to overcome this air-status of critical thinking. Of course, it may be a problem if the theoretical task is reduced to writing air theory. In Freyenhagen’s *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*, Adorno’s attempt to connect negativity and indirect utopian claims without having to ground them in hard facts seems to be defended, when Freyenhagen, in Adorno’s favour,

²³ Ibid, 259.

²⁴ Adorno, “The Essay as Form”, *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 152.

questions the necessity of grounding normative claims in the positive knowledge of the good.²⁵

One can say that Adorno oscillates between being more optimistic and more pessimistic about the possibilities of theory. In those moments when he appears more optimistic, and acknowledges theory's own critical (and non-identical) contact with society, Adorno sees how he has had an effect on it, though only through theory itself. I have already mentioned this, but now I quote:

Wherever I have directly intervened in a narrow sense and with a visible practical influence, it happened only through theory: in the polemic against the musical Youth Movement and its followers, in the critique of the newfangled German jargon of authenticity, a critique that spoiled the pleasure of a very virulent ideology by charting its derivation and restoring it to its proper concept.²⁶

Other remarks about the possibilities of theory, however, strike a more pessimistic tone. Adorno develops images of theory as an expression of desperate action in a world entirely closed off from its influence—this is what I describe as the incompatibility of theory. One example of this is in “Marginalia”, where Adorno describes theory with the following words: “Despite all of its unfreedom, theory is the guarantor of freedom in the midst of unfreedom”.²⁷ In German, Adorno uses the word *Statthalter*, arguably saying that theory is defending a sanctuary of freedom in a state of unfreedom, without the direct possibility of expanding this limited realm. Theory is defending its minimal access to oxygen.

Another example of this desperate and incompatible understanding of the role of theory in capitalist society is the image of the “message in a bottle”, a *Flaschenpost*. Adorno does not use this concept frequently, but when for example writing on new music, he employs this metaphor. For Adorno, no one wants to have anything to do with new music; it remains unheard, without echo. It finds its only happiness in recognising unhappiness. And for Adorno, due to it not being acknowledged properly, it is the true message in a bottle.²⁸

²⁵ Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10; see also Freyenhagen: “What is Orthodox Critical Theory?” (http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_12/pdfs/Freyenhagen_WP_12a.pdf) and João Pedro Cachopo, “Disagreeing before acting: The paradoxes of critique and politics from Adorno to Rancière”, *Theoria and Praxis* 1 (2013).

²⁶ Adorno, *Critical models*, 278.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 263.

²⁸ Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 126.

In other texts, for example the aphorisms from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno discuss who, in an (almost) wholly alienated society, is the addressee for Critical Theory, broaching this matter in a way closely related to the idea of the message in a bottle:

It is not the portrayal of reality as hell on earth but the slick challenge to break out of it that is suspect. If there is anyone today to whom we can pass the responsibility for the message, we bequeath it not to the ‘masses’, and not to the individual (who is powerless), but to an imaginary witness – lest it perish with us.²⁹

Theory is written without any direct and immediate addressee. Yet, it has to be written for it not to “perish” along with its authors. Critical Theory therefore aims at an “imaginary witness”, who it tries to reach by means of messages in a bottle, the destination of which is dependant on the arbitrariness of the sea. But at the same time, in the preface to a later edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from 1969, Horkheimer and Adorno seem to have a more ambiguous view on the possibilities of theory. One must, according to them, defend the existing “residues of freedom”, and this would answer to the more pessimistic view. But they also, and this seems more optimistic, describe such residues as “tendencies towards true humanism”, seeing in them a movement towards more.³⁰

In her book, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel*, which partly deals with Adorno, Robyn Marasco is interested in “the forms that critique takes at the heights of despair”³¹ and affirms the critical potential of Adorno’s aporetic negativity. In the despair of negative dialectics she finds the possibility for “hope” to “find indirect expression”.³² However, it might be problematic to formulate the pessimistic dimensions of Adorno’s thought (i.e. despair) as hopeful, to the exclusion of the optimistic dimension from the scope of his thinking. If what I call the incompatibility of theory addresses a similar problem as Marasco’s notion of despair, then I think that Marasco’s interpretation misses out on the promising dimension of the non-identical. Still, having to rely on messages in bottles offers only a modicum of hope, though for Adorno, if this transpires to be the only option available, then this is how it must be. With little by way of public recognition, even from those initially allied

²⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 256.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ix–x.

³¹ Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 85.

³² Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 86.

with him, Adorno does what he can passionately. Adorno chooses incompatibility before constructive critique and thereby risks to lose contact with society and to appear as a querulant, not letting go of his mystical and utopian goals. But as we have seen, Adorno sees the role of Critical Theory as holding onto the little amount of freedom that is inherent in theory and trying to keep it alive. If there is nothing else to hold onto, Adorno must stick to this non-identical theory, which boils down to society-incompatible residues that contain almost forgotten images and promises of something other and better.

Conclusion: Possibilities and Limitations

I believe that the future of Critical Theory and the possibility for changing society must acknowledge Adorno's understanding of the problem of theory and praxis. There will be no shortcut to circumvent it. If it wants to take the possibilities and problems of theory and praxis seriously, it must not neglect Adorno's reflections. Therefore, in this situation, where it seems distant from a radical theory to establish a link to radical action (and capitalism arguably is even stronger than during Adorno's lifetime), the future of Critical Theory might be stuck in the activity of saying no. It is hard to decide in what ways current theories are non-identical in the fruitful critical sense discussed above or incompatible in the more limited way, but nevertheless, Critical Theory, as a heritage that comes from Adorno, contains the risk of becoming non-constructive and incompatible with the object it criticises, since Adorno would never choose a path in which he saw the confirmation of the false. For Adorno, it is better to keep theory from being realised rather than engaging with reality in an acquiescent and false way.

But does this mean that the future of Critical Theory is a future of saying no? Is this what Critical Theory will, from here onwards, have to be about? If so, would this constitute a problem? Yes, because it would have to put on hold its programmatic ambitions to have practical effects in society. Or, at best, the only way of trying to produce societal effects would necessarily be through blind messages in bottles, that is, nothing more than enveloped ideas without an addressee. But if Critical Theory sustains itself solely as a negative attitude of saying no, mainly in order to prevent itself from engaging in pseudo-free activities, then this would come across as taking the easy way out. Would Critical Theory then entirely abandon the imperative of radical action, with its theorists becoming self-sufficient meditators? Is it really just a betrayal of its program, or even a weakness as well as an easy way out? I don't think so. Here I shall offer two points:

1) The reason for turning its back on direct political praxis derives from a differentiated reflection on society and on the relation between theory and praxis; this is done for the sake of society. Adorno and other critical thinkers hold onto the promise of happiness in order for it not to be destroyed. For Adorno, the last way of holding onto a minimal chance for societal change is to block society out as much as possible and become incompatible with it.

2) It is not a sign of weakness to say no.³³ It is not easy to say no and at the same time avoid giving in to the prospect and fame of delivering a practical theory. But Adorno refuses to be constructive; he would have rather endured the fact of inaction. And this effort is immense. Weakness would rather be to say yes. In line with this, Freyenhagen states that, defending Adorno, “[t]o face up with this, to assign critical reflection priority, is not a sign of resignation, but the only way to keep the flame of resistance alive”.³⁴

So, one can say, depending on his different interpretations of society, in his various texts and formulations, Adorno is more or less pessimistic. But none of the options are completely hopeless. If theory is non-identical it has a critical contact with its object and can be the place for a thinking that transcends society towards possible futures. If theory instead only sees itself as conserving the promise of a better future for another time and receiver, *this* society, if interpreted adequately, makes theory incompatible. The worst-case scenario for Critical Theory would of course be if even these critical residues were themselves eliminated. Notwithstanding this, the minimal criterion for Critical Theory is that it should, at least for future generations, continue sending out messages in a bottle. One could say that positive and constructive engagements in existing society—I think this would be Adorno’s position—should never be betrayals of or avoidances of the priority of saying no in Critical Theory. Or, Critical Theory can only become constructive when at the same it has not betrayed the imperative of saying no. And every action trying to escape or denounce this critical and negative priority, in order to act constructively within society, risks deceiving precisely its critical motivation. Critical Theory might want to reach further than this, but if it can only get there by sacrificing the critical activity of saying no, then it probably is the wrong way forward.

³³ See also Eric Jarosinski, *Nein: A Manifesto* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2014), and Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 325ff.

³⁴ Freyenhagen, “Adorno’s Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany’s 1960s”, 883.