

# Achieving Subjectlessness: Reassessing the Politics of Adorno's Subject of Modernity

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Adorno

References to "cold thought" permeate Adorno's work, especially after 1945, when he wrote almost exclusively in response to Auschwitz. In his sociological and philosophical analyses of habits of intellectual contemplation, for example, he condemns a "cold" contemplative stance because it necessitates a fatally fixed distance between the observer and whatever is being observed, a recalcitrant coldness towards the object. His condemnation of this cold distance is expressed in the strongest possible terms, since, as he argued in *Negative Dialectics*, he believed it to be the "basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz" (363). Likewise, in his 1966 essay "*Erziehung nach Auschwitz*" ("Education after Auschwitz"), he is mistrustful of the artificially induced climate of social warmth and reconciliation then being cultivated in the postwar Federal Republic because even the "compulsion to love . . . is itself a component of the ideology that perpetuates coldness" (99).

And yet in his writing on music and aesthetics generally Adorno seems to most highly value the artistic expression of just such a cold stance. In his essay commemorating the death of Arnold Schönberg, for example, he praises the point in the composers's development at which he "froze out" of his musical language any references to emotion

or indeed to the language of human beings. In the *Kammersymphonie*, "for the first time Schönberg's warmth reversed into the extreme of a coldness, whose expression is expressionlessness" (163). The modernist artists whom he most ardently defends--Schönberg, Beckett, Paul Célan--are those whose work is the least immediately accessible, work that seems to remain indifferent to and even contemptuous of its reception. And then there are the accusations of arrogant coldness made against Adorno's own writing, which has been labeled "pretentious," "Mandarin," and "Mephistophelean"<sup>1</sup> by its admirers and detractors alike. Adorno took great pains to cultivate his contentious style, since he believed that style was always itself a sort of content, and that this particular style, which is simultaneously carefully mannered and "jagged,"<sup>2</sup> was the one that most effectively enabled him to present his thought both through and as negative form. The importance of coldness as a central trope in his own work should not be underestimated. Before his death in 1969, he had planned to complete the definitive trilogy he had begun with *Negative Dialectics* and the *Aesthetic Theory* with a third volume on moral philosophy that was to be entitled *Kälte*, "Coldness" (Miklenitsch 248).

This essay is intended as the first part of a longer study of the relationship in Adorno's work between subjectivity, consumption, production, and political agency.<sup>3</sup> Here, I will concentrate primarily on a closer examination of the seemingly contradictory assessments of coldness in Adorno since, although he understands them both as variations of "the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity" that ultimately led to the death camps, he nonetheless promotes one of them as the last hope for an autonomous bourgeois subject strong enough to resist the negative pressures of late capitalism, and in particular the increasing pressure to define oneself through consumption. I will conclude with a briefer look at what Adorno's restriction of possible options for subject positions in late capitalism to what are in effect two sides of the same coin reveals about the limits of the political usefulness of his analysis of the subject of modernity. This will necessitate suggesting the source of his consistent blindness to other possible subjective modes, and to the radically different political options that recognition of these other options would open up.

Some of what seem contradictions in Adorno's various assessments of coldness can be found in "Erziehung nach Auschwitz," an essay that, like many of those he wrote after his repatriation, was originally delivered as a radio address. Adorno's ostensible topic is how to alter how children are educated in such a way that Auschwitz will never again be possible. He does not believe that this can be done by simply restructuring or "rethinking" the school system, or by socializing children differently; what is needed is not a new, "enlightened" psychological approach to education: "I want to stress emphatically that whether fascism does or does not return is not primarily a psychological, but rather a social question" (89). The traditional ideal of the German education system, ". . . that of hardness" (93), can likewise not be softened up through a "kinder, gentler" education of children in accordance with so-called Christian values. The Christian attempt to implement its command to "love thy neighbor," Adorno argues, has and will continue to fail because it doesn't realize that the habit of hardness towards one's own suffering and that of others isn't rooted simply in a recalcitrant individual or collective wilfulness. Rather, "such an attempt will fail, precisely because it has no

impact on the social order that produces and reproduces coldness" (99). Society produces and needs to reproduce the cold rigidity of the bourgeois, to demand his alienation and indifference to the suffering of others; his hardness has to be continuously reinforced as part of what Adorno had referred to earlier in his 1936 essay, "On Jazz," as the "mechanism of psychic mutilation upon which present conditions depend for their survival" (79), "present conditions" being those that encourage the cynical attitude of stoical acceptance of "things as they are."

Following Adorno's logic, then, any "warmth" that might permeate society before "present conditions," i.e., the entire economic, moral, and ideological foundation of society itself, had been radically reconfigured would be a false warmth, a cosmetic mask of compassion worn to conceal the ice still beneath it. Thus he can come to what might at first seem the perverse conclusion that the "compulsion to love . . . is itself a component of the ideology that perpetuates coldness" (99).

The false warmth that Adorno is so unwilling to take at face value here is hardly a phenomenon that arose only after the fall of the Third Reich, and neither is it one that Adorno addresses for the first time in 1966. "False warmth" is rather itself the essential component of the phenomenon of *Innerlichkeit* (a term Adorno's translators variously render as "inwardness," "interiority," and the "bourgeois interior" and which refers simultaneously to the inner psychic domain of the bourgeois subject and his actual living space) that was of central importance to Adorno's work from the 1930s through the end of his life. He first analyzed inwardness at length in his dissertation, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, which was published in 1933; the phenomenon is still central to the *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970. In a section of the latter that is entitled, appropriately, "Dialectic of Inwardness: Aporias of Expression," inwardness is described typically as having been initially a strategy developed by the emergent bourgeoisie for its own self-differentiation and self-definition in the face of a rigidly imposed external order. A psychic site of refuge constructed to accommodate an imagined alternative life, the bourgeois interior was fatally flawed, however, in that it was content merely to *look like* an alternative to the external order without really being in any way resistant to it.

Although inwardness, even in Kant, implied a protest against a social order heteronomously imposed on its subjects, it was from the beginning marked by an indifference toward this order, a readiness to leave things as they are and to obey. This accorded with the origin of inwardness in the labor process: Inwardness served to cultivate an anthropological type that would dutifully, quasi-voluntarily, perform the wage labor required by the new mode of production necessitated by the relations of production.<sup>4</sup> With the growing powerlessness of the autonomous subject, inwardness consequently became completely ideological, the mirage of an inner kingdom where the silent majority are indemnified for what is denied them socially; inwardness thus becomes increasingly shadowy and empty, indeed contentless in itself. (116)

The gesture of protest that initiated the emergence of inwardness is also described succinctly as a misdirected one in the book on Kierkegaard. Here, "[i]nwardness presents itself as the restriction of human existence to a private sphere free of the power of reification. Yet as a private sphere it belongs, if only polemically, to the social structure . . ." (47). The cultivation of the bourgeois interior for which Kierkegaard serves Adorno as a paradigmatic example is revealed as a self-defense mechanism that is constructed very much like the mechanism of "playing dead" to outsmart death that would later be described by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a mechanism Wilhelm Miklenitsch summarizes as an "introversion of sacrifice, a mimicking of death, the playing-dead reflex of a weak, but thinking insect" (236). The bourgeois subject threatened by reification believes that it can outsmart reification by creating a space unaffected by it, a haven that will remain immune to the threat it perceives (incorrectly) as coming from without. "Everything truly external" is shrunk down to accommodate the perspective from the interior; the external world appears as if viewed, not even through a one-way mirror, but rather a front-door keyhole, so that it appears diminutive, remote, and thus manageable.

The alternative world of interiority is one built ostensibly for self-protection, a psychic/physical space into which the subject can withdraw for comfort and refuge. This option of withdrawal is clearly a class privilege of the bourgeois, who is naive and/or arrogant enough to presume that he can create his own exclusive and private warmth.<sup>5</sup> But it is a privilege indulged at great cost. The alternative world of interiority can only be inhabited (although "occupied" might be the more accurate term here) once the subject has renounced a somatic relationship with the world: the bourgeois interior is thus "museal," a "still life [in which] the self is overwhelmed in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence" (40).<sup>6</sup> The commodities with which the bourgeois surrounds himself form a sort of bourgeois version of the barricade, unintentionally mirroring the working-class barricades in the street and made up of everything from the piano that, according to Max Weber, was transformed during the nineteenth century from a musical instrument into a piece of decorative furniture to the plush chairs Benjamin comments on as part of the "physiognomy of the dwelling."<sup>7</sup> In the section of the *Passagen-Werk* on "Boredom, eternal recurrence," Benjamin contemplates the plush chair of the bourgeois sitting room as an object that is static and gathers dust: "Plush as dust collector. . . . Dust and the 'good room' [*Der Staub und die 'gute Stube'*]" (103). In a later section, "The Interior, the Trace," Benjamin comments on how, in the bourgeois interior, "pieces of furniture take on and retain the character of fortifications" (215), and that "to live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider's web, in whose toils world events hang loosely suspended like so many insect bodies sucked dry. From this cavern, one does not like to stir" (216). Just as Adorno's thought owes much to Benjamin, so this section of the *Passagen-Werk* is indebted to Adorno's book on Kierkegaard, which Benjamin cites several times (referring to Adorno as Wiesengrund). This is clear in formulations like the following: "The holders of power in the bourgeoisie no longer necessarily exercise this power in the places where they live (as rentiers) and no longer in direct unmediated forms. The style of their residences is their false immediacy. Economic alibi in space. Interior alibi in time" (218). This wall of false immediacy, facilitated via

commodification, replaces any living experience of materiality, rendering the interior domain increasing ghostly, "increasingly shadowy and empty, indeed contentless in itself" (*Aesthetic Theory* 116). And the subject, the "absolute self" who rules over this ghostly domain, likewise becomes "shadowy" and "contentless," alienated from the bodily experience it has disavowed in trying to protect itself: "Kierkegaard's absolute self is mere spirit. The individual is not the sensuously developed person. . . . Inwardness does not consist in its fullness but is ruled over by an ascetic spiritualism" (*Kierkegaard* 51).

The price that must be paid for this "absolute self," then, is sensuous life, bodily and material contact with the world. Isolated bourgeois "selves" thus seem to wither from within, each safely locked up in its own "solitary confinement of pure inwardness" (*Minima Moralia* 43, translation modified)), unable to give, to maintain a vital connection with life and thus be warmed by it. The closely-guarded interiority that was initially cultivated as a refuge from reification turns in on itself to become a reification originating from within that is ultimately more paralyzing than any that could be imposed from without. As Adorno notes of "people who no longer give" in a section on gifts in *Minima Moralia*,

[i]n them wither the irreplaceable faculties which cannot flourish in the solitary confinement of pure inwardness, but only in living contact with the warmth of things. A chill descends on everything they do, the kind word that remains unspoken, the consideration unexercised. This chill finally recoils back on those from whom it emanates. Every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. He who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself into a thing and freezes. (43, translation modified)

Robert Hullot-Kentor has noted that, in the study of Kierkegaard, Adorno's "language becomes more self-assuredly Hegelian" (*Kierkegaard* xxi). But it is not only the language that is Hegelian here. What Adorno describes as the bourgeois "absolute self" that has drained itself of all somatic materiality and become "mere spirit" is very close (except for the "mere") to what Hegel describes in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* as the ideal of a human consciousness dominated by "absolute spirit." Spirit is able to fully command reason and conceptual thought only by obeying what Hegel calls the "cold command against particular interest, warmth of heart, sensuous inclinations and impulses" (53), aggravating and intensifying the contradictions between spirit or mind and the body that

have always preoccupied and troubled the human consciousness, even if it is modern culture that has first worked them out most sharply and driven them to the peak of harshest contradiction. Spiritual culture, the modern intellect, produces this opposition in man which makes him an amphibious animal, because he now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another. The result is that now consciousness wanders about in this contradiction, and, driven from one side to the other, cannot find satisfaction for itself in either one or the other. (54)



This wandering, amphibious consciousness is precisely Hegel's unhappy consciousness that has lost its body, its access to animal warmth:

man . . . strips the world of its enlivened and flowering reality and dissolves it into abstractions, since the spirit now upholds its right and dignity only by mishandling nature and denying its right, and so retaliates on nature the distress and violence which it has suffered from it itself.

The unhappy consciousness remains unhappy because it cannot reconcile the "contradiction between the dead inherently empty concept and the full concreteness of life, between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience" (54).

Hegel's solution to the problem of the persistent itch of the body is to eventually rise above it altogether, to release spirit from what he calls its "entanglement in matter" (88). This solution determines his aesthetic judgments in a way that makes them the opposite of those of Adorno, especially as these pertain to music. Hegel refers to music as the "ensouling of matter," ranking it second to poetry because it is still flawed by the "tick" of the unhappy consciousness. He approves of music to the extent that it is a negation, but it is a negation that retains a trace of the body, an unsublated trace of the material body:

. . . the point is concrete in itself and an active cancellation within the material by being a movement and tremor of the material body in itself in its relation to itself. The incipient ideality of matter, which appears no longer as spatial but as temporal ideality, is sound: the sensuous set down as negated with its abstract visibility changed into audibility, since sound releases the Ideal, as it were, from its entanglement in matter. (88)

Adorno comes to a conclusion diametrically opposite to that arrived at by Hegel vis-à-vis the ultimate consequences of the elimination of the body from the bourgeois interior (because that body might suffer the pain of reification or remind the interiorized consciousness that something vital is missing from it). Just as in the *Aesthetic Theory* he had remarked that the initial move inward in Kant's time had a contradictory function in that it ". . . implied a protest against a social order heteronomously imposed on its subject, [but] was from the beginning marked by an indifference toward this order, a readiness to leave things as they are and to obey," so he would in *Negative Dialectics* praise the unsublated contradictions in the spirit/body split because "it is a last epistemological shivering of the somatic element, before that element is totally expelled" (203, translation modified). For Hegel, the ideal state of human consciousness is a "lack of desire." For Adorno, the last unrelenting tremor of the body's desire is something to be cherished and even cultivated. Adorno sees in the unhappiness of the unhappy consciousness that which grants it dignity: "[U]nhappy consciousness is not a delusion of the mind's vanity [*keine verblendete Eitelkeit des Geistes*], but something inherent in the mind, the one authentic dignity it has received in its separation from the body. It reminds it, negatively, of its somatic aspect; that it is capable of this is the only source of any hope for the mind" (*Ibid.*, translation modified).<sup>8</sup> The mind's capacity to feel the body's pain is what makes it human and vital. Thus, for Adorno, music's entanglement in matter is its

greatest strength, just as a self-willed severing of the mind's capacity to feel its "somatic aspect" negatively as pain could only amount to self-asphyxiation--two key differences from Hegel that may account for the grounding of so much of Adorno's work in music.

Following Adorno's logic, then, one must conclude that the shivering, trembling "absolute self" that has severed its connection to its body and thus the rest of the world in the "solitary confinement of pure inwardness" is indeed the condition of possibility for Auschwitz in that, in its anguish to ease the persistent pain of its isolation, this self mistakenly tries to imitate what is hurting it, thus repeating once again Odysseus' strategy of mimesis that Horkheimer and Adorno point to as the, as it were, Achilles heel of bourgeois subjectivity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

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Given Adorno's explicit condemnation of the "absolute" subject that emerges from the frigid confines of bourgeois inwardness, and his defense of music as the aesthetic form that prevents that subject from completely eradicating its "somatic aspect," what is to be made of his praise for Schönberg's eradication of warmth from his music? Adorno describes the *Kammersymphonie* in no uncertain terms as a positive breakthrough and the point at which Schönberg's music first comes into its own; instead of following convention, the composer had allowed the music to follow its own inherent logic. Schönberg suggests, as do the other modernists Adorno champions, "the idea of a language that is not like that of human beings" (164), devoid of any residue of warmth or emotion. Here, as elsewhere, the composer is praised for the extreme degree to which he has turned his back on his fellow human beings and their communicative language so as to gain access to the language of music.

Through the example of Schönberg, Adorno seems to be suggesting that the artist must renounce his links to the human world and practice an askesis much like the self-imposed askesis of the bourgeois, except that the latter chooses ascetic renunciation in exchange for the insipid artificial warmth of interiority, while the artist does so in exchange for a Faustian fluency in a trans-human language that can only be spoken while breathing the "cold air of other planets" (*Philosophy* 119). Adorno would thus seem to be contradicting himself--he praises the mechanism of renunciation when it is the heroic artist doing the renouncing, but condemns it in the ordinary bourgeois.

Renunciation is clearly exposed as a form of automutilation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during the same period as *The Philosophy of Modern Music* when Adorno was living in exile in California: "The history of civilization is the introversion of sacrifice. In other words: the history of renunciation" (51-52). In *Minima Moralia*, also written during this period, he likewise condemns the assumption that one can "withdraw," whether to the rarified atmosphere of musical language or anywhere else:

The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such. His own distance

from business at large is a luxury that only business confers. *This is why the very movement of withdrawal bears features of what it negates. The coldness, that it must develop is indistinguishable from that of the bourgeois. Even where it protests, the monadological principle conceals the dominant universal.* (Minima Moralia 26, my emphasis, translation modified)

Schönberg's withdrawal from the language of humanity into the cold language of music might thus be read as a futile gesture, as pointless as the gesture Adorno refers to in "On Jazz" as that of "a disenfranchised subjectivity plung[ing] from the commodity world into the commodity world: the system does not allow for a way out" (40). In turning away from human warmth "into the extreme of coldness," isn't Schönberg merely replicating the gesture of the bourgeois who believes he can escape reification by turning his back on it? Does the modernist artist like Schönberg, who renounces the comfort of the bourgeois interior and refuses to produce the sort of art compatible with it, not also risk the possibility that he will eventually "make himself into a thing and freeze"?

Although he is clearly walking a tenuous line in making this argument, Adorno adamantly insists that the difference, the crucial difference, is that if the detached subject is an artist of the calibre of a Schönberg or Beckett, what he is renouncing or, more accurately, refusing is not humanity *an sich*, but rather the false warmth of the bourgeois interior that has also permeated bourgeois art. Fredric Jameson summarizes this nicely when he writes that

there is surely a sense in which the moderns are all, in one way or another, eager to escape the kinds of interiority bequeathed us by traditional bourgeois culture and its values; the cultivation of subjective refinements and of heightened ethical discriminations enabled by social exclusion and class privilege, the fetishization of Experience as a kind of private property, the aesthetic individualism which becomes a privatized substitute for the life and culture of groups in business society. (125)

Peter Bürger has also emphasized that for Adorno as well as for the modernists more generally, ". . . [R]éfus becomes the . . . central principle: not only a refusal of romantic motives, but of any solution . . ." (51). The gesture is one of turning away from the conviction that there is any clear-cut solution, any sort of easy cure for psychic mutilation that can be proscribed, such as the Christian dictate to "love thy neighbor" and thus collaborate with the mechanism of false warmth that Adorno dismisses in "Education after Auschwitz." The different evaluations of coldness as a strategy--for the bourgeois subject, an initial playing-dead that calcifies into a frozen absolute subject, while for the artist a strategy of absolute refusal made in the name of art, which is itself produced as a reminder of how things might and should be otherwise--emphasize the rigid line of demarcation Adorno insists on maintaining between art and the rest of life, as well as the enormous potential he invests in the aesthetic as a site of resistance.

In appearing to turn its back on the world external to it, Adorno argues, art thus does



not repeat the mistake of the Kierkegaardian bourgeois who convinces himself that the external world will disappear once he chooses to avert his gaze from it. The stubborn self-isolation of the modern art Adorno champions is, for him, not so much a turning away from society as a strategic silence inserted into an ongoing antagonistic dialogue with it. The "tense position" must be assumed in order to insure that this dialogue will be carried out on its own terms. Rather than being merely another example of the "play-dead reflex," a mimicry of death to elide death, art turns this reflex back on itself by mimicking it--it scandalously *plays* at playing dead. Art appears to put on a death mask not so as to retreat and protect itself, but so as to be able mount surprise attacks, "carrying out guerrilla raids into affirmative culture." Likewise, rather than concede to the various constructions of "false warmth" thrown into its path to tempt it into premature reconciliation, art forces society into a defensive position by refusing its offers of warmth in such a way that it explicitly reveals the deep, subcutaneous structure of ideological violence and mutilation that has remained well-concealed beneath society's veil of false warmth. Following this logic, Adorno's assertion in *The Philosophy of Modern Music* that "'lonely discourse' reveals more about social tendencies than does communicative discourse" (43) is not as far-fetched as it might at first seem.

Schönberg's music should accordingly be understood as provoking the complacent subject into extracting himself from the false warmth of interiority to wrestle with the complexity of the music and thus come back into an active relationship with the external world. I quote from *The Philosophy of Modern Music*: The subject--trembling [yet again!] before the alienated language of music which is no longer its own language--regains its self-determination. . . . In the most recent phase of music the subject succeeds in communication over and beyond the abyss of silence, which marks the boundaries of its isolation. *It is precisely this phase which justifies that coldness, which as a hermetic system of mechanical function would only bring about ruin.* . . . (118-119).

What is being renounced in Schönberg's "renunciation of aesthetic necessity" is the mimetic compulsion that had traditionally required bourgeois art to sacrifice its oppositional potential "for the sake of the unity of the structure." This is not a renunciation of oneself, or of one's somatic links to the world, but rather a renunciation of false closure. Modern art refuses to mirror falsely reconciled social relations in falsely reconciled and harmonious art.[9](#)

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But why are these two models of subjectivity--those of the inadvertently frozen bourgeois, on the one hand, and the modernist, but also bourgeois, artist who intentionally renounces false warmth, on the other--the only options Adorno can recognize? Why is the latter model the only agent he can credit with the potential to resist "present conditions," if only through a gesture of refusal? And why can resistance be expressed only in aesthetic, rather than openly political, terms?

The answer lies, I believe, in Adorno's one-sided analysis of capitalism, which he condemns repeatedly because of its mutilating impact on the modern subject. He blames

this negative impact on the proliferation of consumption. (Readers will recall the infamous "culture industry" argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, according to which the unlimited consumption of mass culture has resulted in a pacified subject at the mercy of Hollywood.) While his condemnation of the pernicious effects of commodification and consumption is central to his analyses of the increasing alienation and deterioration of the bourgeois subject from the Enlightenment to the present, he devotes almost no attention to the at least as evident alienation of the non-bourgeois subject--the laboring subject--which results during the same period, not just from the *proliferation* of commodities, but from their *production*.

Production, the process central to the Marxist critique of capitalism and the, as it were, Siamese twin of consumption, is in fact almost entirely absent from his analysis. Martin Jay has pointed to Adorno's consistent "hostility to the Marxist privileging of production" (68); because of this, he also remains consistently oblivious or indifferent (or perhaps even hostile?) to the existence and position of proletarian subjects. When he writes in *Minima Moralia*, for example, that the present phase is characterized "only by the dissolution of the subject, without yet giving rise to a new one," it is clear that he can only conceptualize "the subject" as the universal bourgeois subject of the Enlightenment, the very "Individual" he has spent his career dissecting: "individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned, which is still for-itself, but no longer in-itself" (15-16). Not unlike Jürgen Habermas, whose analyses of the rise and decline bourgeois public sphere also ignore proletarian and other counter-publics, he ultimately remains nostalgic for an ideal autonomous bourgeois subject. As Jay puts it, he laments the deterioration of "the unique individual, which had come into its own during the heroic period of bourgeois ascendancy. . . . Adorno . . . treats its passing in a highly nuanced way, both mourning its loss and recognizing its limitations" (37). But he refuses to recognize an alternative, collective subject that arose in response to this same "period of bourgeois ascendancy."

Because he refuses to engage in any complex way with production, Adorno misses the extent to which production, and not simply consumption, both overdetermines the public sphere and produces, depending on their relationship to it, radically different subjects. He cannot recognize not only the possibility, but the already existing presence, of an alternative and competing collective subjective mode, produced precisely by the same process that facilitates the consumption that is sucking the life-blood from the bourgeois subject. In his posthumously published essay on Benjamin, Michael Sprinker pointed out the apparent obliviousness of Leo Lowenthal and the other members of the Institute for Social Research (from which Adorno would emerge as the key thinker) to the radicalism of the U.S. working class in the 1930s; "[o]n the eve of an era of extraordinary working-class militancy, Lowenthal and his colleagues seem to have concluded that the combined forces of Hollywood and the New Deal had already doomed American workers to servility and material comfort" (122, fnt. 21). This blindness to the considerable capacity of the working class for an alternative political agency based in a collective sense of subjectivity remained with Adorno to the end of his life; when he does briefly acknowledge in *Aesthetic Theory* that the capitalist mode of production produced a laboring subject, he can only imagine that subject as passive and obedient.

This [acquiescent aspect of inwardness] accorded with the origin of inwardness in the labor process: Inwardness served to cultivate an anthropological type that would dutifully, quasi-voluntarily, perform the wage labor required by the new mode of production necessitated by the relations of production. (116)

If subjectivity is understood not so much as we have been lately in the habit of understanding it, as a construct, but rather as a product of the same mode of production that produces the social formation, sociality as a whole, and if we accept that differing senses of selfhood and identity are produced by the social relations in a given social formation--or to put it another way; if we accept that, as Sprinker wrote in his provocative rewriting of Lacan's formulation, "the subject is structured like a mode of production" (*Imaginary* 199) it follows that a class-differentiated society rooted in a capitalist mode of production will produce not just subjects hierarchized by class, but class-differentiated subjectivities. It is thus nothing new to suggest that, while bourgeois subjects were and are produced as "Individuals," as Marx first noted, the laboring subject is produced differently--and that difference makes all the difference in terms of the resources these people can draw on for agency.

The term "subject," then, must refer not just to the bourgeois subject dissected by Adorno (whom he assumes is "the" representative subject of modernity), but also to a subject that is "the bearer of different, often contradictory structures" (*Ibid.*) and potential. Recognition of these particular contradictory structures, these differently produced subjects, does not invalidate the model of modern bourgeois subjectivity suggested by Adorno, but rather illustrates the limitations of its applicability. For they provide valuable evidence that the bourgeois modality of subjectivity, the "individual," is not the only available subjective mode, and that a different and competing working-class mode *has* existed, but has been representationally suppressed, not least of all in the modernist cultural production that Adorno privileges. Recognition of this mode has been blocked, perhaps precisely because it embodies the threat of an alternative social formation that would necessarily destroy once and for all the autonomous bourgeois subject that Adorno idealizes, in spite of his realization that its coldness was responsible for Auschwitz. This differently structured subject has been named in a number of ways--for Hardt and Negri, it is the subjectivity that is "produced in the processes of the self-valorization of living labor . . . [these are] the agents that create an alternative sociality" (6) through a radical negation of the existing one.

Therefore, when Adorno blocks the representation of the laboring subject, and with this the representation and recognition of the existing and potential political agency of that subject so that he can foreground the pathos of a vanishing bourgeois subject as it "becomes gradually disembodied and loses [both] individuality" (Moretti 218) and its presumed cultural authority, he also blocks recognition of not just the existence, but also the political potential, of non-bourgeois subjects of modernity. And, with this, he blocks the political potential of his own critique.

## Notes

[1](#) See, for example, Hans Heinz Holz, "Mephistophelische Philosophie," in Wilfried F. Schoeller, ed., *Die neue Linke nach Adorno* (Munich: Kindler, 1969) and Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil," *Telos* 19 (Spring 1974). This characterization was first authorized by Thomas Mann's 1948 novel *Doktor Faustus*, in which he models the devil with whom Adrian Leverkuehn discusses the critical component of composition on Adorno and his *Philosophy of Modern Music*.

[2](#) Robert Hullot-Kentor puts his finger on the intentional resistance to a "harmonious flow" in Adorno's language in the foreword to his translation of Adorno's *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. He writes that "to call the style mannered hedges; it is pretentious." He adds, however, that "although this is galling, it follows the demands of the material, not from Adorno's supposed high-handedness" (xiv). See also the introduction to his brilliant re-translation of *Aesthetic Theory*.

[3](#) In his essay on Sartre and Althusser, Michael Sprinker wrote that "Althusser's project was doubly determined, by politics *and* by philosophy" (*Imaginary* 182). Michael's own project could be defined similarly as doubly determined by politics and aesthetics, in that his work, from the brilliant analyses of Sartre, Jameson, Althusser and de Man, to his book on Proust, to his final work-in-process on Benjamin and Adorno, insisted--contrary to the trend away from theory--on maintaining a tense dialogue between the two in the name of a genuinely materialist aesthetics. I have undertaken this initial critique of Adorno by way of honoring and contributing to that project.

[4](#) I will return in the conclusion of this essay to Adorno's brief comments here on the laboring subject.

[5](#) Quoting Walter Benjamin's 1929 essay, "Communist Pedagogy," Helmut Lethen points out that the bourgeois interior is one to which the proletarian child cannot gain access, a restriction that works ultimately to the advantage of the development of its revolutionary consciousness: Because the proletarian child . . . is subjected to the cold of its conditions of existence, it develops . . . a proportionate disposition towards class consciousness. . . . The working-class family into which it is born is, in contrast to that of the bourgeois, no closed shelter, no warming subculture, that protects the child; for "the proletarian family provides the child with no better protection against the piercing knowledge of social realization than its threadbare summer jacket provides protection from the piercing winter wind." (308)

[6](#) Adorno is hardly the only cultural critic to have described the modern bourgeois interior as something *museal* in the rather literal sense of being meant for the presentation of dead commodities rather than for living. For example, Egon Friedell, the Austrian critic and contemporary of Adolf Loos, described the Viennese interior of his day in just these terms:

Theirs were not living rooms, but pawnshops and curiosity shops. . . . There was a conspicuous absence of any idea of usefulness or purpose; it was all purely for show. We note with astonishment that the best situated, most comfortable and airy room in the house--the "best room" [*gute Stube* ]--was not intended to be lived in at all, but was there only to be exhibited to friends. Friedell, *A Cultural History of the Modern Age*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, Vol. III (New York: Knopf, 1954): 299-300.

[7](#) A distinction must be pointed out, however--the bourgeois barricade of interiority was constructed defensively, to keep the outside world out, while, as Kristin Ross among others has pointed out, the working-class barricade of the Paris Commune functioned *offensively*. See her *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[8](#) Adorno's English translator renders his use of Hegel's term, "*unglueckliches Bewusstsein*," as "conscious unhappiness," which distracts the English reader from the critique of Hegel Adorno is obviously trying to make. I have corrected this here.

[9](#) For an acerbic account of how Schoenberg's once (seemingly) revolutionary 12-tone technique deteriorated into the background music of choice in the postwar Federal Republic, see Jost Hermand, "Avantgarde, Modern, Postmodern: The Music (Almost) Nobody Wants to Hear," in Ingeborg Hoesterey, ed., *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): 192-206. Hermand's essay is indebted to Adorno's own 1955 essay, "*Das Altern der neuen Musik*," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 14, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974): 143-168.

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