

*The Power of Negative Thinking: Defending the Hegel of Adorno and Marcuse*¹

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Of the 19th century's most prominent thinkers, perhaps none have been more willfully (and violently) distorted, caricatured, and trivialized in the current sociopolitical conjuncture than Hegel. Postmodernists² prop him up as the unabashed straw man of modernity, only to summarily burn down the idealist effigy of their own creation. Vulgar Marxists of a certain persuasion will avert their eyes and shuffle their feet at the mere mention of "dialectic," preferring to focus on something—*anything*—other than that "metaphysical embarrassment."³ As for positivists and empiricists, Adorno's words from 1963 still hold true for the present: "[Hegel] is hardly even given consideration nowadays. Instead of being subjected to criticism, he is rejected as devoid of meaning."⁴ Indeed, it is quite possible that at no time in history has the power of the "negative" been more devalued, the validity of "contradiction" more in question.⁵

¹ I would like to thank both Elliott Buckland and Kanishka Goonewardena for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² If I can be forgiven for borrowing my adjectives from Terry Eagleton, I have in mind here that "depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, [and] pluralistic" bunch that tends to equate anything that might aspire to move beyond the realm of the particular (or the singular) with the bogey of Stalinism. *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), vii.

³ It should be promptly noted that my "target" here is not Marxism *as such*, but only those trajectories within it which have either (1) attempted to dismiss the importance of the Hegelian dimensions of Marx's thought outright, or (2) endeavored to definitively sever the link between (what has regrettably ossified into) the "relatively autonomous" traditions of Historical and Dialectical Materialism: in order to leave the problems addressed by the latter behind. As for the way in which I understand this (rather treacherous) divide, see Slavoj Žižek's *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 5-7.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, "Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel," in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994 [1963]), 95.

⁵ It seems necessary to mention here that it is beyond the scope of an essay such as this to adequately address the question as to *why* this holds true today. Suffice to say, any attempt to effectively do so would have to come to terms with a certain "eternalization" of the present that today reveals itself as a vital symptom of our "end of history" ideological coordinates (I will touch on this further, vis-à-vis the important work of Frederic Jameson, in my concluding remarks). Moreover, it would *also* have to tackle the troublesome equivalence between "totality" and "totalitarianism" that has sedimented as doxa amongst both liberals and radicals alike. For more on this subject, see Žižek's *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso Press, 2001), 6-7.

In light of this veritable assault on all flanks, the important works of those individuals associated with what came to be known as the Frankfurt School for Social Research—especially (but not limited to) those of Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse—should once again be acknowledged and consulted; and not because their insightful readings in texts like Adorno’s *Hegel: Three Studies* (1963) and Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution* (1941) extrapolate the “objective” significance of Hegel’s oeuvre over and against its many detractors, but because they stand in favour of what Marcuse has called “a mental faculty that is in danger of being obliterated: the power of negative thinking.”⁶ This paper will attempt to briefly outline (and defend) Adorno and Marcuse’s respective depictions of the eminently *critical* and *revolutionary* spirit inherent in Hegel’s thought: a spirit that led him to “denounce the world”⁷ as it was given, in order to strive towards “new modes of existence with new forms of reason and freedom.”⁸

Setting the Philosophical Stage: Between Positivism and Irrationalism

Martin Heidegger—of whom Marcuse once assisted, and of whom Adorno no doubt despised⁹ more than any other philosopher of his time—once wrote that Germany lay in a “pincer-grip” between the ideologies of (Soviet) bolshevism to the East, and (American) capitalism to the West. And while it is not my intention to dwell on Heidegger’s claim in any great detail here, I would like to suggest that the image he conjured up can be fruitfully applied to the circumstances that faced some of the Institute’s more illustrious members—as they, too, found

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941), vii.

⁷ Adorno, “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994 [1963]), 30.

⁸ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, viii.

⁹ Despised, but not dismissed. Of course, Adorno took Heidegger’s work very seriously indeed; one need only glance at the ontological excursion in the first part of *Negative Dialectics* to confirm this.

themselves caught up in something of a (theoretical) pincer-grip of their own: in the many spirited attempts to defend critical reason from the equally vigorous assaults of a vitalist *Lebensphilosophie*¹⁰ and obscurantist irrationalism on the one side, and a skeptical empiricism and logical positivism on the other.¹¹ (To this, we could also add a third position—that of a particularly dogmatic strain of Marxism—which *itself* created a potent cocktail in bringing together the metaphysical mysticism of the former with the unabashed scientism of the latter, but for my purposes here, the dichotomy will prove heuristic.)

Regarding the irrationalist position, historian Martin Jay has provided a succinct outline of Horkheimer's objections to the *Lebensphilosophie Weltanschauung* that, with some caution, can, I think, here serve to illuminate something of the Institute's general orientation on the matter. While Horkheimer was undoubtedly sympathetic to *certain* aspects of the philosophical arguments put forth by Dilthey, Bergson, and especially Nietzsche—the latter of whom's work he admired for its “uncompromisingly critical quality”¹²—he nonetheless offered three major criticisms. Firstly, while Horkheimer applauded them for attempting to save the individuated human subject from the (objective) leveling tendencies of modern life, he also thought that “they had gone too far in emphasizing subjectivity and inwardness,”¹³ thus abandoning the posts of history and society to a logic of domination that all-too eagerly accepted their impulsive withdrawal. (As an aside, this was a polemic that Adorno would have certainly endorsed, and we find distinct echoes of it in his critique of the “bourgeois interior” inhabited

¹⁰ This term—which, translated, reads as “philosophy of life”—has come to encapsulate a certain sensibility common to the likes of Dilthey, Bergson, and even Nietzsche (among others). The emphasis here is on the unrestrained development of the individual over and against the inflexibility of abstract rationalism.

¹¹ This “spirited defense of reason on two fronts” has been most fruitfully elaborated by Martin Jay in his highly engaging *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), of which I have drawn from extensively below. My debt to this path-breaking work should be obvious.

¹² Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 51.

by Kierkegaard.¹⁴) Secondly, Horkheimer chastised them for their concealed idealism in observing that, with a few notable exceptions, they “tended to neglect the material dimension of reality.”¹⁵ (At the same time, his own—properly *dialectical*—form of materialism was an attempt to traverse this impossible gulf *without* falling prey to the rigidly mechanical epistemology of some of his more “orthodox” contemporaries.) Finally, Horkheimer also noted how their respective critiques of certain forms of rationalism became unnecessarily excessive when they began to reject the concept of reason *as such*. This, of course, opened the door to the much-dreaded relativism of their 20th century successors (of which I will have more to say below).

As for positivism and empiricism, Jay has argued in his comprehensive biography of the Institute’s activities that the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle—who’s key figures were forced to leave Europe for the United States around the same time as their colleagues in Frankfurt—was better disposed to the basic traditions of American philosophy than was the speculative thought brought to the table by Adorno, Horkheimer, and the other de facto heirs of German Idealism.¹⁶ While the skeptical empiricism practiced by thinkers like Locke and Hume had its critical impulses when placed in its proper historical context, the logical positivists—in their questionable obsession with “protocol sentences,” and their radical abandonment of reflection as the active element of cognition—effectively excluded the unspeakable from the realm of philosophy, and hypostatized the status quo as an unalterable given.¹⁷

Equally unpalatable to Horkheimer and company, was logical positivism’s reliance on formal (as opposed to substantive) logic. On this

¹⁴ See Adorno’s *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989 [1933]). For an excellent interpretation of Adorno’s work here, see Susan Buck-Morss’s *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 114-121.

¹⁵ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 51.

¹⁶ Of course, what we could call the “political quietism” of the philosophy in question—which, incidentally, is not to impute the same charge against those who happened to practice it—was also better disposed to the social climate of both a pre-, and post-war America.

¹⁷ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 62.

subject, Adorno would call attention to the way in which actually existing contradictions were “conjured away”¹⁸ through the sorcery of scientism—how, by way of a logical sleight of hand, it could “make the antagonisms of reality disappear through its methodical processing.”¹⁹ Over and against this, Adorno would argue that a “contradiction can, in very real terms, have its place in reality and can in no way be removed by increased knowledge and clearer formulation.”²⁰ As Jay himself muses, “[t]o believe that all true knowledge aspired to the condition of scientific, mathematical conceptualization was a surrender to a metaphysics as bad as the one the positivists set out to refute.”²¹ As for this “capitulation to the real,” both Adorno and Marcuse were decidedly unambiguous. Drawing a line in the sand in not-uncertain terms, Adorno presented the matter with his characteristically uncompromising flair: “[f]or positivists, the system, according to the logical-deductive model, is something worth striving for, something ‘positive’. For dialecticians, in real no less than philosophical terms, it is the core of what has to be criticized.”²² Of course, Marcuse emphatically agreed: noting that if dialectical philosophy “negated—namely, [if] it repudiated any irrational and unreasonable reality,”²³ then “[p]ositive philosophy was going to affirm the existing order against those who asserted the need for ‘negating’ it.”²⁴; it would “counteract the critical

¹⁸ Adorno, “On the Logic of the Social Sciences,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. G. Adey and D. Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1976 [1969]), 106. Of course, this conflation of science and the arcane already had precedence in Adorno’s work; one might think of the accusation he leveled at his friend and colleague Walter Benjamin to the effect that the latter’s writings could be found “at the crossroads of magic and positivism.” For more on this, see Giorgio Agamben’s “The Prince and the Frog,” in *Infancy and History*, trans. L. Heron (London: Verso, 2007 [1978]), 119-137.

¹⁹ Adorno, “Introduction,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. G. Adey and D. Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1976 [1969]), 16.

²⁰ Adorno, “On the Logic of the Social Sciences,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 108. While Adorno’s explicit target here was Karl Popper, it just as easily could have been Rudolph Carnap (and this despite the gulf that separated Popper from the Vienna Circle).

²¹ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 62.

²² Adorno, “Introduction,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 26.

²³ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 325.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.

process involved in the philosophical ‘negating’ of the given, and to restore to facts the dignity of the positive.’²⁵

Marcuse, attempting to shed light on the connections between a (reactionary) “modern” positivism and the (counter-revolutionary) “positive” philosophy that came to dominate both France and Germany after Hegel’s death, found as the common denominator uniting them the detail that both movements, “apart from their joint struggle against metaphysical apriorism,” endeavoured to restrict “thought to matters of fact,” and to ensure that experience became the ultimate guarantor of knowledge.²⁶ Of course, this strategy wasn’t entirely without its merit; both Marcuse and Adorno concurred that some good did indeed come of this, with the former observing that “the positivist method certainly destroyed many theological and metaphysical illusions,”²⁷ and the latter agreeing that certain elements of positivistic thought became indispensable when “[h]ypostatized dialectics becomes undialectical and requires correction by the fact finding whose interest is realized by empirical social research.”²⁸

Nonetheless, as the pendulum is seen to have swung (much) too far in the other direction, Marcuse explains how the positivists effectively “decoupled” facts from values by way of their “neutralization” (or naturalization) of the social world:

The positivistic opposition to the principle that the matters of fact [and] experience have to be justified before the court of reason [...] prevented the interpretation of these ‘data’ in terms of a comprehensive *critique of the given itself*. Such a criticism no longer had a place in science. In the end, positive philosophy facilitated the surrender of thought to everything that existed and manifested the power to persist in experience.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 327.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Adorno, “Introduction,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 26-27.

Of course, this severing of what “ought” from what “is” could not have been more at odds with Adorno, Marcuse, and the rest of the Institute’s thinkers. By acquiescing wholly to what was believed to be a historically invariant form of analytical reason (*Verstand*) that prioritized experience above all else, positivism—from Comte to Carnap—effectively denied the validity of critical reason (*Vernunft*) altogether: thus relinquishing the right of philosophy to seriously question—let alone to call for the drastic realignment of—the practical activities of humankind.

In summary, then, the Frankfurt School thinkers found themselves caught in the pincer-grip between, on the one hand, a positivism that was—if the excessive alliteration can be pardoned—ahistorical, acquiescent, anti-subjective, absolute, and abstractly universal, and, on the other hand, an irrationalism that was equally ahistorical and acquiescent, but also overly-subjective, relativistic, and myopically particular. One could easily discern a looming predicament implicit in this war on two fronts: how to defend against the primacy of the *object* without lapsing into an irrationalist relativism? Or, conversely, how to fight back against the primacy of the *subject* without recourse to some transcendental notion of truth? It is against *this* backdrop that I would like to turn to consider Adorno and Marcuse’s respective appropriations of the Hegelian dialectic and its central tenet of “determinate negation.” In so doing, I hope to outline the contours of—and indirectly make a plea for—what the latter has termed “the power of negative thinking.”

Adorno and Marcuse’s Hegel: Dialectics and the Power of the Negative

So what, then, of the labour of the negative? Or, to put it another way, why “dialectics” at all? To be sure, a number of prominent thinkers—and not all of them for reasons that can be written-off as superficial or reactionary—have declared the dialectic (be it Hegel’s, Marx’s, or

anyone else's) to be the dearest of dead horses: arguing that dialectical reasoning has long outlived its usefulness.²⁹ Some of these contenders have attempted to engage it in open combat, proclaiming it to be nothing more than outright metaphysical claptrap. ("Hegel's monkey," asserted one prominent social scientist in the postwar era.³⁰) Other critics—no less hostile, but undoubtedly more perceptive—have recognized that the dialectic has always-already anticipated such voices of opposition into its very structure or logic, and thus they have been more inclined to try to circumvent it—that is, to stop playing by its rules or speaking in its language³¹ (as if this could actually make the false totality simply "cease to be," in spite of its terrible untruthfulness). In the face of these not-so-insignificant challenges, it is telling that we find Adorno and Marcuse stubbornly refusing to let go of the Janus-faced gift that Hegel had bequeathed them. And while a comprehensive presentation of dialectics in general is something that, by definition, will always prove insufficient and incomplete, we can here attempt to isolate at least *something* of the spirit that they were plainly unwilling to let go of.

Firstly, let us consider "the power of negative thinking." In a hauntingly compelling phrase that both Marcuse and Adorno were fond of quoting, Hegel once claimed that "thinking is, indeed, essentially the negation of that which is immediately before us." (Some have argued that Marx's famous "thesis eleven" was the "ground zero" moment for what was to become Critical Theory in the strict sense; but I would perhaps put forward this statement as its valid predecessor.) With a nod

²⁹ While I would have preferred to let my silence speak for me, I should make clear that I have in mind here that particular generation of "Continental" thinkers that emerged out from under the thumb of Kojève, Hyppolite, and the rest of what was then and there (i.e. post-war France) the reigning Hegelian orthodoxy. Of course, the relationship between Hegel's Mid-Century mediators and the diversity of thinkers that rebelled against their teachings is an historically complex one; to follow it further, one could do much worse than to turn to either Michael S. Roth's *Knowing and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), or Judith Butler's *Subjects of Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [1987]).

³⁰ Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 145.

³¹ By and large, this was the strategy employed by Gilles Deleuze (after his monographs on Bergson and Nietzsche, at any rate). For more on this, see Michael Hardt's Ph.D. dissertation *The Art of Organization* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1993).

to the phrase in question, Adorno himself tells us that “Hegel’s philosophy is indeed essentially negative: critique.”³² He and Marcuse saw as the essence of Hegel’s philosophy, a staunch refutation of the posited identity between the rational and the real³³ —an essence that he would (arguably and regretfully) later abandon by way of inversion, in his undoubtedly reactionary identification of the Absolute with the Prussian State.³⁴

Nonetheless, the Hegel under scrutiny here is the Hegel that “denounced the world” as it presented itself by way of “a critique of what exists, of any and every positivity.”³⁵; he believed that “[t]hought as such” was “an act of negation, of resistance to that which [was] forced upon it.”³⁶ To be sure, it was (in part) through a sustained engagement with Hegel’s “negative” philosophy that Adorno himself was able to produce “a joyous counter-poison and a corrosive solvent to apply to the surface of ‘what is’ ”³⁷; and in this respect, as Marcuse asserts in the exemplary preface to *Reason and Revolution*, “[t]he power of negative thinking” can be understood as “the driving power of dialectical thought, used as a tool for analyzing the world of facts in terms of its internal inadequacy.”³⁸

And so we are brought to yet another aspect of dialectical reasoning: as internal to its object, it is, by definition, *immanent* critique. With this

³² Adorno, “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, 30.

³³ Here, I think, everything depends on the inflection one chooses to give to Hegel’s (in)famous equation of the rational and the real. It is undoubtedly conceivable that someone of a conservative bent might interpret this dictum as a perpetual defense of “what is,” over and against that which remains unthinkable in a given socio-political order. However, as Adorno and Marcuse read Hegel—and I follow them here—it is to be understood in the sense that what totality presents to us—both then and now—as “real” (i.e. the actually-existing social world, rife with inequality and oppression, colonized by the logic of capital, etc.) is “false” or “untrue” when put to the test of critical reason. Conversely, what *is* real is that which is “not yet”—that which remains confined to the realm of the possible, and that which must be brought into actuality through the labour of the negative.

³⁴ Although Marcuse (rather shrewdly) portrays the fear that Hegel’s philosophy inspired in the Prussian monarchy of the 1840’s, going so far as to note that Frederick William IV actually provided an “express commission” to Schelling that he might “destroy the dragon seed of Hegelianism.” *Reason and Revolution*, 326.

³⁵ Adorno, “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, 30.

³⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1990 [1973]), 19.

³⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso Press, 2007 [1990]), 249.

³⁸ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, viii.

observation, we are able to see that the dialectic is anything *but* a hovering and abstract metaphysical anomaly; through the notion of what Hegel termed “determinate negation”—what Adorno and Marcuse have (respectively) called the “central nerve”³⁹ and “governing principle”⁴⁰ of dialectics as method of inquiry—it becomes clear that the critical (or “negating”) impulse that might allow an object to “become itself” originates from *within*: the movement of the dialectic here coming to stand for the historically specific forces that always-already permeate it.⁴¹ It is in precisely this sense that Adorno was able to claim that “criticism, if it fulfils its latent possibilities, can [...] already imply the solution; the latter hardly ever appears from without. It was to this that the philosophical concept of determinate negation referred.”⁴²

So much, then, for the tyranny of the empirical, the positive, and the factual. If the facts as they are given fail to defend themselves in what Marcuse once labeled as the “critical tribunal” of reason,⁴³ then we are faced with Hegel’s derisive “so much the worse for the facts.”⁴⁴ But what, precisely, do we invoke when we defer to this higher court? Here, we could do worse than to compare in greater detail the opposing categories of *Verstand* (or understanding) and *Vernunft* (or critical reason, properly conceived). Marcuse explains how these Kantian categories were taken up by Hegel to articulate the difference between “common sense and speculative thinking,” or, put another way, “between undialectical reflection and dialectical knowledge.”⁴⁵ While *Verstand* functions to help us mentally organize our phenomenal experiences, it

³⁹ Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994 [1963]), 80.

⁴⁰ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, xi.

⁴¹ Of course, one should avoid extrapolating from this claim anything along the lines of a definite teleology. “Determinate negation” is another way of saying that all things are finite. To use the rather cumbersome language of ontology, it is to say that all things contain within them that which will ultimately return them to the void from whence they came; it is not, however, to specify the positive content of that which they might eventually *become*.

⁴² Adorno, “On the Logic of the Social Sciences,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 113.

⁴³ See Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 60.

⁴⁴ See Adorno’s “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, 31.

⁴⁵ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 44.

fails to perceive the connections that bind social reality together; it sees all things as finite and separate. *Vernunft*, on the other hand, attempts to find a temporally and spatially situated—which is to say context-specific—form of truth that explodes the false dichotomy between relativism and absolutism. While this definition is necessarily somewhat vague—and especially so in relation to Adorno’s appropriation—the concept of critical reason has always remained a cornerstone of dialectical thinking. It is, as Marcuse suggests, “motivated by the need to restore the totality.”⁴⁶

To round things off, a final word or two about the vital categories of totality and mediation. In the case of Adorno, many commentators have gone to great lengths to portray the anti-systemic underpinnings of his philosophy. This is all well and good; but when Adorno infamously stated against the Hegel of the Phenomenology that “the whole is the false,”⁴⁷ this should not be understood as a disavowal of either the utility of the concept of totality, *or* of the actually existing character of the social totality as such.⁴⁸ Rather, it should be interpreted *normatively*, in the same way that Adorno would posit the falsity of all those so-called “facts” that common sense has allowed to sediment behind critical reason’s back.⁴⁹ The “false” totality is very much “true” insofar as it empirically exists as a contradictory world in which the logic of capital and instrumental reason—which, notably, was stripped of its designation as *Vernunft*, and instead relegated to the realm of *Verstand*—reign supreme.⁵⁰ In Adorno’s own words:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005 [1951]), aphorism #29.

⁴⁸ “Taken in isolation,” claims Simon Jarvis, “the aphorism [from *Minima Moralia*] gives a misleading impression. The whole is false for Adorno not in the sense that a philosophical emphasis on totality is a mistake, but in the sense that this emphasis is inseparable from an increasingly self-totalizing society. In this sense, the whole may be false, but it is none the less real.” See his *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 172.

⁴⁹ On these grounds, we find Adorno asserting that “[t]otality is not an affirmative but rather a critical category.” See his “Introduction,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 12.

⁵⁰ Thus, Adorno can claim that “totality is what is most real,” while at the same time acknowledging that “it is also illusion—ideology.” *Ibid.*

A world integrated through “production,” through the exchange relationship, depends in all its moments on the social conditions of its production, and in that sense actually realizes the primacy of the whole over its parts; in this regard, the desperate impotence of every single individual now verifies Hegel’s extravagant conception of the system.⁵¹

One might therefore be forgiven for thinking that Marcuse better captured the spirit of Adorno’s original statement when he (somewhat paradoxically) claimed that “no method seems authentic which does not recognize that these two propositions are meaningful descriptions of our situation: ‘The whole is the truth,’ and the whole is false.”⁵² As for the concept of mediation (*Vermittlung*), the point is deceptively simple: dialectical thought will always dispute the immediacy (or “givenness”) of any object; because even those things that seem to be immediate—indeed, *especially* those things—are ultimately always-already mediated. Dialectics will thus endeavor to bring subject and object closer together: to both “short circuit” their (seemingly) discrete boundaries, while at the same time keeping either category from gaining the upper hand.

In summary, we are presented with a series of interrelated concepts: negative thinking, immanent critique, determinate negation, totality, contradiction, and mediation—something more profound than a mere methodological toolkit, and yet decidedly less absolute than a fundamental ontology. Moreover, it should now be at least somewhat more apparent as to how the power of the negative inherent in Hegel’s thought proved an indispensable ally in the war against a (status quo-affirming) empirico-positivism, and it should also be clearer as to how the Hegelian defense of critical reason allowed both Adorno and Marcuse to fend off the irrationalist onslaught *without* falling back on transcendental truth claims.

⁵¹ Adorno, “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, 27.

⁵² Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, xiv.

Dialectics and the Calamity of the Postmodern

From here, there are many trajectories we could follow. For instance, we could endeavor to display how both Adorno and Marcuse conceived of a certain “threshold” beyond which Hegel could not cross: that he was essentially afraid of the revolutionary consequences inherent in the power of his own method, thus legitimating Marx—who attempted to take Hegel’s philosophy to its logical conclusion by abolishing philosophy altogether—as his rightful heir. We could also observe how Marcuse was, in certain respects, more sympathetic to the possibility of an emancipatory historical subject—and, therefore, to the potential for an identity (or reconciliation) between the rational and the real—while Adorno’s emphasis on the non-identical left him somewhat less convinced, and decidedly more elusive.⁵³ (Although he was not always, I think, as hopelessly pessimistic as many have often claimed; one need only refer to the concluding sentences of *The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy* to see just how “utopian” Adorno could actually be.⁵⁴)

What I would like to address here, however, is the relevance of dialectics for the present day. In 1963, Adorno claimed that “[a]t the present time Hegelian philosophy, and dialectical thought, is subject to the paradox that it has been rendered obsolete by science and scholarship while being at the same time more timely than ever in its opposition to them.”⁵⁵ And since the stifling objectivity of instrumental reason has only increased in its preponderance since these words were written, it could be said that never have they been more urgently, pressingly, true. As Fredric

⁵³ On the subject of Marcuse’s more benign attitude towards a possible unification here, we find Jay arguing that he was far less hostile towards identity-based thinking than either Adorno or Horkheimer (*The Dialectical Imagination*, 61). For more here, see Marcuse’s “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” in *Negations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968 [1965]).

⁵⁴ The final line of which reads: “The ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments [is] none other than utopia, the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized” (Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, 88).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

Jameson has sagaciously warned us, “what Adorno called positivism is very precisely what we now call postmodernism, only at a more primitive stage.”⁵⁶ Following from this observation, Jameson proceeds to dazzle us with his extraordinarily dialectical sense of style—which he has, no doubt, inherited at least in part from Adorno himself. I will here quote him at length:

The shift in terminology is to be sure momentous: a stuffy petty-bourgeois republican nineteenth-century philosophy of science emerging from the cocoon of its time capsule as the iridescent sheen of consumerist daily life in the Indian summer of the superstate and multinational capitalism. From truth to state-of-the-art merchandise, from bourgeois respectability and ‘distinction’ to the superhighways and the beaches, from the old fashioned authoritarian families and bearded professors to permissiveness and a loss of respect for authority (which, however, still governs). The question about poetry after Auschwitz has been replaced with that of whether you could bear to read Adorno and Horkheimer next to the pool.⁵⁷

Jameson claims that “[p]ositivism becomes postmodernism when it has, like philosophy on the older paradigm, fulfilled and thereby abolished itself.”⁵⁸ Its aim is to bring about the end of history by eliminating the subjective—and indeed, the dialectic itself, along with anything else that would dare to sort ends from means—in favour of a perpetual extension of the empirical present.⁵⁹

It is here, to be sure, that we find the specter of Adorno haunting Jameson’s words most abundantly. On the subject of the unending hypostatization of the actual—that is, on the subject of a “post-historical”

⁵⁶ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 248. Of course, by “postmodernism,” Jameson is alluding to something much more than “merely” an aesthetic style or school of thought; his formulation is an attempt to historically periodize the ideological coordinates of the present by unfolding what he has rather succinctly termed “the cultural logic of late capitalism.” For more here, see his definitive *Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁵⁷ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 248.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 248-249.

age “free” from (dialectical) conflict and contradiction—Jameson’s perspective can be found on a somewhat smaller scale, confined to the realm of science itself, towards the end of Adorno’s rather lengthy introduction to “The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology.” After warning us that “one should not lose sight of what continues to survive untouched in positivism,” Adorno chastises Ralf Dahrendorf—a commentator participating in what came to be known as “the dispute”—for making the symptomatically “ironic” claim that the Institute was likely to be the last “school” (in the partisan sense of the term) of sociology. Adorno’s (rather lively) riposte here should, I think, formally illuminate the affinities between positivism and postmodernism all the more clearly:

What was probably meant here was that the age of schools within sociology was past and that unified science has triumphantly ousted the schools as archaically qualitative entities. But no matter how democratic and egalitarian the prophecy is intended to be, its fulfillment would be intellectually totalitarian and would decisively undermine the very dispute which Dahrendorf himself regards as the agent of progress. The ideal of progressive technical rationalization, even of science, disavows the pluralistic conceptions to which the opponents of dialectics otherwise pay homage. Anyone who, when faced with such a slogan as that of the last school, recalls the question of the little girl upon seeing a large dog—how long can such a dog live?—does not need to subscribe to any sociological psychologism.⁶⁰

As for Jameson’s assertion that positivism/postmodernism wants to “abolish the subjective”—by which he means the annihilation of “thoughts, interpretations, and opinions” as well as “the language that

⁶⁰ Adorno, “Introduction,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 65-66.

corresponds to those things: poetic, emotive, rhetorical”⁶¹—consider Adorno’s sympathetic (if anachronistic) supplement:

Positivism, to which contradictions are anathema, possesses its innermost contradiction, unbeknown to itself, in the following: namely, that it adheres to an objectivity which is most external to its sentiments and purged of all subjective projections, but thereby simply becomes all the more entangled in the particularity of mere instrumental reason. Those who regard themselves as victors over idealism are far closer to it than critical theory.”⁶²

How, then, can we best depict the endgame to this ruse of instrumental reason, this culture of unbridled affirmation? What, precisely, would we find in this doomsday scenario of a world “liberated” from the labour of the negative, and “emancipated” from the “dictatorship” of dialectics? Once again, and for the last time, Jameson’s words are far more prescient than my own:

At that point, even talking about the not-being of thinking ceases to be effective, which was what was desired in the first place. What no longer is is as absent as what never was, or what is not yet or is not to be; only being is left, only we don’t call it that anymore since the word itself is meaningless without its opposite, nothingness, which has been withdrawn from circulation.⁶³

To apply the final declaration of one of Adorno’s essays to the warning so vividly depicted above, “[t]hese, and nothing less, are the stakes in understanding Hegel.”⁶⁴ And when we pause to consider just how many of today’s nascent critical thinkers are choosing to blindly follow in the footsteps of those who would joyfully and recklessly deny both the validity *and* utility of concepts like contradiction, mediation, and above all, the power of negative thinking, it seems apparent that Jameson’s

⁶¹ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 248.

⁶² Adorno, “Introduction,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 5.

⁶³ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 249.

⁶⁴ Adorno, “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, 148.

Adorno-inspired observations have painted a very worrisome picture indeed. That said, I will give the last word to Rolf Wiggershaus—perhaps the Frankfurt School’s most judicious biographer and intellectual historian—who rightly observed that:

The theory which filled Adorno and Marcuse with a sense of mission both before and after the war was a theory of a special sort: in the midst of pessimism it still spurred them on towards a kind of salvation through knowledge and discovery. The promise was neither fulfilled nor betrayed – it was kept alive.⁶⁵

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⁶⁵ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theory, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 06.

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