

## **Adorno's Marxism**

University of Chicago doctoral dissertation

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### *Tasks and project*

“If [Walter] Benjamin said [in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)] that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things that were not embraced by this dynamic. . . . It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. . . . Benjamin’s writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.”

-- Adorno, “Bequest” (1945), *Minima Moralia*

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“The objection has been raised that, because of its immanently critical and theoretical character, the turn to [the] nonidentity [of social being and consciousness] is an insignificant nuance of Neo-Hegelianism or of the historically obsolete Hegelian Left -- as if Marxian criticism of

philosophy were a dispensation from it. . . . Yet whereas theory succumbed . . . practice became nonconceptual, a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of; it became the prey of power. . . . The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice. . . . The interrelation of both moments [of theory and practice] is not settled once and for all but fluctuates historically. . . . Those who chide theory [for being] anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted. They thus endorse the course of the world -- defying which is the idea of theory alone. . . . If [one] resists oblivion -- if he resists the universally demanded sacrifice of a once-gained freedom of consciousness -- he will not preach a Restoration in the field of intellectual history. The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that 'world history is the world tribunal'. What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations."

-- Adorno, "Relation to Left-Wing Hegelianism," *Negative Dialectic* (1966)

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### *Precis*

The writings of Theodor W. Adorno (1903-69) comprise an attempted recovery of Marx's critical theory for a dialectic of 20th Century social forms. Through the immanent critique of modern aesthetic, epistemological, philosophical, political and psychological forms of social subjectivity and its antinomies, contradictions and discontents, including those of ostensible Marxism, the thought figures of Adorno's essays are modeled after and attempt to elaborate Marx's self-reflexive critique of the subjectivity of the commodity form.

Adorno's concepts are dialectical, and his critique of 20th Century social forms is concerned with their potential for emancipation as well as domination: "culture industry," for instance, is meant to grasp comprehensively the critical social object and form of aesthetic subjectivity in common for practices of both "hermetic" art and "popular" culture; and the emergence of post-ego psychological "authoritarian personality" and the "eclipse of the individual" are meant to characterize not only misled "masses" but also, reflexively, 20th Century developments in the social-historical formation of critical subjectivity itself, including Adorno's own. However, readings of Adorno have fallen below the threshold of this dialectic, and both the rhetorical register and critical intent of such works as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have become obscured.

Adorno's thought understands itself as being formed in a period of counterrevolution, civil war and reaction after the revolutions of 1917-19, and it faces and seeks to provoke recognition of the possibility and reality of social regression as well as regression in thinking. Apprehending Marx's critical legacy after the collapse of 2nd International Social Democracy in 1914 and the 1917-19 Communist revolutions, Adorno's thought tries to recognize the nature of the diremption between Marx's critical theory and ostensibly Marxist politics, pointing, for example, to Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* in considering the degeneration of Marx's legacy into what Marx would call "political economy" rather than its critique, and developing a critique of 20th Century society that is aware of Lenin's critical caveats in the face of ostensibly Leninist politics after 1917 as well as Trotsky's critique of Stalinist reaction in the Soviet Union. The emancipatory potential of 1917-19, however failed and betrayed, remains the lodestar for Adorno's thought, apprehending the unfolding of 20th Century history as reaction against and retreat from that moment.

Stalinism, fascism, the Fordist national state, and the “one-dimensional” or non-contradictory “industrial” society hypothesis emerging mid-century with the resumption of world war obscured the historical legacy of Marxist politics as well as Adorno’s dialectic, which remained, through the late works of the 1960s such as *Negative Dialectic* and *Aesthetic Theory*, consistent with its social-political origins in the 1920s-30s and sought to grasp contradictions of social modernity at more profound levels than traditional Marxist categories of relations of the market, private property and class struggle, whose critical valences had become attenuated. The coincidence of reception of Adorno’s works with the emergence of the social discontents, oppositions and transformations of the 1960s and their aftermath obscured Adorno’s thought during the two decades of “postmodernism” that finally culminated in the events of 1989-92, and whose exhaustion has opened possibilities for reconsidering the critical-theoretical tradition as a whole.

Precedence for such recovery and reappropriation of Left critique can be found in the works of the late ’70s-early ’80s by thinkers retrospectively critical of the forms of social discontents that had emerged in the ’60s, critically apprehending and struggling against a certain one-sided misapprehension of modernity as baleful social homogeneity that informed the oppositions of the ’60s and the postmodernism that followed: Moishe Postone’s reinterpretation of Marx centering on the dialectical critique of proletarian labor and industrial production; Adolph Reed’s critique of the transformation and persistence of American politics of black-white “race” after the ’60s; and Gillian Rose’s Hegelian critique of the antinomies of sociological epistemology.

An excursus on America after the ’60s explores late problems in the grounding of freedom and reason in the social history of modernity. If, as W. E. B. Du Bois put it, the 20th Century was (to be) the century of the “color line,” finding salient expression of modern society in “the strange meaning of being black,” then the question remains: What was and is the nature of the

history of modern forms of social reason and their discontents as they precipitated the freedom movements from the 1930s-60s, in the heart of the “American Century?” The work of contemporary black visual artist Glenn Ligon has been received as emblematic of a certain formation of African-American socio-cultural identity in the 1990s, participating in the post-1989 regeneration of black identity in American (and world, or American-imperial) culture. This is ironic to the extent that Ligon’s work is preoccupied with discontents of African-American cultural-political identity, and thus struggles within and against its terms: “I think the problem with American culture,” Ligon has said, “is that we think there is such a thing as white history and black history.” Such a confrontation of culture with history is thematized in Ligon’s artworks. The concept of artworks as “determinate negation” of society can apprehend Ligon’s works as instantiations of the enduring social-historical problematic of racism in America, and artworks’ “aesthetic autonomy” and “determinate negation” of society can demonstrate, by contrast, the specific means by which artworks present a dialectic of social formation, participating in its reconstitution, while providing for its critical apprehension and recognition. In Ligon’s works, historical forms of discontent provide for the critical objectification of the reconstitution of racist subjectivity in the present as an ongoing problematic of American society, thus demanding a certain reappropriation of history. Such a reappropriation follows in a critical reading of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), expressive of specific problems of American racism and the failed vision of social freedom in the 20th Century.

Attempts at reappropriating Adorno’s critical theory after postmodernism might remain bound by the terms of the postmodernist reception of Adorno, if inverting them. But Adorno’s dialectic itself can explain and provide for the critical specification of the terms of its mistaken reception and obscurity through successive and varied historical moments. This dissertation

engages the reconstruction of and development upon the coherence of Adorno's dialectic as expression of the extended tasks and project of Marxian critical theory bequeathed by history to the present.

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*Theodor W. Adorno to Walter Benjamin*

“The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness. . . . [P]erfection of the commodity character in a Hegelian self-consciousness inaugurates the explosion of its phantasmagoria.” (2 August 1935)

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“The proletariat . . . is itself a product of bourgeois society. . . . [T]he actual consciousness of actual workers . . . [has] absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except . . . interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear[s] all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character. . . . We maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do -- the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution. I am convinced that the further development of the aesthetic debate you have so magnificently inaugurated depends essentially on a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working class.” (18 March 1936)

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*Intention*

In her monograph on Adorno, *The Melancholy Science* (1978), Gillian Rose wrote that Adorno sought to answer for his generation the question Marx had posed in his 1844 *Economic and*

*Philosophic Manuscripts*, “how do we now stand as regards the Hegelian *dialectic*?” Prompted by the questions and problems for Adorno’s thought raised by her exposition of it, in the subsequent book *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981) Rose pursued Hegel’s dialectic further, seeking to find how a critique of the “culture and fate of Marxism” in the 20th Century might produce, through consideration of Marx’s sources in Hegel’s thought, a “critical Marxism.” Rose established the necessity of such inquiry by reference to the positivist and nominalist liquidation of the foundation for critical knowledge of social form in the progress of 20th Century thought, especially after the 1960s. Contemporaneous with Rose’s interrogation of the debasement of critical social theory, and motivated by response to aporias in New Left Marxism, Moishe Postone established the foundation for Marx’s critique of political economy in the dialectic of the commodity form. In this reading, Postone’s exposition of Marx in “Necessity, Labor and Time” (1978) and the book *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (1993) addresses explicitly the basis for Adorno’s critical theory that might otherwise remain implicit and obscure in his writings, the self-reflexive critique of the subjectivity of the commodity form.

This dissertation addresses the problem of the status of Adorno’s critical theory to the extent that Adorno’s writings seek to provoke the recovery of Marx’s dialectic that they themselves do not undertake but take for granted. -- Hence, the direction: Marx after Adorno.

In one of his late writings, a popular essay on “Critique,” Adorno seeks to assess the relation of the status of social freedom to that of “critique,” hence he casts the tradition of German Idealist philosophy, the Kant-Hegel complex, as being important and having made a contribution only as critically reflexive self-consciousness. -- Thus, the other direction: Adorno after Marx.

Left are these questions: How do we now stand in regard to dialectic as critique? How is critical theory possible? What is the basis for theoretical reflection? -- Aimed at here is nothing

less than a comprehensive reconsideration of the status of critical consciousness in society, through Adorno.

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### *Argument*

“Why Adorno?” and “Why now?” In a certain sense, another monograph on Adorno is something that should not need to be written -- and, in this sense, the extant literature on Adorno has been mistaken. Adorno's work needs to be read, but not interpreted. It should be cited for precedence, but, more importantly, the kind of dialectical critique engaged by Adorno should be performed -- continued and developed upon. However, literature on Adorno tends to reify his work, precisely because Adorno's work is considered only as his work, and its authorship is thus fetishized: if not simply reduced to the biographical and idiosyncratic, it is intellectually historicized and commented upon in the past tense, and thus the possibilities it presents are buried along with its empirical author.

Why should this be a problem specific to Adorno's work? Why should it matter that Adorno's work has become historically closed in this way? What the expository literature on Adorno tends to overlook is that (as Gillian Rose put it, in *The Melancholy Science*) Adorno's work “presents a dialectic.” -- It presents and opens questions and problems of the possibility of its own authorship, the possibilities of its thinking and its writing, and it presses these as problems of its reading. Adorno's dialectic deliberately resists the discursive, and thus is irreducible to discourse: all discourse around Adorno is unfortunate, and remains, as discourse, symptomatic of the social formation that Adorno's work attempts to critique. The reasons that Adorno's dialectic continues to provoke and yet has not been elaborated further are to be

explored in this dissertation, not as intellectual history or biography, but as problems that inhere in the dialectic Adorno's work presents.

The core problematic for Adorno's work, following Marx, is that of the possibilities for reflexive critique of dialectical categories apprehended as both product and productive of subjectivity in social history. Adorno's work presses its concerns for the present to the extent that it continues to convincingly enact a critical dialectic of its own subjectivity as well as that of its object, society. It is the premise of this dissertation that exploring and elaborating the possibilities opened in Adorno's dialectic is not only desirable but necessary. -- Desirable because Adorno's writings continue to stimulate debate and irritate commentators: for a thinker so caricatured as hermetic, whose work has been characterized by such apparent closure, the agonist Adorno still continues to provoke. -- Necessary to the extent that social history continues to be tasked with discovering determinate possibilities for fundamental transformation and emancipation. Adorno's writings must be read and comprehended, and this requires a deliberate effort at their recovery from accumulated interpretation. Thus, this dissertation explores the legacy of Adorno's critical theory and its continued purchase on present social life, both as historical formation and potential transformation. -- Hence, "Back to Adorno."

The focus of this dissertation is the close reading of Adorno's writings as dialectical works that eminently recognize their own performative contradictions. Such performative contradictions of Adorno's dialectic can be demonstrated to continue to characterize the social imagination of the present: Adorno's dialectic can critically grasp and socially-historically specify forms of thought characteristic of the present. Hence, this dissertation involves the fundamental recontextualization and reconstruction of Adorno's work, and require a dialectic of the work itself, its re-opening in the face of mistaken closure.

Literature on Adorno has recognized problems of reading Adorno's work, of the possibilities of its thinking and its writing, as constitutive of the problematic his critical theory attempts to grasp. However, this has been characterized as a philosophical problem, as a problem of the subject and not of its object, modern society. Hence, Adorno's dialectic has not been integrated into the problematic of conception and critical apprehension of society as mediated by forms of social modernity, including forms of thought. For instance, Adorno's attempt to grasp the Nietzschean critique of modern society according to Marx's dialectic of the commodity form has been obscured, and the diremption between a Marxist and Nietzschean (or Existential) critique of modernity is left as an ontological problem of subjectivity, and not addressed as a characteristic social-historical dialectic. Adorno was not a late Nietzsche. It is the point of departure for this dissertation to grasp Adorno's attempted recovery of Marx's critical social dialectic, and the forms of thought with which it arises, that comprehends categories of both Enlightenment rationality and its Romantic critique that continue to inform the present.

Adorno's aesthetic writings have received more attention in critical discourse than his ostensibly more sociological work. What such a focus overlooks is that all of Adorno's writings consist of thought figures deliberately modeled after Marx's dialectic of the value form and social subjectivity of the commodity. To the extent that dialectical thought figures have been recognized in Adorno's work, they have been taken only as aesthetic forms for performative critique of epistemology that provide for "determinate negation" of modern forms of consciousness, and not as the presentation of the social form of being and consciousness itself. In this way, Adorno's dialectical social critique has been mistaken for cultural criticism, and his work is re-assimilated into the very antinomical structure it attempts to point beyond. For the reading of Adorno's dialectic in this dissertation, aesthetic form is social form, and Adorno's

writings can be recognized in their attempt to apprehend and *critique* the aesthetic -- “non-conceptual,” or “mimetic” and affective -- dimensions of social-historical constitution and potential transformation of subjectivity.

Adorno's “negative” dialectic has been misunderstood as a critique of identity that anticipates poststructuralism as advocacy for the irreducibly non-identical and heterogeneous. However, such conventional readings of Adorno's work have remained one-sided and decidedly non-dialectical, for Adorno's negative dialectic, following Marx's critical theory, seeks emancipatory potential in capitalist social-historical forms of identity and homogeneity (e.g., the proletariat), and insistently exposes the moment of Existential (e.g., Heideggerian) “ontological need,” the affirmation of non-identity and difference, as a constitutive aspect of the social-historical dialectic of the value-form of the commodity as product and productive form of mediation. -- For Adorno, social forms of non-identity and difference are also implicated in social modernity as dynamic, self-reproductive historical totality, providing for its perpetuation. Adorno's -- and Marx's -- critique of identity and homogeneity is not philosophical, it is not the critique of the identity of subject and object or of their homogeneity per se, but rather of the specific social form of value, its mediating activity, historical dynamic and socio-cultural elaborations in capitalism. Hence, this dissertation responds to the inadequacies of post-1960s critique of social homogeneity, the one-sided characterization and critique of capitalism as baleful social homogenization, and to the inadequacies of claims for socio-cultural heterogeneity and difference. Adorno's critique of 20th Century social forms is a critique of post-“revolutionary” society (following Marx's critique of 19th Century society, after 1789, 1830 and 1848) that grasps modern society as being characterized and actually constituted by its specific social-historical forms of subjectivity, discontent and opposition. -- For Adorno, a dialectic of

emancipation constitutes social modernity that is not exhausted by recourse to characterizations distinguishing its “truth” contents from “false” claims.

This dissertation explores some important reversals of conventional readings of Adorno: reading Adorno's work as dialectical critique of modernity and not modernist criticism; reading Adorno's aesthetic theory as critical social theory and not aesthetic (Romantic) critique of society; reading Adorno's critique of culture industry as a comprehensive dialectic of (19th and 20th Century socio-cultural forms, including phenomena such as modern and avant-garde art at its center, artworks regarded as instances of social modernity, rather than providing either one-sided normative (19th Century bourgeois) or utopian (post-capitalist) criteria for judgment; the emergence of post-bourgeois “authoritarian” personality from the eclipse of classical ego psychology and the increased prevalence of “pre-Oedipal” psychology (“regression,” narcissistic “other-directedness” and “projective identification”) as formation of subjectivity in advanced modernity and not social-historical liquidation (or “end”); the public sphere not taken in its own terms but, as *agora*, a critical category of the constitutive social horizon for experience in modernity. Adorno's dialectic of modernity critically anticipates postmodernism, not as nostalgic modernism, but critique that prefigures, characterizes and begins to point beyond the transformation and continuation of capitalism after crises in the 1960s-'70s as context for postmodernist debates. Categories such as “totality” and “history” -- and “dialectic” -- that have come under attack by postmodernist criticism should be grasped in Adorno's work as critical categories rather than normative or descriptive terms. Adorno's dialectic of reification, which attempts to critically grasp the diremption between Lukács's social-historical critique of reification and Benjamin's apparent melancholic “endorsement” of it, provides context for grasping problems and aporias of poststructuralist discourse theory, the persistence of an

inexorable self-other or subject-object dialectic as index of continued constitution in, reproduction of and domination by abstract and alienated, yet real, effective social forms of capitalism. -- The term "capitalism" itself is a reflexive, critical category for Adorno's dialectic in the face of historical claims for post-capitalist society.

This dissertation focuses on Adorno's actual writings as well as on problems of their conceptualization, the characterizations of modern society in major works such as *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectic*, for their attempts to recover the greatest achievements of Marx's dialectic of social modernity (e.g., in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*) for the critique of 20th Century society. The more immediate context for this dissertation is renewed interest in Adorno in the 1990s -- major new books on Adorno; special numbers of various academic journals; recent English-language translations of Adorno's writings and lectures; and the new critical editions and re-translations of *Aesthetic Theory* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* -- that has continued to be determined by the initial, contemporaneous (Anglo-American) reception of Adorno's late writings, *Negative Dialectic* and *Aesthetic Theory*, in the wake of the 1960s New Left: interpretations by Susan Buck-Morss (*The Origin of Negative Dialectics*), Jameson (*Marxism and Form*), Martin Jay (*The Dialectical Imagination*) and Gillian Rose (*The Melancholy Science*). The debate over poststructuralism and postmodernity between Jean-François Lyotard (e.g., *The Postmodern Condition*) and Jürgen Habermas (e.g., "Modernity -- An Incomplete Project," and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*) provides an entrance, tracing the historical period between 1969 and 1989 in which Adorno's later works were received.

Partisanship in critical-theoretical debates over the nature of "post"-modernity has had recourse to Adorno's work to the extent that, on the one side, Adorno's critique of social

modernity and aesthetic modernism prefigures or anticipates that of postmodernist critics, or, on the other side, to the extent that Adorno's critique is considered to be, at best, inadequate, or, at worst, the kind that constitutes or reproduces the object of critique, ("totalizing forms" of) social modernity. However, such an antinomical reading of Adorno falls into partisanship for either rationalist (Enlightenment) thought or its irrationalist (Romantic, Existential) critique that Adorno's work attempts to critically characterize and comprehend as antinomical forms of thought arising with social forms of capitalism.

The current reconsideration of Adorno starting in the 1990s seems to have been enabled precisely at the closure of two decades, 1969-1989, during which both society and its critical theorization were determined by the aftermath of the upheavals of the 1960s. As Jameson put it (in his 1990 monograph on Adorno, *Late Marxism*), perhaps Adorno seems to be so timely for the '90s precisely because he seems so out of date, after the "post"-modernism of the 1970s-'80s -- in this sense identifying Adorno with the apparent anachronisms of neo-liberal capitalism. The unfortunate coincidence of the historical reception of Adorno's later works that appear to consummate his critical theory, *Negative Dialectic* and *Aesthetic Theory*, during the 1970s-'80s, can be shown, retrospectively, to have determined a reading of Adorno's work characterized by a pessimistic and despairing search after the '60s for moments of resistance in the face of what appeared to be blocked potential for the social transformation of and emancipation from capitalism. In the 1970s-'80s there was such an identification with the kinds of pessimism associated with the failure of international proletarian revolution and disenchanting developments of the Russian Revolution in the early 1920s; after the rise of Nazism in Germany, the Spanish Civil War and the Stalinist purges of the international Left in the 1930s; after the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact facilitating the outbreak of WWII; and, after WWII, during the Cold

War-era false polarization of the 1950s- early '60s; those periods punctuating Adorno's life history: making for a certain reception of Adorno's critical theory in the context of the ambiguous outcomes of social upheavals in the 1960s-70s. -- The rejection Adorno's work experienced in the '70s-'80s was a continuation of the late '60s rejection of such "pessimism." However, the reappraisal of Adorno in the 1990s has been enabled by the reconsideration of the critical-theoretical tradition after an exhaustion of postmodernism, the empirical resurgence of a social-historical dynamic of "global" capitalism, and the search for potential opposition within it. (Jameson's attempts to enlist Adorno for the project of a "late" Marxist critique of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism seems to have been so enabled.) -- Current rejection of Adorno amounts to the rejection of Marx. Hence, current rehabilitation of Adorno's critical theory can be shown to have been motivated by what a recent book calls "Marx's revenge [or vindication]" (Meghnad Desai, 2002). However, this dissertation guards against elision of the critique of historical Marxism within which Adorno's work struggles in its attempt to grasp the social forms of post-liberal capitalism in the 20th Century. -- This dissertation seeks the potential development of a Marxian critique of modernity after Adorno.

Responding to the reappraisal of Adorno's work in the 1990s, after postmodernism, Adorno's critical theory can be recovered in a way not undertaken by the literature on Adorno: Adorno's attempted recovery and continuation of Marx's dialectic. -- Marx's dialectic has been transformed retrospectively by Adorno's critical theory of 20th Century social forms. This dissertation is determined by two concomitant and coterminous projects, the characterization of Marx's dialectic from the vantage of Adorno's critical theory, and the view of Adorno from Marx, reciprocal projects that can be characterized as elaborating dialectics of 19th Century liberal and 20th Century post-liberal or statist forms of the commodity (what David Harvey's

1990 book *The Condition of Postmodernity* calls “the interpenetrated tendencies of capitalism as a whole”). Reading Adorno with Marx allows for grasping present, at once post-liberal and post-statist, social forms of capitalism.

Occasions for critical departures of postmodernist theory, those aspects of society characterized by socio-cultural transformations since the 1960s, were anticipated as determinate possibilities in Adorno's dialectic, to the extent that Adorno's work has been successful in recovering Marx's dialectic for a critical theory of 20th Century social forms. According to this reading of Adorno's critical theory, Fordist capital preserved the value form and subjectivity of the commodity after the historical crisis of world war and international proletarian revolution during the first third of the 20th Century, just as, in the final third of the 20th Century, post-Fordist, neo-liberal social forms have preserved the commodity form after the historical crisis of Fordism in the 1960s. Present social life can be exposed as a palimpsest of historical elaborations and organizations of categories of the value form as presented in Marx's dialectic of *Capital*. Gillian Rose's reading of Adorno in *The Melancholy Science* grasps that, on the basis of Marx's critique of the modern social-historical formation of capitalism, many further elaborations of the value form could be characterized in the categories of apparently diverse aspects of subjectivity in modern culture, art, philosophy, psychology and law, and that this was what Adorno's works deliberately set out to do. In this dissertation, Adorno's critical theory of modern social forms provides for fundamental critical characterization of historical elaborations of the value form and subjectivity of the commodity through a subject-object dialectic that is immanent and emergent to apparently diverse aspects of the subject as social product and object. Thus, Marx's dialectic can be shown to have rendered possible and plausible later developments configuring the present.

The reconstruction of Adorno's critical theory thus undertaken is necessarily of a provisional nature, but can contribute to opening further possibilities for the reconstruction and continuation of a Marxian dialectic and critique of capitalist society as social modernity. This involves apprehension and expression of unfulfilled tasks given by past history through characterization of emancipatory social potential and possibilities emergent to yet pointing beyond the present.

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### *Adorno and art*

For Adorno, works of art provide prisms through which society becomes apprehensible, crystallizing socio-cultural forms and, thus, instantiating society. Adorno's dialectic, following Lukács (e.g., "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat"), characterizes modern society as one in which forms of thought are themselves instantiations of social forms. However, for Adorno, following Marx, dialectic is the form of thought adequate to its dynamic object, modern society: dialectic is implicated in modern social-historical formation, and thus, as such a form of thought, affirms it. Kant's critique of Enlightenment thought, Hegel's critique of Kant, and Marx's critique of Hegel form an ongoing dialectic of the forms of critical recognition of social modernity -- capitalism. In Adorno's work, it is only as determinate negation, as negative, that dialectical thought allows social dialectic to become critically reflexive. This follows Marx's critical theory of the value-form of the commodity as dynamic form of social mediation, for which dialectical thinking is characteristic of the problem-solution and is not in itself emancipatory. As an attempt to characterize and express immanently emergent social-historical formation, Adorno's dialectic demands that one think along with it, following its forms of thought, and the experiential content of thinking provides forms for the distillation and critical

presentation of society. If (according to Marx, in the *Grundrisse*) Hegel's dialectic of modernity was emergent to its 19th Century formation, after the French Revolution, and Marx's dialectic sought to be emergent to historical developments of proletarian social movements, after 1848, then Adorno's dialectic seeks to be emergent to historical developments issuing from (failed) 20th Century attempts to overcome capitalism (however inadequately grasped by its ostensible opponents), and Adorno's dialectic takes forms of modernity's discontents, such as art practices, as its objects, constitutive of subjectivity. Hence, what is apparently paradoxical in Adorno's dialectic is indicative of the social-historical formation it seeks to present. In modern artworks (modern reception of artworks), where the social context for art is instantiated through the productive framing questions "Is it art?" and "What is art?" -- in the face of perennial, Hegelian questions about the historical "end" of art -- the category of the aesthetic itself, especially as phenomenally autonomous aspect, becomes reflexive: the subjectivity of modern artworks is thus constituted thoroughly dialectically. However, Adorno's critical social theory of modern art goes further than this. Adorno's aesthetic theory is cognizant that the category of the aesthetic itself has become socially-historically problematized, as far back as Hegel. For Adorno, works of art critically objectify (possibilities for) aesthetic experience, and it is precisely through apparent, phenomenal "determinate negation" of society, as "aesthetic autonomy" -- struggling against, and always in productive antagonism with apparently external heteronomous social determination, such as imperatives to communication or representation -- that the category of aesthetic experience problematizes and critically apprehends the social formation of subjectivity. Artworks thus constitute social-historically necessary forms of appearance, and social forms distill and present themselves in works of art phenomenologically, and not merely semiologically. In Adorno's dialectic, modern forms of social subjectivity are constituted

through an aesthetic, non-conceptual dimension, characterized as mimetic or affective, as well as through the conceptual-cognitive or semiotic. What is called, in the art-critical discourse of modernity, the moment of “aesthetic autonomy” achieved by artworks can be characterized as evidence of a specific social formation in subjectivity: it constitutes the moment that an artwork can dialectically crystallize social form and provoke its recognition. As Susan Buck-Morss put it (in response to the “Visual Culture Questionnaire” in *October* 77, 1996), while the work of artists is to critically objectify aesthetic experience, it is the work of critics to recognize this. For Adorno, aesthetic experience is emphatically social experience, and the constitution of artworks as critically objectified aesthetic experience allows for grasping the constitutive experiential contents of social forms as forms of modern subjectivity. -- For this reading, the experiential contents of Adorno's works provide the constitutive bases for such critical recognition. -- In Adorno's dialectic, following Lukács, “form” and “content” constitute one another, each is incoherent without the other, but their phenomenal and effective separation, their mutual opacity, becomes the critical, if constitutive object for a dialectic of modernity. Adorno's critical theory of modern social form attempts to grasp the dialectic of conceptual and non-conceptual forms of knowledge and experience as existing in mutually constitutive and productive antagonism, and does not find partisanship on either side of such an antinomy. Adorno's works reflexively implicate themselves in a dialectic of social-historical formation and do not seek a meta-theoretical vantage “above” it, but recognize the ways in which such a move would actually fall below the threshold of presenting social forms as dynamic objects of mediation. Thus, the forms of presentation for Adorno's social-critical dialectic and the experiential contents of reading Adorno's writings provide social forms of knowledge in Adorno's works as much as their concepts do.

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University of Chicago Doctoral Dissertation

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“The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness. . . . Perfection of the commodity character in a Hegelian self-consciousness inaugurates the explosion of its phantasmagoria.”

— Theodor W. Adorno to Walter Benjamin, August 2, 1935

Outline:

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**Why Adorno? Why Now?**

### Part 1. ***Theory-practice***

**Adorno in 1969**

**1917**

**Lukács and Korsch**

**Theory and Practice**

### Part 2. ***History***

**Adorno and Benjamin's Philosophy of History**

**Capital in History**

**Beyond History**

### Part 3. ***Art***

**Critical Theory of Art**

**Adorno on “Culture Industry”**

**Adorno's Aesthetic Theory**

## ***Conclusion***

**Adorno's Marxism**