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Below the Level, or Adorno's Posture of Thinking

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“You can't even say that this individual is below the political cultural level of his country. Trump is permanently destroying that level.”¹ Thus, Jürgen Habermas once ascribed the destructive effect of Donald Trump and his followers partly to the imbalanced development of the internet and social media. Chinese readers who attempt an analogous critical analysis of the unspeakable political culture of their own country would feel stung by the expression “below the level” and obligated to ask themselves: at what level of political and social reality are *we*?

As witnesses to the unparalleled collapse of the distinction between public and private domains within the “Great Firewall,” while also having poor experiences of the “bourgeois political public sphere,” they have to try to start out from the other side, as Adorno once did regarding the degeneration of human commu-

1 Jürgen Habermas, “For God's Sake, Spare us Governing Philosophers!” interview by Borja Hermoso, trans. Heather Galloway, *EL PAÍS*, May 25, 2018, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/05/07/inenglish/152568361_8145760.html.

nication in daily life: "The private relations between human beings seem to form themselves according to the model of the industrial 'bottleneck.' Even in the smallest community, the level is determined by the most subaltern of its members."²

Far from being elitist contempt for those at the lower level, Adorno's complaint asks for an inquiry into objective social conditions which lower it. The term "the model of the industrial bottleneck" alludes to the inevitable imbalance in capitalist industrialization on the basis of commodity exchange that is itself imbalanced. It is this imbalance that has invaded the innermost relationship between individuals and caused what Adorno names the "privation of [the] private," with which, according to him, the archaic inhuman under human beings has a chance to test its capability to "hijack" (*verschlagen*) human speech:

For the sake of humanity, the conversation is restricted to what is nearest, most dull-witted and banal, even if only one inhuman visage is present. Since the world has hijacked speech from human beings, those who cannot be talked to are in the right.³

Although Adorno's tone could easily lead readers to believe that he would rather turn his back on "those who cannot be talked to," he does not actually personalize the argument against them, which is to say, identify those peevishly dependent on their self-identities. Instead, he reminds us that it is "for the sake of humanity" (*der Humanität zuliebe*) that the opportunity is given to the inhuman, and that we—"who are more differentiated, who do not wish to perish"—have to "remain strictly constrained to the consideration of everyone who is inconsiderate."⁴

Here, as he always does, Adorno exemplifies a paradoxical stance insisting on the nonidentical and incommunicable moments in human communication, which is concomitant with, as Habermas put it, "the paradoxical structure of thinking as totalizing critique"⁵ in his philosophical discourse. But if we pay more precise attention to the postural moment than the declarative content of the "totalizing critique," it seems less a final denunciation than an endeavor to cling—"remain strictly constrained" (*bleibt...strikt verhalten*)—to thinking. Adorno demonstrates a posture of and toward thinking which is

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 183; *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 208-209.

3 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 183-184.

4 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 184. Translation modified.

5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), 119.

both prepared for and enforced by a more desperate “ideal speech situation.” In *Negative Dialectics*, he writes:

But when a man can do nothing that will not threaten to turn out for the worst even if meant for the best, he will be bound to start thinking (zum Denken verhalten) – and that justifies him as well as the happy spirit. [...] The horizon of such happiness need by no means be that of a transparent relation to a possible practice to come. [...] Paradoxically, it is the desperate fact that the practice that would matter is barred which grants to thought a breathing space it would be practically criminal not to utilize.⁶

According to Adorno, a reference to some normal or normative standard (or its opposites such as an endemic convention, state of exception, or social pathology) is relevant only when it is applied to a test to find to what extent it cannot be counted as a standard anymore. Thinking varies its posture in response to each test—“test of the turn to nonidentity”⁷—and thus keeps adjusting to the shifting constellation in every “breathing space.” This requires a dialectical combination of “speculative skill” with a micrological “immersion in particularity,”⁸ which Adorno sees in Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk (Arcades Project)* and develops in his own way. While it seems that Benjamin fails to avoid a convergence of the metaphysical and the poetic stratum in his work, which, according to Adorno, is due to his “acceptance of materialistic dialectics as Weltanschauung,”⁹ Adorno insists on the threshold between philosophy and aesthetics by carrying out dialectics as a mental posture penetrated by physical impulses. The impulses, as the sensational across the threshold, are stimulated bodily and at the same time stimulate thinking across its threshold, namely, thinking adjusts its posture and prepares itself for the unthinkable: “Without a practical visa, thinking should go as much against the façade as possible, should move as far as it is capable of moving.”¹⁰

A way of thinking that could only—willingly or compelled—validate itself based on a certain discursive level is going to find its consolation in the role of “secondary critique.” I model this term after Adorno’s “secondary superstition”¹¹ to denote a simulated critique acting in the place where the original critical impulses, albeit embedded in individuals’ own pri-

6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London/New York: Routledge, 1973), 245; *Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 242-243.

7 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 154.

8 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 28, 83.

9 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

10 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 245.

11 Theodor W. Adorno, *Adorno: The Stars Down to Earth: And Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 36-37.

mary experiences, are organized and institutionalized by either political censorship or an administrative performance standard. As a result, thinking loses its posture as well as the capability to adjust itself to what is unthinkable. A secondary critique is contented to match with an ordered channel, according to which the incompatible parts of reality are left out of sync and outside the scope of what can be heard.

But reality has its own unidentified frequencies consisting of ceaseless, scarcely audible noises which could suddenly elevate themselves into roars and screams at events such as the triumph of Donald Trump or Shanghai's lockdown. The latter, even for those accustomed to living in a post-authoritarian regime, seems as much below the level as the former for those in a democracy. In the three months of lockdown, life was at the same time collapsed and condensed into a negative image of the question, "who is worthy of life?" just as a scream should be heard as language in its extremely expressive moment. Adorno's teaching is of crucial significance in the sense that it is this negative image and its expressive moment that demands thinking to ask, not "how should we think about this," but "what is that which still constrains us to think?" The question, seeking no propositional answer, is only to stir thinking into its posture, which looks as meaningless as the question itself, but with its minimal adjustment, impulses are triggered in a totally different direction: "All mental things are modified physical impulses, and such modification is their qualitative recoil into what not merely 'is.'"¹²

The shock and rage caused by an unexpected event, which are qualitatively the same as daily bodily impulses, constrain one to thinking of "their qualitative recoil" precisely because the "quantitative" one, as we saw, could be so easily borne down by the compression which seems endlessly endurable. It is not thinking's shame to imitate the compression in itself to transform the surplus of the impulse, which means, keeping its posture in being exposed to the objective preponderance that "can be experienced crassly day after day."¹³ Every posture originates from the unendurable moment in endurance. This is the nonidentical moment of posture that we can experience in our own body. A posture of and toward thinking is an exposure of and to what seems unthinkable in everyday life. Its negative image, as Adorno claims, bears a light "reflecting transcendence."¹⁴ This is an improbable promise for those who still hope to climb beyond—as the verb *transcendere* originally means in Latin—with most improbable postures.

12 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

13 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 300.

14 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 404.

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