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## Adorno in the Anthropocene

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The Anthropocene marks the acknowledgement of capitalism's driven pursuit of wealth creation, its profligacy, its structural indifference to environmental damage, and capitalism's rationalized social violence, the constellation that Horkheimer and Adorno identify as instrumental rationality. The Anthropocene is accepted as having risen to become an ecocidal force beginning in 1950, the period of the post-war economic explosion denominated as the "Great Acceleration." Most importantly, the Anthropocene marks the destruction of the 11,700-year reign of Holocene nature. The Holocene's climatic stability and moderate temperatures—following the nearly three million years of unstable glaciations and warmings of the Pleistocene epoch—enabled the resilient benefic fecundity of the living Earth that made historically progressive civilization possible, beginning with the agrarian revolution. Whether or not the geological community finally accepts the Anthropocene as an epoch,<sup>1</sup> no one is de-

1 The concept of the Anthropocene remains contested amongst geologists, a matter discussed in a front-page story in the *New York Times*: "The

nying the catastrophic destruction of the Holocene’s self-regulating climatic stability, temperature moderateness, and resilience. Holocene self-regulation is forever eclipsed by capitalism’s destruction of innumerable ecological habitats and the emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere that have caused increasing global warming with all its consequences: spreading desertification, increased forest fires, “sea-level rise, ocean acidification and spreading oceanic ‘dead zones’; rapid changes in the biosphere both on land and in the sea, as a result of habitat loss, predation, explosion of domestic animal populations and species invasions,”<sup>2</sup> and an approaching sixth mass species extinction that could destroy more than 75% of the Earth’s species. Human social action has become equivalent to the great forces of nature, capable of altering not just the surface features and textures of the living Earth but, beyond the imagination of earlier generations, constitutive structural features of nature: already the destruction of some of the boundary conditions regulating Holocene nature, with more now vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> *Everything* historical humanity had confidently called “nature” was, in fact, only an historical formation of nature; all nature—setting aside the petrifying idea of Newtonian nature—was in fact only Holocene nature. In its integral shape, Holocene nature has been shattered. Through this shattering, contemporary historical humanity has been abruptly deposited in the Anthropocene, and all future humanity, for as long as the human species continues, will live in the Anthropocene—unless all planetary boundaries are transgressed so thoroughly that humanity loses whatever capacities for ecological restoration it now enjoys.

While Adorno lacked the precise conceptual tools necessary to either elaborate or explain systematic structural transformations of living nature—the very idea of geological epochs and ages as constitutive of formations of the living Earth—he nonetheless intended his accounts of instrumental reason and domination to approximate that level of destruction and devastation denoted by the ruination of Holocene nature bequeathing the Anthropocene. Henceforth, and most emphatically for the next several centuries, all human reflections on the states of human living will be “reflections from damaged

Next Epoch Of Planet Earth Might Be Today,” December 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/17/climate/anthropocene-age-geology.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

- 2 Working Group on the “Anthropocene,” Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy. May 2019. <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>. This is the report recommending the preliminary acceptance of the Anthropocene as an epoch with a 1950 start date.
- 3 For the original statement of planetary boundaries, see Johan Rockström et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009): 32. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32/>. For the most recent statement, see Katherine Richardson et al., “Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries,” *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (September 13, 2023), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458>.

[Holocene] life.”<sup>4</sup> Decrying the Enlightenment’s optimistic idea of progressive universal history, recall how Adorno urged the construction of the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history—“the unity of the control of nature, progressing to the rule over men, and finally to that over inner nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. It ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men, in the epitome of discontinuity.”<sup>5</sup>

It is a distinctive feature of Adorno’s critical theory that it genealogically theorizes the drive for self-preservation becoming institutionalized in *scientific, technological, and economic practices* of instrumental rationality about nature. Capitalist modernity is the synthetic fulfilment of that instrumental rationality constellation; and, continuous with this impetus, it was for the sake of enhancing control over nature that there occurred increasingly complex structures of social domination. By beginning with the institutionalization of the drive for self-preservation, Adorno’s materialism makes all human history itself an evolving formation of natural history, an evolving product of natural drives in their institutional formation. As a consequence, capitalism’s brutalizing forms of social domination—of men over women, of slavery, of colonizers over the colonized, of bourgeois over proletariat, of the Global North over the Global South—remain rationalized by being necessary for the continuing exploitation of and control over living nature: the epitome of identity thinking necessitates reducing living nature to *quantifiable utilities* all the way down without remainder, all is solely for the sake of purposeless economic growth without end. As a consequence, capitalism cannot rationally “count” environmental degradation and destruction, or massive species extinction; it cannot rationally “count” the foreclosing of the possibilities of environmental stability for future generations; it cannot and does not rationally “count” its obligations to today’s children and their children; capitalism cannot rationally “count” the consequences of its current practices even for the medium term, for the next fifty years, say. Capitalism is a present of an ever-expanding structure of violation to the biosphere, to the living earth, without a meaningful past or justificatory future goal. Hence, even as the means of direct violence have progressed to burgeoning nuclear arsenals, which remain ever-menacing, the true *menace* to humanity today is the ongoing destruction of a habitable living nature, the Anthropocene as the actuality of “mutilated

4 See Tim Luke’s “Reflections from a Damaged Planet: Adorno as Accompaniment to Environmentalism in the Anthropocene,” *Telos* 183 (Summer 2018): 9-14.

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 320.

nature,”<sup>6</sup> as a world “radiant with” a new, post-Holocaust formation of “triumphant calamity.”<sup>7</sup>

*Thesis one: the actuality of Adorno and his critical theory today is as a thinker of the Anthropocene.*<sup>8</sup> His critical naturalism, his so-called “vulgar” materialism, however, found no followers in second or third generation critical theory. Hence, *a second thesis*: Although it would require a full essay to demonstrate, it has become increasingly plausible to argue that it is, rather, *the tradition of ecofeminism that significantly converges and overlaps with the argumentation of Adorno’s critical theory.* In its convergence and extension of Adorno’s critical theory, ecofeminism provides a more compelling account of our present than does “official” critical theory. It is ecofeminism’s critical naturalism that is the proper inheritor of Adorno’s—and Horkheimer’s, and Benjamin’s, and Fromm’s, and Marcuse’s—critical theory, their post-Marx critical naturalist materialism.<sup>9</sup>

Implicit in my listing of what capitalist instrumental reason cannot rationally “count” is ecofeminism’s core thesis, namely, that the overriding and *primary contradiction* of Anthropocene capitalism is its structurally mandatory pursuit of economic growth in *systematic indifference to the demands for social reproduction as such*—the business of social reproduction historically being mere “women’s work.” It is *because* capitalist production is laser-focused on profit—M-C-M’—that it places into the background the material conditions of reproduction, both in biological and social terms. Apart from the disregard for the environmental costs to Holocene nature that have caused the fall into the Anthropocene, there is also the continuing and permanent actualization of what Marx called “primitive accumulation”

- 6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 77.
- 7 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.
- 8 Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011) anticipates the argument; as does Alison Stone, “Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 4 (2006): 231-53; Tim Luke’s “Reflections from a Damaged Planet” makes the argument explicitly.
- 9 For a singular elaboration of critical theory and ecofeminism, see Ariel Salleh, “Epistemology and the Metaphors of Production: An Eco-Feminist Reading of Critical Theory,” *Studies in the Humanities* 15, no. 2 (December 1988). Other central documents include: Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1990 [1980]); and *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010 [1989]). Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Master of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); and *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002). I attempt offer a first go at defending this thesis in “Adorno and Ecofeminism,” in *Oxford Handbook to Adorno*, eds. Henry W. Pickford & Martin Shuster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

in the exploitation of women's bodies, slave bodies, colonized bodies, racialized bodies, which today appears most emphatically through the continuing exploitation of the peoples of the Global South by those in the waste-producing and irresponsible Global North.<sup>10</sup>

Adorno insisted upon the finitude of philosophy, that no philosophy could be anything other than its own time in thought. Adorno remains actual today because his philosophy drilled down into the conceptual depth of an instrumentally rational capitalist modernity crystallizing in the industrial slaughterhouses of the Nazi genocide and the successors to it that appeared in the presumptively benign forms of post-war liberal capitalism—the culture industry, et. al. Today those very same structures are working themselves out in the Anthropocene as a capitalism without past or future, the Anthropocene thus revealing capitalism's drive for wealth as a death drive. Of course, understood aright, Horkheimer and Adorno had capitalism's death drive clearly in view:

Animism had endowed things with souls; [industry] makes souls into things... The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death. The subjective mind which disintegrates the spiritualization of nature masters spiritless nature only by imitating rigidity, disintegrating itself as animistic. Imitation enters the service of power.<sup>11</sup>

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- 10 Although this argument appears in the writings of all the major ecofeminists, for an exemplary statement see Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2014 [1986]).
- 11 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21; 44-5.