

“Total Disaster”: Primitivism and Progress

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So many global events of the last decade seem to call for an Adornian perspective: mass migration of people seeking refuge, often turned away by governments refusing them asylum; the global rise of right-wing populist movements, whose leaders fit Adorno’s description of “the great little man” all too well;¹ political mobilization of a seemingly contradictory nostalgia for both Imperial and Soviet Russia that calls to mind Adorno’s concerns about irrational identifications with the collective;² and, perhaps above

- 1 A partial list would include America’s Trump, Brazil’s Bolsonaro, Hungary’s Orbán, “a person who suggests both omnipotence and the idea that he is just one of the folks...” Theodor W. Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 2000), 118-37. Also see Samir Gandesha, “A Composite of King Kong and a Suburban Barber: Adorno’s ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,’” in *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*, ed. Samir Gandesha (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 120-41.
- 2 Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 118-37; Theodor W. Adorno, “Opinion Delusion Society,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 105-22.

all, the rapidly worsening climate crisis that disproportionately effects Indigenous peoples, the poor, and the racialized. The climate collapse we are living through is not the "total disaster"³ that Adorno envisioned in his post-atomic texts *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics*, but his reflections on the devastating effects of human domination over nature remain, nonetheless, instructive for us.⁴ Adorno's thinking is persistently insightful, yet his philosophy, dedicated to self-reflectively addressing everyday life in the present, is firmly rooted in its own historical moment. From this, we can infer that we denizens of the neoliberal twenty-first century have not yet escaped the "dialectic of enlightenment" that Adorno theorized with Max Horkheimer in the 1940s. Liberalism regresses to authoritarianism and Adorno's thinking speaks not only to its own time, but ours as well. It is deeply regrettable that Adorno's thinking now seems more obviously relevant to more people than it was perceived to be only fifteen or twenty years ago.⁵

But whoever chooses to study Adorno today must listen carefully to the voices that question whether his thought can address our present needs: to address the sources and the psychological effects of the climate crisis (and its pandemics), the persistence of the "coloniality of power,"⁶ and the violence inflicted upon global Indigenous and racialized peoples—a violence exacerbated by the social and political effects of the latest economic crisis. These are deeply interrelated problems and cannot be addressed without critically assessing how the Western concept of humanity sanctions racial hierarchies, separates humans from nature, and thereby threatens life itself. This means that we must seriously consider whether Adorno's thinking is too bound to the humanistic European Enlightenment project. Does his eurocentric perspective perpetuate what Sylvia Wynter refers to as "the overrepresentation of man," or what Derrida calls the innocent "autobiography of the human species" that Western philosophy writes?⁷ Perhaps Adorno's reliance on a developmental model of "humanity," and his continued insistence on the need

3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 190.

4 Please see the special issue of *Adorno Studies* devoted to Adorno and the Anthropocene, eds. Camilla Flodin and Sven Anders Johansson, *Adorno Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019).

5 Stuart Jeffries, "Why a Forgotten 1930s Critique of Capitalism is Back in Fashion," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/09/marxist-critique-capitalism-frankfurt-school-cultural-apocalypse>.

6 Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-80.

7 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337; Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter, 2002): 398.

for a transformation that cannot yet be positively figured—a radical change of the subject, the political, the social, the economic—requires renovation.⁸

Such criticism cannot be dismissed as entirely unfounded. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, is a truly weird text. It is full of insightful observations about the domination of nature, but these insights seem to be buttressed by a dubious anthropology taking primitive man and his animistic magic as its object of study. And the essay “Progress” is unremittingly critical of what is commonly taken to be “progress”—what Adorno identifies as a negative universal history of domination. Yet he claims that progress—redefined as “averting...total disaster”—is the species’ only hope for survival and that the possibility of progress is entirely dependent upon whether “humanity” in the form of a “self-conscious global subject” develops.⁹ What are we to make of these commitments today? The fantasy of primitive man and what appear to be lofty philosophical claims about a unified humanity-to-come might appear to be entirely irreconcilable with the urgent need for decolonization.

But appearances can deceive. With all due respect to Adorno’s critics, I contend that as Critical Theorists committed to thinking from our contemporary needs, we should follow Adorno in continuing to think from the fantasy of primitive man toward the dream of a universal humanity. I say this because we see evidence of unbridled primitivism everywhere. Whether it is celebrated or vehemently denounced, the notion that we humans bear a deep-seated primal urge toward violence is ubiquitous, and this notion, unexamined, manifests in material instances of rage. I propose we consider in this light the storming of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. in 2021 and the vehement calls for those rioters to face retributive justice. If we read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as I think it is meant to be read, or it may be more appropriate to say as we are certainly able to read it today—as an attempt to work through primitivism, treating it as a projection onto the notional past of the modern liberal subject’s own barbarity—then that book, and

8 See for instance, Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia Press, 2021), 199. Allen suggests that Adorno’s thinking is over-reliant upon rationalism and developmentalism and that this leads to political resignation. She suggests that critical theorists would be better served if they abandoned Adorno’s Freud-inflected use of drive theory and engaged in its place a Kleinian model, in which maturity or progress is measured by one’s capacity to make reparations to others. I contest her depiction of Adorno’s philosophy and I am concerned that the shift she advocates does not fully address our needs. Reparations are valuable but insufficient to the task of creating a world in which our survival does not necessitate pain and suffering for others.

9 Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 144..

Adorno's philosophy as a whole, continues to speak to us in deeply important ways.

Adorno agrees with Benjamin's claim in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that, as Adorno puts it, "progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place."¹⁰ He thus negates the definition of progress as movement along a developmental path toward Hegel's World Spirit. As Adorno has it, "progress is resistance at all stages, not the surrender to the steady ascent" of Spirit.¹¹ One may protest that the ethical potential of the human entangled with the "more-than-human" has always already been achieved in innumerable non-Western cultures in ways that surpass the aspirations of "humanity" as envisioned in modern Western thought. That claim is indisputable. But, following Adorno, I would also argue that this ethical potential has not been universally actualized because much of the world's human population continues to live under the spell of domination—conforming to a logic that reacts to the need for housing and health care with policing and punishment, and the need to end our reliance on fossil fuel with carbon off-setting, protecting the private self and its (property) interests above life itself. Because wrong life predominates, pockets of good relations between humans and the rest of nature exist under conditions of extreme precarity, constantly threatened by modern forms of subjectivity, reified sociality, and political despotism disguised as self-determination. The primitivism at work in Western culture, bringing about the regression from autonomy to authoritarianism, remains a threat to dignity and decency wherever they might be found. Motivated by need and hope, our thinking should continue to progress toward establishing "the whole society as humanity,"¹² not at the expense of difference and diversity and not at the expense of the non-human world. Today, Adorno's thought is still indispensable to the task of undoing "the European notion of man"¹³ and to the desire to end unnecessary suffering.

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10 Adorno, "Progress," 145.

11 Adorno, "Progress," 160.

12 Adorno, "Progress," 144.

13 Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, eds. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 7.