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Experiences from the Ruins of Everyday Life

During the final years of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, Theodor W. Adorno, then in exile in the United States, wrote his most *subjective* book, entitled *Minima Moralia: Reflections from damaged life*. As the author indicates, the book is written “from the standpoint of subjective experience”¹ and for each of its three parts the “starting-point is the narrowest private sphere, that of the intellectual in emigration”². *Minima Moralia* is saturated with scenes from everyday life: Adorno discusses the manner in which one closes the door or keeps his front yard, the way one drives a powerful car, is received in a hotel or goes to cinema. In sharp contrast to the generality of the Heideggerian *das Man*, the “everyday life” experiences Adorno describes are irreducibly singular, and it is from this “subjective standpoint” of singularity that the socio-historical mediations are elaborated: even the ongoing war is firstly thematized through the experience of listening to the news on the radio from the comfort of one’s home.

This enterprise is based on Adorno’s paradoxical bet that at the time when the subject itself and “life”, banished into the “sphere of private existence”, have become no more than “an appendage of the process of material production” and thus are “historically destroyed”³, individual subjective experience can offer something precious for the critical understanding of society. In other words, it is through the acute consciousness of its own nullity, of its being damaged and in ruins, that subjective experience of what seems to be the most immediate and most trivial becomes crucial for a critical theory of society.

In this article we will analyze the epistemological role that subjective everyday life experience plays in Adorno’s text and the anti-methodological

¹ T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 4, ed. by R. Tiedmann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1951; transl. by E. Jephcott, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, London 2005, p. 17.

² Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 18.

³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 17.

grounds on which its centrality is based. It is far from evident that subjective everyday life experience could be understood as a valuable source for critical knowledge about society. In the field of sociology, a positivist apparatus of analysis treats empirical experience to extract knowledge from it, thus abolishing its subjective character. And the Marxism of the first part of the twentieth century is ruled by a principle succinctly expressed by Brecht: “An individual has two eyes / The Party has a thousand eyes”⁴; the triviality of the experience of an individual who “has two eyes” is superseded by the superior intelligence of the party. In this sense Adorno’s gesture is paradoxical; the reader is confronted with the question – why write a book pertaining to critical theory of society “from the standpoint of subjective experience”?

We will answer this question by interrogating the very concept of subjective experience as it is thematized by Adorno. We will proceed by multiple *detours* which will permit us to clarify the conceptual elements surrounding Adorno’s problematic concept of experience and conferring it methodological centrality. We will start by a preliminary remark about the relationship that *Minima Moralia* entertains with the methodology of Adorno’s philosophical project.

Thinking as experience

In his last of the *Three studies on Hegel*, entitled *Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel* (1963), Adorno writes:

The task Hegel imposes is not that of an intellectual forced march; it is almost the opposite. The ideal is nonargumentative thought. His philosophy, which, as a philosophy of identity stretched to the breaking point, demands the most extreme efforts on the part of thought, is also dialectical in that it moves within the medium of a thought freed from tension.⁵

This quote synthesizes Adorno’s lifelong preoccupation with the question of method. Adorno opposes the deductive or argumentative method, where each step of the chain of reasoning is grounded in the preceding one. This opposition itself relies on an elaborate theory of domination (*Herrschaft*), according to which the “forced march” of deductive and

⁴ B. Brecht, *Die Maßnahme. Lehrstück*, Wien, Leipzig 1931, p. 52.

⁵ Adorno, *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 5, ed. by R. Tiedmann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1970; transl. by S. Weber Nicholzen, *Hegel: Three studies*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 141.

identifying thinking *dominates* rather than actually knows its object and has in itself a strong affinity with the exploitative capitalist structuring of society⁶. Already in his *lectio prima* at the University of Frankfurt, *Actuality of philosophy* (1931), Adorno notes that the idealistic thesis according to which the reason “was supposed to be capable of developing the concept of reality, and in fact all reality, from out of itself”⁷, that is, from its internal procedures of deduction and argumentation, “has disintegrated”⁸. And at the very end of his career, in his magnum opus *Negative Dialectics* Adorno writes that “The procedure [of thinking, which is laid out in the *Negative Dialectics*] will be justified, not based on Reasons [*begründet*]”⁹. Hence, all through his career Adorno tries to develop a “nonargumentative thought” which would be “freed from tension” which characterizes the rigidity of the strict argumentation. This task is far from evident, given that Adorno is firmly opposed to any form of relativism¹⁰. Nevertheless, through his preoccupation with method Adorno develops two closely related themes which concern our inquiry: the question of style and the question of experience.

It is especially in his later texts that Adorno uses the concept of experience to thematize the transformed or emancipated thinking. In the *Negative Dialectics* he writes: “A changed philosophy [...] would be nothing but full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection”¹¹; and in a very late text, entitled *On Subject and Object* he adds: “The key position of the subject in cognition is experience, not form”¹². In this way Adorno transforms the very concept of what it means to think: in thinking we should not be satisfied with the formal aspect, that is – laying bare the logical relations which are supposed to define or constitute its objects, but instead “we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it”¹³. This transformed concept of cognition

⁶ Cfr. T.W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 3, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1969; transl. by E. Jephcott, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, pp. XIV-XIX.

⁷ T.W. Adorno, *Die Aktualität der Philosophie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 1, ed. by R. Tiedmann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1973; transl. by E.B. Ashton, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, in “Telos”, 31, Telos Press Publishing, New York 1977, pp. 120-133, p. 121.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Adorno, *Hegel: Three studies*, p. XIX.

¹⁰ Ivi, pp. 35-37.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 13.

¹² Adorno, *Zu Subjekt und Objekt*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 10, ed. by R. Tiedmann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1977; transl. by H.W. Pickford, *Subject and object*, in *Critical Models*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, p. 254.

¹³ Adorno, *Hegel: Three studies*, p. 13.

itself presupposes different procedural or methodological elements: if the purpose of cognition is not to determine the forms which define the phenomena and their relations but to *immerse* itself in it, it becomes clear how argumentation might not be the only or even the most essential procedure of thinking. The concept of *thinking as experience*, to which we will have to come back, is therefore also reflected in the manner in which Adorno conceives the construction of his texts. A text is no longer mere means to convey some formal content which lays, so to speak, behind it. The questions of presentation (*Darstellung*) and expression (*Ausdruck*) become essential, because, as Gillian Rose rightly notes, for Adorno “[t]he question of communicating his ideas becomes the question of what the reader should experience when confronting the text”¹⁴. For this reason, style, understood as the principle of the construction of text and the concrete ensemble of figures it takes, becomes of major methodological importance and can be said to partly replace, in Adorno’s thought, the role normally played by argumentation in traditional philosophy.

If, as we have tried to outline, the concept of experience and the question of style are crucial for Adorno’s philosophical methodology, then *Minima Moralia*, the text which is stylistically most developed and written “from the standpoint of subjective experience”¹⁵, is itself essential in order to understand Adorno’s philosophical project. These indications will lead us in interrogating the epistemological role the subjective everyday experience takes on in *Minima Moralia*.

Subject in historical hiatus

How can subjective everyday experience confer critical knowledge about society? The manner in which Adorno justifies his own way of proceeding is highly paradoxical. On the one hand, Adorno makes a very Hegelian assumption that “society is essentially the substance of the individual”¹⁶, which grounds social analyst’s interest in the individual and its experience. On the other hand, Adorno insists that the subject itself, that is – the very instance to which any experience is referred and on which it is based, is *historically destroyed*:

[C]onsiderations which start from the subject remain false to the same extent that life has become appearance. For since the overwhelming

¹⁴ G. Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, Macmillan Press, Hong Kong 1978, p. 12.

¹⁵ (*supra*)

¹⁶ Adorno, *Subject and object*, p. 18.

objectivity of historical movement in its present phase consists so far only in the dissolution of the subject, without yet giving rise to a new one, individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned, which is still for-itself but no longer in-itself.¹⁷

Thus, Adorno inscribes the subject itself into a historical hiatus. The subject enters into contradiction with itself: it is, according to the critical thinker, historically and objectively destroyed or dissolved, deprived of its substance – “no longer in-itself”. But, on the other hand, it stays subjectively assured of oneself, keeps its appearance – “still for-itself”. In this sense the subject becomes a locus of contradiction. Nevertheless, this contradiction can be activated in different ways. If the subject relates to its own experience in a naive fashion, without taking into account the objectivity of the historical movement that affects it, it slumbers in “an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer”¹⁸; therefore, according to the critical thinker, considerations which start from the subject and try to “speak immediately of the immediate”¹⁹ are doomed to “remain false”. On the other hand, this contradiction itself is something objective, pertaining to a socio-historical process in which the subject is caught. Approached in this way, subjective experience becomes a theater of objective forces and factors which intersect in it and therefore an object relevant to social analysis. So, the possibility of critical insight through subjective experience is neither blocked nor granted in advance; the subject is inscribed in a historical hiatus which can encapsulate subjective experience in ideology, but this risk isn’t absolutely decisive. The bifurcation between ideology and critical insight seems to depend on the manner in which subject’s relation to itself, that is – to its own experience, is constructed. If for Adorno subjective experience can be of importance for critical social considerations, it is because he elaborates a specific understanding of it, where it becomes something else than an immediate relationship to what is given, designated in Hegelian terminology as “for-itself”. In order to continue interrogating this concept of experience and its role, it is necessary to firstly offer a few elucidations of what Adorno understands by the destruction of life, the dissolution of the subject or “the overwhelming objectivity of historical movement” in which the subject is inscribed.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 16.

¹⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Mutilation of life, dissolution of the subject

How does philosophy, which has for its ideal “nonargumentative thought”, proceed? It ironizes and exaggerates. Gillian Rose notes that two essential stylistic operations characterize *Minima Moralia*: irony and auxesis or exaggeration²⁰. A few ironic inversions articulate the thematic core of the book. Firstly, the title – *Minima Moralia* – is an allusion to *Magna Moralia*, a treatise of ethics usually attributed to Aristotle. Secondly, in the very first lines of the text Adorno qualify his work as “melancholy science” (*traurige Wissenschaft*), which is an ironic inversion of the title of one of Nietzsche’s works – *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*). Both of these ironic inversions have far reached consequences in Adorno’s text, for our purposes we will limit ourselves to the fact that they intersect on the theme of life. Adorno specifies that his melancholy science concerns the “teaching of the good life [*das richtige Leben*]”²¹. In other words, it pertains to the domain of ethics, as it was understood by Aristotle that living well (*eu zên*), a term for him almost equivalent to happiness (*eudaimonia*), was the object and the purpose of ethical investigations. Even though the “*Magna*” in Aristotle’s title bears no conceptual content and pertains only to a historical contingency – it being written on two unusually long rolls of papyrus, the inversion Adorno operates suggests that ethics or the teaching of the good life has itself become something highly problematic, its very possibility being reduced to bare *minimum*. Correspondingly, the inversion of the gay or joyful science into its opposite – the melancholy or sad science – displaces Nietzsche’s immoralist ethics of “saying yes to life” or “affirmation [*Behangung*] of life”²². Both of these ironic inversions rely on Adorno’s observation which is also an exaggeration, namely – that “there is life no longer”²³. It is reiterated in a more moderate form in the subtitle of the book, which reads “Reflections from damaged life”, as well as in the epigraph to Part One, a quote by Ferdinand Kürnberger – “Life does not live”²⁴. To write a book on the teaching of the good life at the time when there is life no longer – this is the ironic gesture that defines *Minima Moralia*.

²⁰ Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 17. As Rose specifies in a footnote, auxesis is “a form of hyperbole which intensifies as it proceeds” (ivi, p. 164).

²¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 15.

²² Cfr. “And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a yes-sayer.” F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Abt.5, Bd.2, De Gruyter, Berlin, New York 1973; transl. by W. Kaufmann, *The Gay Science*, Random House, New York 1974, p. 223.

²³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 15.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 21.

But why is life damaged? What is it that damages life to the point of annihilating it? Adorno's response has a strong Marxist undertone: what was once known as life has become "an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own", and "the relation between life and production, which in reality debases the former to an ephemeral appearance of the latter, is totally absurd. Means and end are inverted"²⁵. If the process of social production is to be understood as means to satisfy the needs of those who live in a society, then in capitalist society this relationship is inverted: all productive process is a priori aimed at exchange, which serves the auto-reproduction of capital. In this sense the process of production is rendered autonomous, detached from the needs of the life of the individuals which serve it. The dialectics of ends and means runs deep in Marx's texts. Nevertheless, it is particularly in his *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* that Marx thematizes the mutilation that the capitalist mode of production inflicts on human life. Discussing the bourgeois political economy which describes and justifies the capitalist order, he states that "self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is its principal thesis"²⁶. In an ironic fashion, Marx claims that the bourgeois political economist manages to show "how the multiplication of needs and of the means of their satisfaction", that is – the increase in productive capabilities which capitalist society entails, "breeds the absence of needs and of means":

- (1) By reducing the worker's need to the barest and most miserable level of physical subsistence, and by reducing his activity to the most abstract mechanical movement. Hence, he says: Man has no other need either of activity or of enjoyment. For he calls *even* this life *human* life and existence.
- (2) By counting the lowest possible level of life (existence) as the standard, indeed as the general standard – general because it is applicable to the mass of men. He changes the worker into an insensible being lacking all needs.²⁷

Hence, Marx shows how the capitalist mode of production redefines what *life* means by effectively reducing the life of the mass of workers to "the most miserable level of physical subsistence". Life itself is objectively damaged or, in Adorno's hyperbole – annihilated, in the sense that it is effectively made unbearable on a mass scale. Marx also notes that this process of mutilation under capitalism affects not only so to speak the *external* life, but the very interiority of the worker: it "changes the worker into an insensible being". Denying the worker the satisfaction

²⁵ Ivi, p. 15.

²⁶ Marx K., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; transl. by Milligan, Prometheus Books, New York 1988, p. 116.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 118.

of his needs ends up damaging his sensibility itself and extinguishes the very capacity to have needs. Thus, the idea that capitalism produces its own damaged subjectivity is already present in the young Marx. Adorno articulates his hyperbole of the annihilation of life in Marxist terms – as a reflection on the violence that the capitalist primacy of production inflicts on human life; nevertheless, the social reality that Adorno reflects upon living in the United States during the years of the Second World War differs significantly from the one Marx analyses living in Paris one hundred years earlier. Marx draws upon the misery of the working and life conditions that the proletarians have to endure:

Dwelling in the light, which Prometheus in Aeschylus designated as one of the greatest boons, by means of which he made the savage into a human being, ceases to exist for the worker. Light, air, etc. – simplest *animal* cleanliness ceases to be a need for man. Dirt – this stagnation and putrefaction of man – the sewage of civilization (speaking quite literally) – comes to be the element of life for him. Utter, unnatural neglect, putrefied nature, comes to be his life-element.²⁸

The working and life conditions in the United States during the 40s were certainly significantly improved in comparison to the horrors that Marx was describing. In a text from 1942 entitled *Reflections on Class Theory* and published only posthumously, Adorno argues against Marxian idea of pauperization, that is – the hope that shared and ever increasing poverty of the proletariat will push them into revolt and revolution: “Against this argument all the statistics can be marshalled. The proletariat does have more to lose than its chains. Measured against conditions in England a century ago as they were evident to the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*, their standard of living has not deteriorated but improved”²⁹. Even if it is well possible that some of the horrors Marx described in his various texts did persist on a smaller scale, the fact is that the material situation has fundamentally changed and it is not primarily this type of material misery that leads Adorno to his observations about the annihilation of life and the historical dissolution of the subject. Thus, the question arises – in what way are life and even more the subject damaged by their submission to the capitalist primacy of production, if it is not anymore in the form of direct misery of the life and working conditions?

²⁸ Ivi, p. 117.

²⁹ Adorno, *Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften Band 8*, ed. by R. Tiedmann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1972; *Reflections on Class Theory*, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and trans. by R. Livingstone 2003, pp. 93-110, p. 103.

Domination

A brief answer can be given in terms of the concept of domination (*Herrschaft*). This concept is present, without ever becoming an object of direct thematic analysis, in the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia*. It is developed in and central to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, firstly published in 1947, which Adorno writes together with Horkheimer during almost the same period as the aphorisms of *Minima Moralia*. Reading the two texts together is even more relevant given that for Adorno *Minima Moralia* presents “aspects of our shared philosophy [i.e., shared with Horkheimer] from the standpoint of subjective experience”³⁰.

As many Adornian concepts, domination does not cover a particular phenomenon or identity – rather, it is in itself a conceptual constellation, containing many different and often divergent layers which are actualized or hidden according to the context in which it is discussed. Adorno and Horkheimer give themselves the task of explaining “why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism”³¹ and their answer is that it is the *ratio* itself, or the enlightenment thinking, understood as the general direction of the Western thought, which is at fault: “We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking [i.e., enlightenment thinking], no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression, which is taking place everywhere today”³².

Let us unpack the different elements which are presented. The regression or barbarism which the authors evoke refers as much to “the antireason of totalitarian capitalism”³³ as to “the international threat of fascism”³⁴, and the authors draw a strong continuity between the two. Adorno and Horkheimer localize the “cause” of these regressions in a violent tendency which is immanent to the *ratio* itself: “[a] tendency toward self-destruction has been inherent in rationality from the first, not only in the present phase when it is emerging nakedly. Its “irrationalism” derives from the nature of the dominant reason and of the world corresponding to its image”³⁵. More precisely, this tendency consists in “the subjugation of everything natural to the sovereign subject”³⁶. Thus, the

³⁰ Adorno, *Subject and object*, p. 18.

³¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

³² Ivi, p. XVI.

³³ Ivi, p. 43.

³⁴ Ivi, p. XVIII.

³⁵ Ivi, p. XIX.

³⁶ Ivi, p. XVIII.

authors conceptualize the reason itself – as it has emerged in the Western culture – as inherently violent and self-destructive, as domination. And their purpose is precisely to transform the rationality in a way which “liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination”³⁷.

This concept of *reason as domination* contains multiple strata which we will evoke in a very schematic way. Firstly, the rationality is expressed in various different forms and branches of knowledge which developed in the Western world: sociology, psychology, epistemology and others³⁸. Secondly, as the authors specify in a very Hegelian fashion, the *ratio*, reason or enlightenment equally pertains to “the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined”. Thus, it pertains not only to the so-called spiritual or mental phenomena, but to the material formations as well. Adorno and Horkheimer interrogate the entanglement of knowledge and technology, which renders knowledge itself inherently technological and thus the growing presence of technology in everyday life of the twentieth century embodies the domination principle³⁹. Furthermore, the capitalist mode of production – the submission of all existing life to the rationalizing principle of production – is for Adorno nothing else than the material realization of the bourgeois *ratio*⁴⁰. In this sense the Marxist distinction between base and superstructure is displaced: domination concerns as much the material conditions of life as thinking and cultural forms.

Thirdly, if these first two aspects can be qualified as *objective* because they pertain to exteriority, the dominant rationality equally concerns the subject itself. In the second chapter of the book, entitled *Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment*, the authors present a prehistory of the modern bourgeois subject through a dramatization of the figure of Homer’s Odysseus: “the hero of the adventures turns out to be the prototype of the bourgeois individual”⁴¹. Through a close reading of the text the authors insist that the subject’s identity to itself – itself, ego, or the synthetic unity of the Kantian “I” which thinks, – emerges only through a violent confrontation with mythologized natural forces⁴². Thus, the synthetic unity of consciousness which idealist philosophy views as autonomous

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Ivi, p. XIV.

³⁹ Ivi, 1-2.

⁴⁰ Cfr. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* Band 6, ed. by R. Tiedmann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1970; transl. *Negative Dialectics*, E. B. Ashton, Routledge, London, 1973, p. 23.

⁴¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 35.

⁴² Ivi, p. 38.

or fundamental is reinterpreted by Adorno and Horkheimer as derivative. It would derive from the natural interest of self-preservation, from a violent effort to master what is multiple, disparate, chaotic⁴³. Therefore, the modern subject's autonomy is displaced, in a Freudian fashion its reason is understood in terms of adaptation and struggle for survival. Two important consequences follow from this prehistory of the subject. On the one hand, the subject itself, in regard to its categorial constitution and cognitive operations, has a deep affinity with "the regression, which is taking place everywhere today": the same violent tendency permeates the subject and the objective social-historical reality. On the other hand, the principle of domination, which constitutes the subject, pertains not only to the exteriority but affects its interiority itself. Analyzing the Book XX of *Odyssey* Adorno and Horkheimer note how the self (*autos*) of Odysseus emerges only through the repression of his impulses, of the affect⁴⁴. Thus, the principle of domination – the constitution of synthetic unity through a violent repression of what is multiple, disparate – is that which at the same time establishes the subject as such and damages its inner nature, its sensibility.

These elements permit us to understand Adorno's hyperboles of the destruction of life and the historical dissolution of the subject. The historical hiatus that Adorno theorizes reflects the observation that "in the present phase" the violence contained in the rationality itself is "emerging nakedly"⁴⁵ and for this reason humanity "is sinking into a new kind of barbarism"⁴⁶. The life itself is damaged in the sense that the dominant rationality, aimed at repressing the natural-living element, has, in the eyes of the critical thinker, overtaken the totality of the social institutions, economic as well as cultural; the subject is therefore pressured to conform to this objectivity which is imposed to it: "The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behavior on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one. Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures. Their criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schemata assigned to it"⁴⁷. Thus, the subject's interiority is constrained by the exterior objectivity, its innermost modes of reaction to the outside world and to itself are forcibly modeled on the dominant rationality to which it is daily confronted.

⁴³ Cf. *ivi*, p. 43.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 259, footnote 5 from p. 38.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. XIX.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. XIV.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 23.

Even though Adorno retains Marx's observation that the capitalist mode of production amounts to the mutilation of human life, the situation is fundamentally different: the reason for this is no longer the brute force of the working and life conditions but the totalization and intensification of the rationality which animates the capitalist mode of production.

There is nevertheless a second aspect of the dissolution of the subject. Adorno writes: "The subject still feels sure of its autonomy, but the nullity demonstrated to subject by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself"⁴⁸. Since Adorno draws a strong continuity between the fascist regression and the categorial constitution of the subject, the concentration camp constitutes a historical break for the subjectivity itself. It renders effective to the highest degree the violent and self-destructive tendency contained in the dominant rationality. It is in this sense that the subject is caught in a historical hiatus: the established, existing or traditional form of subjectivity has been historically proved to lead to a catastrophe, to be based on an auto-destructive drive for self-preservation and thus not to possess the autonomy it was attributed; nevertheless, no *new* form of subjectivity has yet emerged and thus "individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned"⁴⁹.

The concept of experience and its split

In Adorno's text this historical hiatus – the dissolution of the subject and the mutilation of life – constitutes what we could call the conditions of experience. Unlike in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, these conditions of experience do not determine the limits and the uniformity of all possible experience but, on the contrary, reveal a fundamental split. In the dedication of *Minima Moralia* Adorno writes: "He who wishes to experience [*erfabren*]⁵⁰ the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged [*entfremdeter*] form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses"⁵¹. Adorno indicates a fundamental rupture in the relationship to the immediacy of life – its truth cannot be captured anymore by simply relating to what is given, for

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 16.

⁵⁰ In this phrase Jephcott translates *erfabren* as "to know". This translation is correct but given the prominence of the theme of experience (*Erfabrung*) in these pages, we consider it more important to shine a light on the other semiotic aspect of this term.

⁵¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 15, translation modified.

the given – the individual existence – is itself determined by estranged (or alienated – *entfremdeter*) form of life, namely by the dominant reason. In this sense experience itself becomes something problematic. For Adorno, if it consists in simple immediate relationship to what is given – and this is what is habitually understood by experience – it itself reverts to ideology and to the domain of appearance⁵². On the other hand, Adorno indicates that it is by taking into account the “objective powers” which structure it that something like a true, non-illusory experience of the immediacy of life is still possible.

This bifurcation pertaining to experience is touched upon in the aphorism 19 of *Minima Moralia* entitled *Do not knock*. In this aphorism Adorno reflects upon the effects of the overwhelming presence of technology in everyday life on the subject. The fragment is saturated with everyday life observations – that the doors “of cars and refrigerators have to be slammed”, that “there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove”⁵³, or that the sheer power of the engine tempts the driver “to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children and cyclists”⁵⁴. Adorno uses these numerous everyday life experiences to ask: “[w]hat does it mean for the subject”⁵⁵? In what way does it affect him “even in his most secret innervations”⁵⁶? The brief and generalized answer, given before the question, is that technology is making men and their gestures “precise and brutal” while at the same time it “expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility”⁵⁷. A hyperbole permits Adorno to unfold the socio-historical mediations these fragmentary experiences enclose, and he does this by tracing the continuity between the inherent but hidden violence of the technological rationality and the most naked form of this violence manifested in fascism: “The movements machines demand of their users already have the violent, hard-hitting, unarresting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment”⁵⁸. As we can observe, Adorno uses his everyday life experiences as a basis on which an interrogation of the “objective powers” and their effects on the subject can unfold. Adorno identifies various modes of action and of sensibility which the “objective powers” – here the various everyday life technologies – force on the subject. Nevertheless, it is precisely because he himself, in his “most secret innervations”, does not succumb to these domi-

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 44.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 44.

nant tendencies, that he is able to reflect upon it. Here we observe how the paradox that Adorno determines in the Dedication is developed: the simple immediate relationship to what is immediate – which corresponds to the habitual “naive” understanding of experience – is itself rendered problematic, because it would amount to *unconsciously* succumbing to the violent and auto-destructive tendency of dominant rationality. What in the dedication of *Minima Moralia* Adorno calls the “truth” about the immediacy of life, in other words – its true experience, is thus possible only through a certain reflective distance, but in this case the relationship entertained with the object ceases to be immediate. So that which is habitually understood as experience, Adorno equals it to ideological illusion. It is for this reason that he introduces a division into the concept of experience itself:

Not least to blame for the withering [*Absterben*] of experience is the fact that things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus [*Überschuß*], either in freedom of conduct or in autonomy of things, which would survive as the core of experience, because it is not consumed by the moment of action.⁵⁹

The habitual experience of everyday, which is dominated by the technological rationality, is for Adorno equal to the withering or dying off (*Absterben*) of experience. In other words, for the critical thinker the everyday experience in its unexamined or naive form, taken at face value, would not count as experience at all, at least in the full sense of the word. This is because in a Hegelian fashion Adorno measures the thing – his effective subjective experience – with its own concept. For Adorno, the concept of experience designates a substantial contact with the object; in the Dedication of *Minima Moralia* he appeals to the Hegelian demand to “penetrate into the immanent content of the matter”⁶⁰, while in the *Negative Dialectics* he notes that thinking which would amount to experience would “immerse” itself in things⁶¹. Adorno implicitly opposes this immersive and immanent relationship with the object that the concept of experience demands to the dominant technological rationality which imposes a purely functional relationship of “mere operation”. Thus, the immediate, unreflected way of relating to what is given and to oneself consists in succumbing to these merely operational and inherently violent modes of conduct which are objectively imposed. If Adorno insists, as

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 44.

⁶⁰ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, London, 1996, p. 112, quoted in Adorno 1951; eng. tr. 2005, p. 16.

⁶¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 13.

we have discussed, that “life has become appearance”⁶², it is because he considers that “the withering of experience” has become the norm rather than an exception: “Today [...] the enemy’s power and control over the consciousness of the masses has been immeasurably strengthened”⁶³. Therefore, the very expression “everyday life experience” is problematic in the Adornian context, to the extent that Adorno considers that experience itself has become scarce in the everyday life.

On the other hand, Adorno appeals to what he calls “surplus” (*Überschuß*), “which *would* survive as the core of experience”. It is notable that this surplus does not amount to any positive phenomenon or mode of action, it is rather to be understood as a fracture in the chain of the dominant rationality, something which cannot be reduced to it but can’t be fully liberated from it either. The access to these fragmentary elements which are not fully integrated into the dominant rationality seems to depend on the capacity to distance oneself both from the demands that the exterior world imposes on the subject and from its own compulsive mechanisms which correspond to it. It is this capacity that in the *Negative Dialectics* Adorno names *resistance* (*Widerstand*) and which is central to his idea of transformed or emancipated thinking: “Thought as such, before all particular contents, is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it”⁶⁴. We have discussed the fact that in his later thought, namely in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno conceives the transformation of philosophy through the concept of *thinking as experience*. In *Minima Moralia*, written about 20 years earlier, we observe a similar but opposite relation: it is experience itself which seems to be conceived as a form of reflection. As we can observe, Adorno considers that relating immediately to the immediacy encapsulates the subject in the domain of appearance which cannot be called experience at all. Thus, paradoxically only a contemplative distance from the immediacy of life can still grant access to the fragmentary “core of experience”, which resists the dominant rationality precisely because it is detached from any practical activity, “not consumed by the moment of action”⁶⁵. In this sense, what Adorno calls subjective experience takes the form of critical reflection upon its own impossibility. The numerous observations from everyday life with which *Minima Moralia* is saturated furnish content to the critical consciousness not so much of the reasons of this impossibility but rather of the various forms it takes.

⁶² Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 16.

⁶³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 113.

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 19.

⁶⁵ *Supra*.

To conclude, in this article we have taken numerous detours in order to approach an elusive conceptual problem – the epistemological role which subjective everyday life experience plays in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*. Adorno claims to write his text – pertaining to a critical theory of society – “from the standpoint of subjective experience”, nevertheless the way in which subjective experience could confer critical knowledge about society is highly obscure. It is not rendered more evident by Adorno’s claim that the subject itself, that on which experience is based, is dissolved or “historically condemned”. We have interrogated various surrounding or related conceptual elements – the destruction of life, dissolution of the subject, objectivity of historical movement, domination – in order to shine a light on the conceptual problem of subjective experience. Approaching Adorno’s concept of experience and its usage we have observed that it is marked by a fundamental split: in the society of late capitalism that Adorno describes, subjective everyday life experience either degrades into mere appearance, or consists in an immersive reflection of its own impossibility. In both cases, for the critical thinker it is precisely as being fundamentally *damaged* that subjective experience is valuable for a critical theory of society: because the reasons as much as the forms of its mutilation pertain to social objectivity.

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Experiences from the Ruins of Everyday Life

In this article we treat the question of the subjective everyday life experience in T. W. Adorno's philosophy. It is in no way evident how such experience can be central or even valuable for a critical knowledge of society, especially for Adorno, who tends to emphasize the illusory, ideological and damaged character of the "everyday life". Nevertheless, his *Minima Moralia* (1951) is famously written "from the standpoint of subjective experience". It is for this reason that *Minima Moralia* is in the center of our interrogations. In order to treat the epistemological problem pertaining to the role of subjective everyday life experience in Adorno's critical theory of society, we proceed by numerous detours which elucidate surrounding and relating concepts, such as dissolution of the subject, objectivity of historical movement, domination. We conclude that Adorno's concept of experience is itself marked by a fundamental split: an unstable and always fragile division between relapsing into ideology or becoming a reflection upon its own being damaged and virtually blocked. Subjective experience contributes to the objective knowledge of society by becoming consciousness of its own mutilation, and this because the reasons as much as the forms of this mutilation are objective, social.

KEYWORDS: Adorno, experience, subject, everyday life, domination.