‘TO LEND A VOICE TO SUFFERING IS A CONDITION FOR ALL TRUTH’: ADORNO AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which a fuller attention to suffering in the tradition of the early Frankfurt School might valuably inform international political thought. Recent poststructural writing argues that trauma is silenced to prevent it disrupting narratives of order and progress and instead advocates a continual ‘encircling’ of trauma that refuses incorporation into a broader historical narrative. This paper welcomes this challenge to mainstream international ethics: attention to particular suffering provides an important challenge to the abstraction, instrumentalism and universalism of modernity. However, if we simply mark trauma and refuse to incorporate it into any kind of narrative, we cannot profit from the ways in which suffering can illuminate the structures and ways of thinking that create it. Drawing on Adorno’s negative dialectics, the paper argues that a dialectical understanding of the relationship between universalising order and disrupting particularity can lead from individual suffering towards a political re-engagement with the universal.

Keywords: Adorno, education, hope, modernity, negative dialectics, suffering

The persistence of unnecessary global suffering has long prompted ethical reflection in emancipatory political theory. Oddly, however, in its mainstream variant – modern international ethics – thinkers have not lingered on the experience of past or present suffering. Instead, they have looked to the future and asked what might be done to secure a world in which human suffering is lessened, proposing such responses as the codification of human rights and the pursuit of a ‘rational consensus’ in a cosmopolitan world order. The rush to ‘solve’ the problem of suffering with the forward-looking articulation of an abstract, universal response skims too quickly over concrete human experience. However, in critical international ethics, emotion is attracting
increasing attention and emancipation from suffering looks to past traumas and present pain as well as to a better future (Bell 2006; Butler 2004; Crawford 2001; Edkins 2002, 2003; Fierke 2004).

Some of the most interesting work on suffering and trauma in political theory comes from a strand of poststructural thought that challenges narratives of progress under modernity by pointing to the traumatic ‘real’ lurking beneath the surface (Edkins 2002, 2003; Žižek 2002a, 2002b). This approach offers an important critique of statist and cosmopolitan attempts to improve individual well-being, questioning accepted social and political arrangements and advocating the dismantling of repressive hierarchies that lead to the marginalisation of experience (universal and particular, public and private, subject and object). In this paper, I argue that this increased focus on suffering should be welcomed but maintain that a refusal on the part of these (broadly poststructural) thinkers to incorporate traumatic experience into a wider social and historical narrative limits their critical project. Against a melancholic ‘encircling’ of trauma, I propose a dialectical approach to suffering in world politics. To do this, I draw on the work of Theodor W. Adorno, a prominent member of the early Frankfurt School whose thought has largely been neglected in International Relations. Adorno’s writing points us to a tradition of thinking with a speculative Hegelian core, which holds together concepts such as universality and particularity, private and public, identity and difference, and seeks to understand how they are mediated by one another. He advocates the situating of bleak reality in historical and social context, not forgetting immediate pain but also looking beyond this to its complex and often hidden antecedents. Alongside sensitivity to human suffering, Adorno holds firm to a utopian hope in the possibility of reconciliation, a sense of future promise that keeps despair and resignation at bay. It does not quickly pass over human suffering in the pursuit of the universal, as mainstream international ethics tend to do, but attends to suffering, creating space for the communication of bodily and emotional pain that ‘tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different’ (Adorno 1973: 203). At the same time, it also resists the temptation of retreating into a solipsistic focus on the traumatic ‘real’, urging us to continue to take the risk of engaging with the universal by allowing particular pain to shed light on broader social processes.

The paper is divided into three sections. I begin with a brief discussion of some recent work on trauma and suffering in world politics from a broadly poststructural perspective. I then outline Adorno’s critique of modernity, noting his debts to Hegel and Marx and highlighting the ways in which his thought differs from poststructural critiques. In the final section, I examine his response to pervasive suffering under modernity, which is twofold: to enlighten Enlightenment with attention to suffering and particularity, and to gesture towards a metaphysics of hope. I argue that his negative dialectics offer a way of negotiating binary opposites that does not fall into the violent hierarchies of modern
philosophy, or into the inversion of those hierarchies in poststructural thought, and that his notion of promise keeps despair at bay despite pervasive suffering.

**Trauma and Poststructural International Political Thought**

Some of the most provocative work on trauma and suffering comes from poststructural international political thought, which draws attention to concrete suffering to counter assertions of progress under modernity. At the risk of oversimplifying a rich and varied tradition of thought, poststructural theories maintain that there is no absolute foundation for knowledge and that those oppositions that are taken for granted in traditional metaphysics (subject and object, noumenal and phenomenal) are in fact violent hierarchies of values that suppress the less valued term. This interrogation of established hierarchies has lead poststructural thinkers to question settled social arrangements and practices. They ask why and how they are accepted as normal and desirable and point to the hidden suffering they mask. Jenny Edkins’s recent writings on memory and trauma have challenged the state’s treatment of citizens who have experienced trauma, be it in the course of war or in the wake of events such as those that took place on 11 September 2001 or 7 July 2005 (2002, 2003, 2008). Edkins suggests that traumatic events signal the traumatic real that lies beneath the secure façade of contemporary politics, pointing to the violence that created and maintains the international state system and to its profound fragility. As a result, sovereign states have a vested interest in silencing the voices of those who have suffered. Survivors are reinserted back into the established social order and encouraged to ‘forget trauma’ or they are labelled as suffering from mental illness and portrayed as traumatised victims; in both cases, they are depoliticised (2003: 9). This allows ‘politics as usual’ to continue unchallenged by those who have encountered the traumatic ‘real’, by those whose experiences call into question accepted social reality.

Edkins rejects a politics of forgetting, drawing attention to the contingency of accepted social arrangements and arguing that if we are to resist depoliticisation then we must ‘encircle again and again the site’ of the trauma (Žižek 2002a: 272; Edkins 2003: 15). Such *encircling* stands outside of linear narrative time in what she terms ‘trauma time’ (15). Edkins maintains that ‘[w]e cannot remember [trauma] as something that took place in time, because this would neutralise it’. Against gentrification of the traumatic ‘real’ and a return to the everyday banalities of politics as usual, she seeks to continually recall the radical contingency of the social order. Following Slavoj Žižek, she argues that the truly political act is to draw attention to that which is concealed by everyday politics and to ‘occupy the place of the lack’ therein (1999: 13).

Edkins is right to protest against the silencing of those individuals who have experienced the limits of sovereign power. However, by placing trauma time outside of linear historical time, she encourages a view of history as radically
contingent and discourages a working through of traumatic events that would attend to their situation in time and place. If we cannot place trauma in linear time for fear of neutralising or gentrifying it, then how can we make links to those historical and structural conditions that are embedded in place and time and that facilitated the traumatic losses? How can we gesture towards a way of being and thinking that might reduce the likelihood of such events recurring?

In the remainder of this paper, I draw on Adorno’s work to suggest an alternative conception of suffering in international political thought, an approach that situates trauma in historical and social context and asks how we might come to terms with it. Adorno argues that attention to fragmentation and suffering must be tempered with attention to unity and hope. We must continue to reach towards a conception of the ‘whole truth’ by attending not only to particular suffering but also to the historical and social antecedents of suffering. Such an attempt is not a hubris-filled attempt to ‘solve’ the world’s ills, but an always incomplete and imperfect reaching towards a world in which Auschwitz might not happen again. It is a form of working through that will never be complete but that always holds before it the hope that moral learning, however fragile, might take place.

**Adorno’s Critique of Enlightenment**

Adorno’s response to suffering differs markedly from that advocated by poststructural thinkers, in part because of a fundamentally different response to modernity. Poststructural approaches eschew a positive project of Enlightenment, maintaining that Enlightenment ideals obscure oppressive realities and that the liberal attempt to ground a progressive project of modernity in metaphysical humanism is ‘transcendental egoism’. Instead, they celebrate alterity and difference, emphasising the local rather than the universal and shunning the broad social analysis of metanarratives such as Hegelianism or Marxism. Adorno’s critique of Enlightenment has strong affinities with poststructural critiques, with its emphasis on concrete particularity as a correction to historical progressivism; however, his dialectical approach means that he also attends to broader social processes and institutions and the ways in which these constitute (and are constituted by) particularity. He also continues to hold fast to Enlightenment ideals and the utopian hope that things might yet get better, arguing that to reject these would be to take refuge in despair and resignation and prevent analysis of totalising repression under modernity. He argues that what ails society is not too much Enlightenment but too little and that critical intellectuals have a responsibility to enlighten Enlightenment through attention both to particularity and to social structures.

In the remainder of this section, I examine more fully Adorno’s critique of modernity, highlighting the ways in which it differs from other critical approaches. A critique of Enlightenment thinking is at the core of his writings, and those of the early Frankfurt School more generally. Adorno maintains that
the Enlightenment project has been usurped by an obsession with instrumental rationality; ‘progress’ has brought new means of enslavement rather than the promised liberation. For the early Frankfurt School, Enlightenment thinking is committed to a group of values that includes ‘first of all, a substantive commitment to certain principles of humanity, noncoercion, rationality, the right of individuals to pursue their happiness; second, a particular view about how these goals can best be attained, namely by the systemic pursuit and implementation of a certain kind of knowledge’ (Geuss 2005: 164). Adorno does not advocate that we turn our back upon Enlightenment ideals; on the contrary, he notes that ‘reification of life results not from too much enlightenment but too little’ (1981: 24) and argues that it would be barbaric to ‘wipe away the whole [of Enlightenment thought] with a sponge’ (32). However, he abhors the type of knowledge with which these ideals are pursued.

Enlightenment knowledge has three major properties: first, knowledge is held to be enhanced when objects or things can be subsumed into a general concept and where the constituent things may substituted for one another; second, it is held to be instrumental, that is, useful for the organisation and control of the environment; and third, any ‘meaning’ must be related to the identifying, instrumental nature of what is known (Geuss 2005: 164). It prescribes useful solutions that will benefit user groups, and leads to a hyper-rationalist or problem-solving ethics. Adorno (1981: 29) is highly critical of such a shift in thinking, noting that ‘[n]o notion dares to be conceived any more which does not cheerfully include, in all camps, explicit instructions as to who its beneficiaries are’.

In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that the desire for ever-increasing control that springs from the pursuit of Enlightenment knowledge works against the attainment of Enlightenment ideals. The Enlightenment has stripped reason of rational ideals and reduced human interaction to power relationships and economic transactions. This assertion draws on Marx’s theory of value, which states that capitalism depends upon exchange value, whereby commodities have no intrinsic value apart from what they are worth on the market (Marx 1990). Adorno asserts that under modernity, human beings are treated as commodities: substitutable entities valued merely for their instrumental uses or ability to command market resources; even where commodification is resisted, the overriding pull of society is toward the status quo and those forms that are valued by society. The mind thus shapes itself into socially acceptable, marketable forms and freedom becomes an illusion, made all the more dangerous and difficult to resist because of the appearance of freedom. This is not the fault of Enlightenment ideals as such, but the instrumental use of these ideals in the promotion of a rational, efficient system: ‘The network of the whole is drawn ever tighter, modelled after the act of exchange’ (Adorno 1981: 21). The driving force in society that Adorno and Horkheimer term the ‘culture industry’ has numbed individuality and
Adorno's rejection of instrumental rationality and of the idea of an autonomous subject has much in common with poststructural thought but his critique differs radically by drawing heavily on Hegelian dialectics. Poststructural approaches largely dismiss dialectics as totalitarian, as resisting plurality in its inexorable movement towards the Absolute (Dews 1989). However, Adorno perceives in Hegel's dialectics a method with which to challenge the rigidity of Enlightenment forms of knowledge and concomitant societal repression. His adoption of Hegel's dialectical method is influenced by Marx and Engels's critique of Hegel. Friedrich Engels distinguishes between 'the whole dogmatic content of the Hegelian system [which] is declared to be absolute truth, in contradiction to his dialectical method, which dissolves all dogmatism' (1970: 13). This distinction between Hegel's system, which is rejected, and his dialectical method, which is adopted, is a left-Hegelian move that is followed in part by Adorno. On the one hand, Adorno perceives Hegel as a conservative thinker who provides an 'apology for the status quo' and a defence of the State (Adorno, 1981: 19); on the other, he perceives Hegel as a revolutionary par excellence, whose dialectical method provides a means of challenging the status quo (1993).

Adorno points to Hegel's critique of Kant's dualisms as revealing the radical nature of his dialectics:

The poles that Kant opposed to one another—form and content, nature and spirit, theory and praxis, freedom and necessity, the thing in itself and the phenomenon—are all permeated through and through by reflection in such a way that none of these determinations are left standing as ultimate. In order to be thought, and to exist, each inherently requires the other that Kant opposed to it. (1993a: 8)

Instead of posing opposites that must be thought separately, Hegel sees the reflection of one extreme in the other, arguing that it is impossible to think one concept without also thinking its opposite. He posits the category of mediation between the two concepts, examining the ways in which they constitute one another, without proposing a weak middle way. For Adorno, this is the radical aspect of Hegel's thought, setting his philosophy apart from traditional metaphysics, with its insistence on an 'ultimate principle from which everything must be derivable' (9) and from new philosophy or ontology, with its melancholy resignation (1993b: 98). He finds in Hegel's thought an alternative to Kantian
dualism, and its reductionist legacy in modern ethics, and to poststructural thought, with its overemphasis on the previously neglected side of a binary pair. Instead, he emphasises the importance of mediation (Vermittlung), which is an interpretive category that never settles on a middle ground between two poles, but operates ‘in and through the extremes’ (1993a: 9). For Adorno ‘the content of Hegel’s philosophy is the notion that truth—which in Hegel means the system—cannot be expressed as a fundamental principle…but is the dynamic totality of all the propositions that can be generated from each other by virtue of their contradictions’ (12). So where poststructural thought focuses on the categories of fragmentation, particularity, and alterity, and largely ignores notions of totality, universality, and collective solidarity, Adorno attends to the relations between the two sets of concepts. He maintains that concrete particulars are shaped by wider social processes, and that attention to these particulars enhances our understanding of those processes.

Adorno draws on Hegel’s dialectics to attack the notion of a complete separation of subject and object. He maintains that such separation is false and masks the repression of the object by the subject. The repression to which Adorno refers is not merely of the human ‘other’, though this is of central importance; it also refers to human domination of the natural world. However, like poststructural thinkers, Adorno firmly rejects Hegel’s identity theory, which posits the underlying unity of subject and object, thought and being, and leads to the belief that contradictory ideas and ways of life are part of a total truth (Weber Nicholsen and Shapiro 1993: xiv–xv). He maintains that identity theories lead to reification and a suppression of difference. His oft-quoted remark that ‘all objectification is a forgetting’ indicates a longing for a space where difference and non-identity might flourish (Adorno and Horkheimer 1986: 230; Jay 1984: 68). Furthermore, he argues that a concept of total truth denies the possibility of reflection and leads to a withdrawal from human effort. However, unlike much poststructural thought, Adorno refuses to concede the priority of difference, non-identity, and particularity (Dews, 1989: 17). Instead, he proposes a conception of subject and object, thought and being, whereby they cannot be thought without reference to each other and are therefore neither completely separate nor in complete unity (Jay 1984: 61–4). He stresses the ways in which the concepts mediate one another, showing how thought is shaped by societal discourses and institutions, and society is shaped by thought and practice.

Although Adorno is strongly influenced by a Marxist interpretation of Hegel, he does not uncritically accept a left-Hegelian reading; indeed, in many ways the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School can been seen as a return to Hegel from Marx (Weber Nicholsen and Shapiro 2003: xxi). Unlike most Marxists, Adorno posits his method of immanent critique against Hegel’s ‘fundamental antinomies’. He argues that whilst the Hegelian system silences thought through the reification of philosophical categories, its power can be appropriated in order to criticise itself, by holding the system up against the categories it sets forth.
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(Adorno 1981: 21). Adorno finds in Hegel a focus on the negative that informs his critique of modern society. He maintains that the relentlessly positive, prescriptive, and instrumental forms of knowledge associated with the Enlightenment drive out all alternatives to the status quo, and that one of the tasks of a critical theory is to preserve those alternatives, ideas, and ways of being that cannot be neatly subsumed into socially sanctioned categories. Through a process of commodification and reification, the Enlightenment has stripped language of the possibility of thinking outside accepted social parameters, promoting what Marcuse famously termed ‘one-dimensional’ society. Language is unable to give voice to pain and suffering or to express critical alternatives; instead, ‘all difference degenerates to a nuance in the monotony of supply’ (Adorno 1981: 21). Adorno’s negative dialectic, in contrast, is a ‘dialectic of resistance’ that determinedly preserves the non-identical: that which cannot be understood, manipulated, or controlled by reason (Adorno 2003a: 8).

Despite eschewing Hegel’s identity theory, his belief that contradictory ideas and ways of life were all part of a total truth, Adorno argues that even this aspect of his thought contains a ‘moment of truth’ (2003a: 40). He maintains that Hegel’s belief in eventual reconciliation and his doctrine of absolute spirit can be interpreted as a further negative move, a preservation of non-identity in the face of identity, of something non-immanent in the face of relentless positivity. A key tenet of Enlightenment thinking is its rejection of that beyond what we can see or control; it was perceived as a coming of age, whereby society no longer needed to look to priests or rulers for guidance, but could rely instead on our individual reason and judgement. Adorno finds in Hegel’s idealism a preservation of utopia, and inspiration for his own utopian belief that ‘success might be achieved anyway’, despite evidence to the contrary:

The rigor of Hegel’s attempt to rescue the ontological proof of God in opposition to Kant may be questioned. But what impelled him to do it was not a desire to eclipse reason but on the contrary the utopian hope that the block, the ‘limits of the possibility of experience’, might not be final; that success might be achieved anyway, as in the
concluding scene of Faust: that spirit, in all its weakness, limitations, and negativity, resembles truth and is therefore suited for knowledge of truth. (2003a: 41)

Thus for Adorno, Hegel’s idealism, his belief in the absolute, is not unreasonable but rather a preservation of reason in the face of manipulative, fragmented rationality. Adorno also finds in Hegel’s idealism a ‘wholesome corrective’ to the philosophy of being propounded by Heidegger and his followers: If at one time the arrogance of the Hegelian doctrine of absolute spirit was rightly emphasized, today, when idealism is defamed by everyone and most of all by the secret idealists, a wholesome corrective becomes apparent in the notion of spirit’s absoluteness (41–2).12

Adorno finds this ‘new philosophy’ profoundly unsatisfactory with regards moral or substantive issues, accusing its proponents of secret idealism and ‘pathos-filled narcissism’ (35–47; Rose 1978: 52). The poststructural emphasis on the singular, prefigured in the work of Heidegger and Nietzsche, turns from one form of abstraction (identity thinking) to another (pure singularity).13 For Adorno, the abandonment of enlightenment ideals hinders social critique; there can be no immanent critique if there are no socially accepted values against which to measure society, and there can be no transcendent critique if there is no utopian ideal of reconciliation to strive for. Hegel’s doctrine of absolute spirit provides one such utopian ideal.

Adorno provides an approach to critique which differs markedly from poststructural approaches. His dialectics insists on attending to both sides of binary oppositions, moving back and forth in continual interplay between ‘the knowledge of society of totality’ and ‘the specific content of the object’ (1981: 33). Thus, where poststructural theories privilege particularity and non-identity, Adorno attends to the ways in which these categories interplay with universality and identity and, in examining their interrelation, contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of social reality.

Adorno and Suffering

The previous section focused on Adorno’s critique of the ways in which Enlightenment ideals are pursued under modernity, tracing the development of a negative dialectics that attends to broader social processes alongside concrete experience and difference. In the remainder of the article, I focus more specifically on Adorno’s response to suffering, drawing particularly on his reflections in the wake of the Holocaust. Can we still pursue emancipation in the face of such inhumanity? Adorno argues that we must. How should we do this? In ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, he argues that emancipation requires both immanent and transcendent critique of enlightenment: ‘To insist on the choice between immanence and transcendence is to revert to the traditional logic criticized in Hegel’s polemic against Kant. . . . Dialectics means
intransigence towards all reification’ (1981: 31). Adorno’s first response, then, is one of immanent critique, or the enlightening of Enlightenment. His negative dialectics point to the bleak, dark side of modernity, drawing attention to that which is neglected in contemporary ethical thought—the concrete suffering of particular individuals—and determinedly preserving alternatives to the status quo. Alongside an immanent critique of modernity lies a utopian strand that points to something transcendent: the notion of promise and the possibility that things might yet get better. I examine these two facets of Adorno’s thought in turn—immanent critique and utopian hope—and argue that he offers a stark alternative to poststructural approaches to suffering in world politics. Like poststructural critiques, Adorno challenges mainstream ethics by drawing attention to particular suffering and highlighting the fragility and reversibility of moral progress. However, he continues to cling to Enlightenment ideals, insisting upon a dialectical enlightening of Enlightenment that attends to historical and social processes as well as particular pain.

Negative Dialectics

Measuring the Enlightenment against its own standards—the method of immanent critique—is the first layer of Adorno’s response to modernity. As we have seen, Adorno maintains that Enlightenment notions of justice and injustice fail to live up to their goal of improving individual well-being. Furthermore, the appearance of progress towards Enlightenment ideals hinders critique: ‘the semblance of freedom makes reflection upon one’s own unfreedom incomparably more difficult than formerly’ (1981: 21). Adorno argues that the mind has ‘fallen increasingly under the anonymous sway of the status quo’, as an obsession with universality has taken hold in both social theory and practice—a rational, abstract, generalised universality that neglects concrete, sensuous particulars (1981: 21; Bernstein 2001: 18). Adorno’s negative dialectics are an attempt on his part to preserve the non-identical—that which cannot be subsumed under universal concepts and which does not conform to closely held liberal assumptions about progress and rationality.

Against modern notions of progress, Adorno draws our attention to the pervasiveness of suffering under modernity. He argues that the concrete reality of human suffering must be given voice: ‘The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition for all truth’ (1973: 17–18) and ‘[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream’ (362). The concrete other, passed over in the pursuit of universal guidelines for living, is often the individual experiencing the negative aspects of progress and is precisely the one who suffers in silence. Although a desire to emancipate humankind from suffering provides the motivation for mainstream
international ethics, this suffering is too quickly passed over in the attempt
to delineate universal norms, and the influence of present emotion or past
traumas on present capability for political interaction is all but ignored.
The articulation of particular pain challenges this marginalisation of physical
and psychological dimensions of human experience. Adorno maintains that
bodily pain provides a strong message that things ought not to be as they
are (203). It is at this intersection, where physical reality challenges closely
held beliefs about the way the world is and should be, that the material
world meets with the philosophical world and prompts criticism and social
change.

Adorno’s call for attention to concrete suffering and his warning against
a politics of forgetting past traumas has close parallels with poststructural
approaches to global politics (Connolly 1996: 138; Edkins 2003). However,
there are clear differences in his approach: he clings to a possibility of moral
learning, however fragile; his negative dialectics reach towards knowledge of the
whole, however imperfect; and he balances his attention to particular suffering
with reflection on the ‘objective social conditions’ that facilitated that suffering.
He reaches towards a more stable historical representation of trauma than most
poststructural thinkers would be happy with, maintaining that this is necessary
if we are to enlighten Enlightenment.

Part of Adorno’s emphasis on particular suffering as a corrective to abstract
universals is his insistence that historical experiences of extreme suffering must
not be glossed over or forgotten. There must be fora for telling the truth about
the past, for enlightening those who do not know or who do not want to know
about the horrors that have taken place under modernity: ‘Enlightenment about
what happened in the past must work, above all, against a forgetfulness that too
easily goes along with and justifies what is forgotten’ (1986: 125). For Adorno
(2005a), truth-telling is crucial if humanity is to learn about itself, and what it
is capable of, and seek to do things differently. Although he rejects progressive
philosophies of history and emphasises the fragility and reversibility of moral
progress, he maintains that we cannot give up reaching for a world in which
Auschwitz does not happen again. Adorno (1993b: 74) argues that negative
dialectics can bring ‘a healing awareness’ as society perceives the ‘marks of
unreason in its own reason’.

Adorno’s experience of living through the period of the Holocaust, albeit
in exile, prompted agonised reflections on the unspeakable horrors and death
suffered by millions deemed ‘other’ by Nazi Germany and on what they meant
both for Germany as a nation and also for humankind in general. He famously
stated that ‘[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (1981: 34), arguing
that poetry cannot help but be co-opted by the dominant social forces which shut
down and commodify alternative voices – those same social forces that allowed
Auschwitz to take place. Adorno uses the place name ‘Auschwitz’ to refer to
the Nazi genocide because it emphasises the concreteness and historicity of the
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events. He abhorred the detachment with which the atrocities were discussed just a decade after the fact:

All of us today also recognize a readiness to deny or belittle what happened – however difficult it is to conceive that people are not ashamed to argue that it was surely at most only five million Jews, and not six million, who were killed. Irrational too is the widespread ‘settling of accounts’ about guilt, as if Dresden made up for Auschwitz. There is already something inhuman in making such calculations, or in the haste to dispense with self-reflection through counter-accusations. (1986: 116)

Against such rationalisation and denial, he pushes for remembrance and reflection, arguing that what is repressed or unconscious will do much more damage than that which is made conscious. He argues that effective remembrance is extraordinarily difficult; it does not begin and end with reproach, but requires one to ‘endure’ the horror through a certain strength that comprehends even the incomprehensible’ (127).

As well as drawing our attention to the particular horrors of past suffering, Adorno maintains that we have a responsibility to reflect upon how they came about. This search for ‘truth’, for a (relatively) stable historical representation of what happened, is another point of departure with poststructural thought. However, Adorno does not advocate a naive historical positivism; he advocates a dialectical working towards a good enough truth, a representation that is sufficiently stable to allow links to be drawn between particular traumatic events and social and historical context. In an essay on coming to terms with the past, Adorno asks what objective social conditions might have brought about the turn to National Socialism in Germany. He explores several conditions that might have facilitated the rise of fascism. He argues that economic insecurity, combined with a need to conform to the status quo to preserve what little security they had, served to prevent citizens from becoming autonomous, politically mature agents who sought to hold their leaders accountable. This insecurity, combined with the all-encompassing culture industry, meant that autonomous thought required ‘painful intellectual effort’, which was close to impossible under the circumstances. In his words:

The necessity of such adaption [to the given circumstances], to the point of identifying with the status quo, with the given, with power as such, creates the potential for totalitarianism, and is reinforced by the dissatisfaction and rage which that forced adaption itself produces and reproduces. Because reality doesn’t provide the autonomy or, finally, the possible happiness that the concept of democracy actually promises, people are insensitive to democracy, where they don’t secretly hate it. (1986: 124–5)

Although democracy promised freedom and happiness in the place of unfreedom, this was proved untrue. Once again, Enlightenment ideals did not
match concrete reality, provoking a dissonance and anger that paved the road for fascism, which promised security, integration, and collective greatness in the place of insecurity, disintegration, and humiliation.

For Adorno, the enlightening of Enlightenment is a negative exercise. He does not prescribe positive prescriptions for change, for fear that this will further hinder people’s ability to act as autonomous agents and to make judgements based on the conditions they face in a particular time and space:

Men must act in order to change the present petrified conditions of existence, but the latter have left their mark so deeply on people, have deprived them of so much of their life and individuation, that they scarcely seem capable of the spontaneity necessary to do so…. Concrete and positive suggestions for change merely strengthen this hindrance. (1989a: 275)

Adorno’s negativity – where the maxim ‘men must act’ is held alongside a rejection of ‘concrete and positive suggestions for change’ – is the antithesis of the kind of tidy moral theory that helps us to feel better that is the substance of much international thought. In shunning a positive moral theory, Adorno was in accord with Benjamin, who had a profound distrust of progressive historicism and famously maintained that ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (1999: 248).

Although Adorno refuses to seek ‘solutions’ for the ills of modernity, he gestures towards a different kind of being that might ameliorate its worst excesses. There is a politics implicit in Adorno’s writing but it is a politics directed at changing our fundamental ways of being and thinking, rather than at particular concrete projects, which will only emerge out of that intellectual reorientation.

In ‘What does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?’, Adorno (1986: 126) points to political education as centrally important, arguing that although those who are likely to be receptive to such instruction are not those who are likely to be attracted to fascism in the first place, ‘it is in no way superfluous to strengthen, through enlightened instruction, even this group against “non-public” opinion’. He hopes that in doing so, ‘cadres’ of self-reflective, critical intellectuals may develop who will then go on to have broader societal influence. Adorno’s approach to education is very different from a cosmopolitan education that promotes universal values about, for example, the equal worth of all human beings. On the contrary, Adorno believes that a problem-solving approach is likely to be counterproductive, for three reasons. First, he maintains that externally-imposed beliefs and duties are unlikely to have much influence on those individuals who might commit or condone oppression, torture, or genocide of those they consider to be their inferiors. Second, he argues that an instrumental appeal to a common humanity is likely to be perceived as ‘untrue’, as being a means to an end rather than a truth in itself. Third, he argues that the prescription
of rules and norms that must be adhered to encourages blind obedience of authority in the place of the exercise of reason and the development of one’s own conscience and that this was one of the major subjective factors that facilitated the Nazi genocide (2005a: 192–5). Rather than the delineation of rules or the construction of dialogic communities in which consensus reigns, then, Adorno (193) advocates ‘an education toward critical self-reflection’.

Part of Adorno’s notion of ‘an education toward critical self-reflection’ is enlightening the public about the past and its antecedents. He suggests that we need a deeper understanding and acceptance of the principles of psychoanalysis and that although ‘mass analysis’ is unlikely to take place, ‘rigorous psychoanalysis’ should be firmly embedded in the institutions of intellectual circles. At the very least, he argues, this would encourage intellectuals to avoid apportioning blame to others but instead turn their gaze on themselves and their own (often frustrated) reaction to societal conditions. In his words, ‘coming to terms with the past in the sense of aiming for enlightenment is essentially that sort of turn towards the subject: reinforcement of a person’s self-consciousness and, with that, a sense of self’ (1986: 128). This attempt to come to terms with or work through historical suffering is another key difference between Adorno’s dialectics and poststructural thought. For Adorno, contra poststructuralism, working through is not a totalising process that encourages the creation of a coherent, linear narrative in order to promote closure in the wake of trauma. On the contrary, working through is a process that will never be complete; trauma can never fully be worked through or fully mended. Alongside critical self-reflection and enlightenment, Adorno recommends a pragmatic appeal to self-interest: reminding the public of the disastrous consequences of war, of the horrific consequences not just for those deemed ‘other’ whose lives were targeted to be eliminated, but also (albeit to a lesser extent) for those ordinary citizens whose lives were irrevocably damaged.22

At the core of a speculative education toward critical self-reflection is a countering of indifference towards pain – hardness – and indifference towards others – coldness. Hardness is bred through the educational system, which does not allow the expression of emotions, and is self-perpetuating: ‘Whoever is hard with himself earns the right to be hard with others as well and avenges himself for the pain whose manifestations he was not allowed to show and had to repress’ (2005a: 198). This cycle of hardness with ourselves and others must be halted; we must be made aware of the cultivation of hardness in the educational system and its effects, and counter it by allowing the freer expression of pain and anxiety, both in the classroom and in society more generally.23 We must learn to feel our own pain and to communicate it with others. We must also learn to listen to others’ stories and to reflect upon those senseless horrors that take place both within our communities and worldwide; if we do not, they are sure to recur. Coldness, a profound indifference toward all those except those with whom they have close (often self-interested) ties, is another psychological characteristic.
that is prevalent under modernity. The reigning principle of the *status quo* is to look out for one’s own interests first and foremost; this was put to the test again and again by the Nazi regime and it rarely failed. Once again, Adorno (200–4) advocates enlightenment in the face of coldness, making society aware of its coldness and of the horrific consequences it engenders. This is the first step towards being able to love, which is the antithesis of coldness, but which cannot be imposed from above.\(^{24}\)

It is important to note a significant tension between Adorno’s promotion of critical modes of education, which would form autonomous and mature individuals, and his belief that society not only promotes unfreedom and immaturity, but puts up ‘indescribable resistances’ to the development of maturity (Adorno and Becker 1999: 32). It is clear that Adorno sees overwhelming challenges to the promotion of an education towards critical reflection; challenges emanating from the very fabric of society – its structures, process and institutions – as well as from our own inertia (29–32). However, despite these challenges, he clings to the ‘promise of education’ (Giroux 2004: 14), to the hope that change might yet take place.

**Promise**

Negative dialectics – the enlightening of Enlightenment – is the minimal necessary response to the ills of modernity, and it is this which receives most attention from scholars reading Adorno. However, as we have seen, Adorno’s thought is not wholly negative. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Jeremy Shapiro argue that his negative dialectics are ‘an essential vehicle’ for the individual trying to live an authentic life under modernity – they preserve the truth about society, looking beyond ‘the slick façade of everyday life’ (Adorno 1986: 125), as well as the truth about oneself. However, this negation is only a part of Adorno’s response. Alongside his often bleak reflections on modernity lies a thread of hope that gestures to something beyond the rational and immediate:

> while the expression of this negation is a part of the truth, it is only a partially developed form of it. For the real truth about reality includes awareness of the potentiality, the desire, and the justification for transcending the perverted world. It must go beyond the merely dialectical to what Hegel calls the speculative, in which the antagonism of the dialectic are resolved. (Weber Nicholsen and Shapiro 1993: xvii)

The second strand of Adorno’s response to modernity is his writings on utopia and promise – the transcendent critique to which he referred in his essay on cultural criticism and society.

The utopian strand in Adorno’s writings draws inspiration from Hegel’s identity theory and notion of eventual reconciliation, a concept that is forcefully rejected by poststructural thought as coercive and totalitarian. However, for
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Adorno, utopian hope is an important counterbalance to his negative dialectics. The idea of a utopia is a negative move, preserving hope in the face of bleakness: ‘The ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments is none other than utopia, the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized’ (1993b: 88). We cannot let go of the Hegelian hope that ‘we might yet succeed’ (68). The notion that the ‘whole truth’ might one day be known inspires continued social criticism and praxis. This hope softens the darkness of extreme suffering; it tells us that we should not give up trying to come to terms with what has happened to us or what we have inflicted on others. Without this hope before us, we might give ourselves to despair, abandoning the struggle that is so central to Adorno’s reading of Hegel (Weber Nicholsen and Shapiro 1993: xxiv–xxv).

A reading of ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’ gives the most concentrated insight into the place of metaphysics in Adorno’s thought (1973: 361–408). He eschews the possibility of traditional metaphysics after Auschwitz, saying ‘Our metaphysical faculty is paralysed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience’ (362). The material world has collided with the metaphysical, yet it has not completely annihilated it. The notion of promise, of hope remains. In answer to the question ‘What is a metaphysical experience?’ Adorno points to particularity, to ‘fugitive ethical events’ that creep into everyday life (Bernstein 2001: 419–20). He illustrates his metaphysics with reference to the childhood experience of happiness:

we are most likely to visualize it, as Proust did, in the happiness, for instance, that is promised by village names like Applebachsville, Windgap, or Lords Valley. One thinks that going there would bring fulfilment, as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed; the feeling now is one of being too close, rather, and not seeing it for that reason. (Adorno 1973: 373)

This promise of happiness is a ‘metaphysics of the particular’ (Chua 2005); it gestures to the possibility of transformation in a world in which despair rather than hope sounds loudest. A child’s naïve sense of wonder and magic in imaginative play invokes the metaphysical: a sense of the non-identical, whereby the particular is not perceived as fungible, or able to be substituted for another, but as a thing of value in itself (Adorno 2005: 227–8).

For Adorno, great art also points to the metaphysical. Under the culture industry, art has succumbed to commodification and the god of profit has come before criticism and truth. However, this was not always the case:

Culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which
they lived, thereby honoring them. Insofar as culture becomes wholly assimilated to and integrated in those petrified relations, human beings are once more debased. (1989b: 129)

The role of culture is to ‘raise a protest’ against the commodification of human beings. The arts can help to express pain where words fail; they resist universality and instrumentalism and point to the possibility of transformation. They can help those who have undergone extreme suffering to begin the process of living with and through their pain.25 The arts also preserve hope in the face of despair. They point to something beyond the now; they say to us that ‘everything is not just nothing’ (1973: 404). For Adorno, great artists like Beethoven gesture to what lies beyond the suffering and contradictions of modernity. He maintains that ‘great works of art express hope more powerfully than the traditional theological texts’ (397). In pointing to art and culture as part of a response to suffering, Adorno opens himself up to accusations of esoteric elitism and a poverty of politics, but evinces a much more human understanding of what it is to suffer.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have pointed to Adorno’s writings on modernity and suffering as a creative and constructive alternative to the predominant critical voices in international political thought. I argue that poststructural approaches engage seriously with the problem of suffering in world politics, drawing attention to the violence underlying accepted social arrangements, but that the situation of traumatic experience outside historical time hinders critique and prevents working through. Adorno’s negative dialectics address this problem by highlighting the relation between the particular and the universal in social critique; he insists upon attention to particular suffering both for its own sake and in order to enlighten the objective social conditions that contributed to that suffering.

Although Adorno focuses on concrete particularity and human experience as a counter to general social analysis, he also considers the ways in which larger social forces, structures, and institutions mediate concrete experience, and how attention to particularity sheds light on those broader processes. Thus, although his work anticipates poststructural thought in its social critique and emphasis on particularity, it differs significantly in its refusal to reject universal categories and in its insistence on a dynamic dialectical analysis that mediates between the two. As such, Adorno is able to analyse the twin forces of fragmentation and totalisation in contemporary society, while poststructural theory, with its rejection of dialectics and macro-theory, is less well equipped for analysis of homogenous repressive trends or collective historical struggle.

Edkins urges an ‘encircling’ of trauma that steadfastly refuses working through for fear of concomitant gentrification. However, an Adornian response
insists that we must attempt to come to terms with the past. His notion of working through has critical self-reflection and political struggle at its core; it does not proffer easy answers nor does it encourage depoliticisation in the service of the premature healing of wounds. Adorno’s refusal to prescribe solutions to the failings of modernity makes his writings unpalatable to many. However, an Adornian approach is neither wholly negative nor wholly pessimistic. He calls for the active preservation of alternatives to the status quo and gestures toward ways in which we might preserve pockets of self-reflection and social critique in the modern world. In this sense, then, he calls for a particular kind of cultural politics. He points to an education in critical reflection and in learning to attend to our own and others’ emotions as being crucial in the struggle for a better tomorrow. Above all, he proposes a different way of being in the world, one that perceives the world as it is, fully aware of the contradictions and oppression that permeate existence, but that also sees beyond these failings to what could be, remaining alive to the possibility of beauty and kindness. In Weber Nicholsen and Shapiro’s words, this approach:

discerns and experiences the good, the true, and the beautiful through their deformations— as the negation of the latter, and as real in this negation. It pursues freedom and happiness in a repressive and oppressive society without ideologically denying this repression and oppression. It pursues the life of a critical intellect without suffering the deformation and rigidification that is the normal form of intellectual life in critical society. (1993: xvii)

By determinedly perceiving the potential for the good and beautiful in the deformed, Adorno proposes a way of being that refuses to fall into flat despair or cynicism, preserving a critique that remains hopeful and mobile, whilst not denying the overwhelming bleakness of experience.

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Notes

1 This paper conceives of suffering broadly, encompassing bodily and emotional pain experienced by individuals and communities. This suffering occurs not only in the wake of political violence but also as the result of unjust social arrangements, although it is often historical events that draw attention to the underlying structural antecedents. Adorno pays particular attention to the concrete bodily experience of suffering; however, he also considers the way in which emotional and psychological pain (and, indeed, horror at others’ suffering) enscribe themselves on the body. Auschwitz was of central importance in Adorno’s reflections
on suffering, as a concrete manifestation of the horrors of the Nazi genocide, and to such extreme suffering attaches an especially urgent demand for critical reflection and working through. However, although Auschwitz might be described as an ‘exemplary instance’ of suffering (Bernstein 2005), Adorno’s writings are profoundly relevant to persistent suffering in world politics today.  

2 Think, for example, of the importance of statistical descriptions of poverty to motivate action in liberal cosmopolitan ethics (e.g. Pogge 2002; Singer 2006) or, indeed, Habermasian critical IR theory’s emphasis on emancipation from suffering; see, for example, Linklater’s (2005) argument that Marx’s focus on material inequality and class domination obscured attention to human suffering. See also Linklater’s (2007) call for suffering to be returned to the centre of critical thought in the manner of the early Frankfurt School.  

3 Of course there are many strands of poststructural thought and I do not mean to imply that they form a coherent whole. I use the term ‘poststructural’ to refer to those forms of thought that have in common a mistrust of coherent identities or systematic thought and that share the broad goal of interrogating these systems.  

4 See also Pupavac (2002).  

5 See also Connolly (1996) who argues that a desire to protect state sovereignty often gives rise to a politics of forgetting whereby those actions and attitudes incoherent with a state’s perception of itself are concealed (138).  

6 For an excellent discussion of the place of history in different traditions of International Relations, see Vaughan-Williams (2005).  

7 According to Connolly (1993: 368), the cosmopolitan agenda is egoistic, because it extracts embedded truths from particular traditions and insists that they apply without question to all, and transcendental, because it insists on its grounding in an accessible underlying consensus or higher law that can be identified as true.  

8 Indeed, the narrow focus on identity and difference in certain strands of poststructural thought has displaced attention from broader issues such as class and economic marginalisation. Benjamin Arditi (2006: 13) illustrates this problem with reference to the metaphor of a walking stick that Lenin is purported to have used: in order to straighten it, one needs to bend the handle in the opposite direction; however, there is always a risk that one will apply too much or too little pressure. Arditi maintains that in identity politics, too much pressure has been applied: ‘The radicalization of the critique of grand narratives and the relentless vindication of particularism served to part ways with, say, the class reduction of Marxism, but it also turned the question of difference into something akin to the essentialism of the totality it criticized’. This overcorrection has distracted attention from economic structures and from the issue of redistribution, which are perceived as totalising, homogenising narratives that distract from difference and particularity.  

9 For broad discussion on the culture industry see Adorno and Horkheimer (1986: 120–67) and Adorno (1991).  

10 See Adorno (1973: 334–8) for a section entitled ‘Dialectics Cut Short by Hegel’ where he criticizes Hegel for subsuming the particular to the universal and thus cutting short dialectics. See also Rose (1981) for a critique of this reading of Hegel.  

11 Adorno maintains that ‘Hegel’s philosophy is indeed negative critique’ (Adorno 1993a: 30).  

12 By ‘secret idealists’, Adorno is referring to those philosophers, such as Heidegger, who are concerned with questions of ontology.  

13 For a more thorough analysis on the difference between Adorno’s analysis of society and a poststructural position, see Dews (1989).  

14 See, for example, Nick Vaughan-Williams’s (2005) article on International Relations and history in which he advocates embracing the ‘radical indeterminacy of historical meaning’ (115). Vaughan-Williams makes a stark distinction between those IR theorists who welcome ‘the radical uncertainty of historical meaning’ and those who ‘impose a form of interpretive closure on the historical record’ (117). However, he does not allow for a third alternative: a dialectical working through that works towards a stable historical representation whilst acknowledging inevitable contingency and resisting closure.
Adorno has powerfully shaped Holocaust discourse. His pronouncement has been transformed into the sound-bite 'after Auschwitz', putting Auschwitz at the centre of public and academic debate. For reflections on the significance of this statement, see Rothberg (1997).

Auschwitz was the site for the extermination of an estimated 1.6 million people between 1940 and 1944, 90 per cent of whom were Jewish.

See also Saul Friedlander’s (1993) essay on trauma and transference, in which he discusses the defence mechanisms (repression, denial, splitting off) employed by Jews and Germans who lived through the period of the Holocaust and the profound silence of the majority of Jewish and German intellectuals in the decades that followed (Adorno and Hannah Arendt being exceptions to this rule in their refusal to push the Shoah to one side).

Note that Adorno’s critique of Enlightenment is profoundly influenced by his reading of Freud. For a thorough analysis of the Freudian dimensions of Adorno’s thought, see Sherratt (2002).

Saul Friedlander’s writings on the Holocaust also search for some degree of truth in representation. Friedlander (1993: 131) helpfully contrasts his notion of working through traumatic history with a deconstructionist approach, saying that a deconstructionist approach would insist upon ‘the impossibility of establishing any direct reference to some aspects at least of the concrete reality that we call the Shoah’ and that it would ‘exclude any ongoing quest for a stable historical representation’. He goes on to advocate a notion of working through that struggles towards a more truthful historical account of the Shoah whilst simultaneously refusing a ‘naïve historical positivism’.

In doing so Adorno sees the Nazi genocide as revelatory in some sense and deserving of engagement, not because it signals an absolute break in history, but precisely because it does not: because it sheds light on the social and cultural context in which the events took place. Jay M. Bernstein (2001: 384) argues that for Adorno, ‘the destruction of the conditions of metaphysical meaningfulness, how lives have point and worth, that occurred in the camps is the hyperbole, the exaggerated fulfilment of the instrumental rationality that forms the infrastructure of modern societal rationalization and rationalized reason. Recognition of that calls for, demands a reorientation in our thinking’. In this sense, there are similarities between Adorno’s reflections on the Holocaust and the writings of Zygmunt Bauman, who also saw clear links between modern instrumental rationality and the devastating efficiency of the Nazi machine (Bauman 2001).

Unlike the cosmopolitan education advocated by Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (1999).

Note that this appeal to self-interest shows a political awareness that many commentators are reluctant to ascribe to Adorno, who they consider apolitical and irrelevant. However, Adorno (1986) evinces an awareness of motivation that is generally lacking in mainstream (liberal) political theory texts, though present in classical realism.

Adorno believes that hardness must be countered through education on two levels: the classroom and society more generally. Adorno maintains that in the midst of our administered society, of the stultifying status quo, ‘[the school] alone has the ability, if it is conscious of it, to work directly towards the debarbarization of humanity’ (2005c: 190). He argues that we must work towards the promotion of an ‘education for protest and for resistance’ (Adorno and Becker 1999: 31), arming students with tools of critical reflection that would enable them to ‘knock things down’; that is, to challenge those elements of the culture industry (film, music, radio) that promote acceptance and sameness and stifle critique and individuality.

For a contemporary reflection on what Adorno’s ideas on education might mean for alleviating suffering in world politics, see Henry A. Giroux (2004). Giroux argues that the horrific acts of Abu Ghraib were not an aberration, but rather an outgrowth of an ideology of hardness, maintaining that ‘in the current morality of downsizing, punishment, violence, and kicking the excluded, the infliction of humiliation, pain, and abuse of those considered weak or less clever is not only celebrated but also served up as daily ritual of cultural life’ (17). He points to Adorno’s politics of education as central to challenging the hardness and domination that promotes violence and suffering, arguing that ‘self-knowledge, self-critique, and autonomy’ must challenge discourses of aggressive nationalism, militarism, and empire (21).

References


