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PARADOXES OF INDIVIDUALITY:

LIBERALISM, THE CRISIS OF WORK, AND THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

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Dedicated to the memory of Moishe Postone (1942-2018) for his inexhaustible generosity, wisdom and humor as my teacher, mentor and friend.

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Abstract

Modern individuality has proven difficult to conceptualize for both modern political thought and contemporary political theory as it appears to contain both a theoretical and practical paradox. If viewed juridically (as bearers of rights) or economically (as bearers of interests), individuals appear abstractly equivalent, non-particular, and even atomized. Yet, as human beings and political agents, individuals are also understood as non-fungible, concretely embodied, and socially-embedded in numerous particular relations. These assessments are not simply different descriptions but rather two opposed sides of that which the concept "individuality" purports to grasp: actually-living individuals. However, political theory has largely explained this discursive divergence as the product of either conceptual imprecision and confusion, or as an aporia between conflicting normative evaluations of individualism. Rarely, however, has the contradictory character of individuality been theorized as the reflection of a specific social-historical form of individuality produced by socioeconomic conditions and institutions which are in themselves contradictory. In other words, the contradictions of the concept of individuality point to contradictory social forms in which we confront ourselves as actually-living individuals.

In the following, I argue that the contradictory form of individuality is both inherent to and a reflection of the objectified forms of social relations unique to modern capitalist society. Through a critical analysis of these forms, I show that the growth of capitalist social relations has historically supported the development of modern individuality. Yet, at the same time, these relations have also eroded the conditions for individuality as an anthropological type and threatened actually-living individuals with liquidation. While some sociologists have theorized the emergence of modern individuality and its subsequent decline as a paradox of individualization and de-individualization that follows a linear historical development, I argue that this paradox inheres in the very form of individuality as the expression of social relations which have become autonomous of human beings.

By investigating how economic institutions constitute a specific form of individuality that is paradoxically self-undermining yet potentially emancipating, my dissertation suggests that for contemporary political theory to analytically and normatively explain what it purports to grasp, it must also engage the perspective of a critical social theory of prevailing socio-economic conditions. Specifically, I locate the crux of the contradiction of individuality in the institution of waged-labor. Evidenced by mass unemployment in the global South and chronic underemployment and the growing precariousness of work in more developed countries like the United States, the ongoing crisis of work indicates that although capitalist development has undergirded the emergence of individuality as we currently understand it, individuals are at the same time made increasingly superfluous for capital's self-reproduction. Moreover, I argue that overcoming this crisis is germane to the aspiration for a free individuality that unifies an otherwise diverse liberal tradition. However, for the potentially free individual to be realized would necessitate a radical transformation of social conditions—hitherto undertheorized by much of liberal thought—including the abolition of waged-work and the social reorganization of time.

Introduction

Modern individuality has proven difficult to conceptualize for both modern political thought and contemporary political theory as it appears to contain both a theoretical and practical paradox. If viewed juridically (as bearers of rights) or economically (as bearers of interests), individuals appear abstractly equivalent, non-particular, and even atomized. Yet, as human-beings and political agents, individuals are also understood as non-fungible, concretely embodied, and socially-embedded in numerous particular relations. These assessments are not simply different descriptions but rather two opposed sides of that which the concept "individuality" purports to grasp: actually-living individuals. However, political theory has largely explained this discursive divergence as the product of either conceptual imprecision and confusion, or as an *aporia* between conflicting normative evaluations of individualism. Rarely, however, has the contradictory character of individuality been theorized as the reflection of a specific social-historical *form* of individuality produced by socioeconomic conditions and institutions which are in themselves contradictory. In other words, that the contradictions of the concept of individuality point to contradictory social forms in which we confront ourselves as actually-living individuals.

In the following dissertation, I argue that the contradictory form of individuality is both inherent to and a reflection of the objectified forms of social relations unique to modern capitalist society. Through a critical analysis of these forms, I show that capitalist social relations have historically supported the development of modern individuality. Yet, at the same time, these relations have also eroded the conditions for individuality as an anthropological type and threatened actually-living individuals with liquidation. While some sociologists have theorized the emergence of modern individuality and its subsequent decline as a paradox of

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By investigating how economic institutions constitute a specific form of individuality that is paradoxically self-undermining yet potentially emancipating, my dissertation suggests that for contemporary political theory to analytically and normatively explain what it purports to grasp, it must also engage the perspective of a critical social theory of prevailing socio-economic conditions. Specifically, I locate the crux of the contradiction of individuality in the institution of waged-labor. Evidenced by mass unemployment in the global South and chronic underemployment and the growing precariousness of work in more developed countries like the United States, the ongoing crisis of work indicates that although capitalist development has undergirded the emergence of individuality as we currently understand it, individuals are at the same time made increasingly superfluous for capital's self-reproduction. Moreover, I argue that overcoming this crisis is germane to the aspiration for a free individuality that unifies an otherwise diverse liberal tradition. However, for the potentially free individual to be realized would necessitate a radical transformation of social conditions—hitherto undertheorized by much of liberal thought—including the abolition of waged-work and the social reorganization of time.

In Chapter 1, I examine a long-standing dispute within political theory over the extent to which the liberal individual is atomistic and abstract, or embedded and concrete. By critically reassessing the communitarian-liberal debate, the rise and fall of C.B. Macpherson's theory of possessive individualism, and some key feminist critiques of individualism, I argue that liberal theory's inability to provide an adequate account of a non-atomistic and non-abstract

individualism indicates that modern individuality is necessarily contradictory under prevailing social conditions. Chapter 2 develops these insights by reconstructing Marx's analysis of modern individuality as "personal independence based on objective dependence," which I argue accounts for individuality's contradictory *form* (individuality as simultaneously abstract and concrete), as well as the contradictory *dynamic* of individualization as simultaneously de-individualization. By tracing how capitalist development increasingly renders waged-work superfluous, Marx's analysis of the genesis and subsequent domination of the individual by capital simultaneously illuminates the creation of the material conditions of possibility for a postcapitalist society which would nurture the flourishing of free individuality. Connecting Theodor W. Adorno's thesis of the liquidation of the individual with the insights developed by my reading of Marx in the previous chapter, Chapter 3 explicates de-individualization not only as the production of strong pressures towards conformity and adjustment, but also by capital's tendency to render individuals absolutely fungible and even superfluous. Chapter 4 re-visits the possibility of an emancipated individuality through a critique and rescue of the normative commitments inherent in the concept of liberal individualism. By comparing the defense of individualism by J.S. Mill with more contemporary attempts, Adorno's concept of rescue suggests that for liberalism to fulfill its commitment to individuality it must recognize the fundamental incapacity of prevailing capitalist social relations to sustain a free individuality, which in turn requires not only a critique of liberalism's concept of individuality, but a radical overcoming of liberalism itself.

Individuality as a historical problem

Most contemporary thinkers would agree that the specific features of the modern individual include ideas and practices of personal autonomy, privacy, and self-development.[1] While there is a rough consensus that such features are *historically novel*, there has been much disagreement over: (1) *when* and *where* we locate the modern individual's historical and geographical emergence (most commonly, the answer is between the 16th and 18th centuries in Western Europe); (2) the specific social processes that produce new forms of individuality (e.g. rapid developments in urbanization, capitalist economic institutions, rationalization and centralization of state apparatuses, the rise of Protestantism) and, (3) whether or not the *emergence* of the particularly modern form of individuality was an epoch-marking historical shift coeval with modernity, or, if this emergence was only the beginning of much broader historical process of individualization with distinct phases developing through the 20th century up until the present.[2] I cannot hope to adequately cover all of these issues here but an abbreviated overview of this literature on the historicity of individuality and the processes of individualization will set the groundwork for understanding why critical theory can approach better explains these processes and their implications for the present.

If what we mean by the individual is the "*empirical* subject of speech, thought, and will, [as an] indivisible sample of the human species," then it is obvious that individuals are found in all cultures and societies.[3] However, such an abstract and indeterminate description of the

[1] Relatedly, this irreplaceable uniqueness forms the basis of the secularized version of inherent dignity—"the ultimate moral principle of the supreme and intrinsic value"— of each individual human being. Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973): 45-51.

[2] Grandiose pronouncements about a "Second Modernity" of individualization were first popularized by Ulrich Beck in the 1980s.

[3] Dumont distinguishes this empirical individual to what he takes to be the specifically modern element of individuality: "the independent, autonomous and thus (essentially) nonsocial *moral* being, as found primarily in our

individual amounts to nothing more than the idea of biological individuation, which, even on its own terms, presupposes the species; and insofar as we are considering the *human* species, this presupposes society.[4] Yet society *as such* is just as abstract and indeterminate as "individual" since society always assumes a particular form.[5] If this is the case, it might seem that in order to specify the modern individual, we simply proceed by uncovering the historically-specific social influences or forces that produce the specifically modern features of the individual. However, such a way of proceeding hypostasizes the individual as already somehow non-social as well as "social influence" as that which puts the individual and society in opposition.[6] Not only is the individual and the category of individuality itself already a product of a specific society, so is the seemingly inherent "divergence of individual and society."[7]

As an alternative, it is also tempting to try to isolate and therefore explain the specifically modern features of individuality strictly from historical periodization. A significant amount of scholarship specifies *modern* individuality by examining prevailing understandings of individuality in the preceding epoch of the early and late Middle Ages. For instance, the semantic use of "individual" connoting a human being only emerges by the late 16th century, so it became intelligible to refer to a human being as an *individual* as such (regardless of order, rank, estate, position, or status).[8] In societies where the social form of European feudalism prevailed, it would

modern (commonsense) ideology of man and society." Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism : Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 62.

[4] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ed., *Aspects of Sociology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972): 44.

[5] Hence, "society" as well as "the individual" appear as universal thereby applicable to every form of political and social life. However, this universality can be misleading.

[6] Adorno, "Revisionist Psychoanalysis [1952]," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2014).

[7] Adorno, "Sociology and Psychology (Part I)," *New Left Review* 46, no. 1 (1967).

[8] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). Class would be anachronistic here in that class arose to prominence as the same time as "the individual" Also see Asa Briggs, "The

be of little help to consider its members as independent individuals when the prevailing social relation consisted of ties of person dependence, most importantly those of super- and subordinate.[9] Furthermore, individuals were identical with their social function within a detailed social hierarchy, so that an individual was "a peasant, an artisan, a knight, and not *an individual* who *happened* to have this or that occupation."[10] The notion that "each person has a unique character and special potentialities" is a peculiarly modern conception[11]. So too is the idea that a human being's individual existence is self-evidently distinguishable from their position and function in the social order.[12] Indeed, a hallmark of modern life is that individuals must *seek out* a social function if they are to maintain themselves *as* individuals. However, as we will explore later in more detail, the particular content of that function is neither predetermined nor is it intrinsically related to the specific characteristics, needs, or desires of the individual who is lucky enough to perform this function.[13]

Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," ed. Asa. John Saville (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967).

[9] As Marc Bloch points out: "From one level to another [personal] ties thus formed—like so many chains branching out indefinitely—joined the smallest to the greatest." Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society: Social Classes and Political Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1964): 444. Bloch's superior insight into these questions rests in his orientation as a "historian of social structure." For a different account of personal ties and the individual, see Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966): 56ff.

[10] Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1994): 41. The latter description is only plausible in a society where waged-work is the predominant form of obtaining the means of subsistence.

[11]Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991): 74.

[12] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1985): 162-165. Of course, this idea has significant roots in the Protestant Reformation, which, to be overly broad, reoriented the Christian idea of "man as an-individual-in-relation-to God" as the center of its teachings. The classic articulation of this idea remains Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958). For well-known critical elaborations of the relation between modern individuality and Protestantism, see Dumont, *Essays on Individualism* and Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 39-102.

[13] "Indeed, while his [the individual's] function lasts, he is taught to express his gratitude for it." Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, ed. Adorno (London: Heinemann, 1976): 10.

It could be argued, albeit risking blatant anachronism, that individuals prior to the 16th century *lacked* personal freedom, opportunities for spontaneity, and had a slim latitude for personal development and differentiation.[14] By counterpoising the absence of a specifically modern form of individuality in pre-modernity, the idea of "modern individuality" has suffered from a significant ideological overestimation by thinkers from the 18th century until the present day.[15] For instance, Georg Simmel's quite insightful claim that the individual's "inner and outer liberation" from the rigid distinctions of caste, guild, and order could be misleading.[16] The emergence of a historically specific type of personal freedom with modern individuality does not imply it was somehow "suppressed"; the individual was *not* previously deprived of freedom, because, at bottom, the individual did not yet exist.[17]

Indeed, these uses of historical periodization have been a prevalent method for explaining modern individuality since the 19th century. Since the ideas of personal autonomy, privacy and self-development common in the 18th and 19th centuries are difficult to find before the 16th century,[18] this scholarship has often assumed modern individuality as a distinct product of the Renaissance.[19] For several generations of scholars, the standard account of the historical origins of modern individuality was found in Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in*

[14] For instance, the low level of urbanization, population density, and the fundamentally local nature of social organization during throughout the Middle Ages may also provide some explanation. Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966). For a discussion of the centrality and limitation of *local* ties, see: Hoffman Nickerson, *Warfare in the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003): 113ff.

[15] In addition to the enormous historiographical challenges of our access to 'pre-modernity' in the first place.

[16] Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, (New York: Free Press, 1964): 79, 81; Georg Simmel, "Freedom and the Individual," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1971): 217.

[17] Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 42.

[18] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 44.

[19] Williams, *Keywords*, 162-165.

Italy (1860), which argues that Renaissance Italy was the fount of the hallmarks of modern individuality including expression of self-assertion against authority, a new longing for private life, and the desire to cultivate oneself as a personality.[20] Despite the influence and staying power of Burckhardt's thesis, numerous subsequent works have attempted to discredit its account in primarily two ways. On the one hand, some have attempted to undermine the entire question of the "emergence of the individual" for its reliance an outmoded fiction of a human subject.[21] On the other hand, numerous historians have held fast to the validity of Burckhardt's project but have discarded his claims about the specific location and time of the individual's emergence by arguing that many of the supposedly modern features individuality can be found not only in 14th or 15th centuries, but also between the 11th and 13th centuries, or even earlier.[22]

However, as with nearly any specifically modern phenomena, one can find traces throughout history if we presume historical periodization is a strictly linear and unidirectional temporal process.[23] However, if we also understand modernity as qualitative category denoting

[20] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990): 98-119; 213-229. Adherents of Burkhardt's thesis—often with qualifications—include Georg Simmel and Emile Durkheim, as well as Erich Fromm, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Others have argued that the absence on individuality is reflected in artistic forms of the time, including literature and art. Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

[21] For example, see Colin Morris, *Discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978). For a recent criticism of Burckhardt, see John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). For an example of the postmodern questioning of the subject, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[22] Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*; Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*; Georges Duby, "Solitude: Eleventh to Thirteenth Century," in *A History of Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World,* ed. Philippe Aries and Georges Duby, (Belknap Press, 1988): 509-533, and Phillippe Braunstein, "Toward Intimacy: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in *A History of Private Life*, 535-630. Despite having a rather mechanical argument that presupposes a strictly linear-progressive conception of history with easily identifiable causal mechanisms, an impressive literature review of the history of the individual can be found in Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and S. Bryan, *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

[23] Even the idea that history is indissolubly temporal is a peculiarly modern idea Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). To the contrary, Marx was fully aware of the methodological problems of presupposing a rigid linear schema of successive historical stages; to overcome these problems, Marx developed a theory of social form which distinguishes mental abstractions used heuristically and "practical social relations themselves." Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of*

not only an epoch but also the historical self-consciousness of that epoch as simultaneously a break from the past and an anticipation of the future different from itself, we may perhaps pose the question of the "emergence" of modern individuality in another way. Instead of trying to identify the historical emergence of modern individuality by locating one or a number of its features at particular points on a historical timeline, we can instead ask: *why* does "the individual" and its relation to "society" become an intelligible and consequential political problem requiring theorization?[24] Although such a question would be difficult to find before the 17th century, the issue of *when* becomes less important than why. Therefore, for purposes of this study, we shall consider one of the hallmarks of modern individuality is the fact that the individual as such is understood as a social and political problem; that is, self-conscious individual existence as a phenomenon demanding clarification and explanation.

Liberalism and individuality today

Liberalism occupies an essential element in the object of this dissertation for two interrelated reasons. First, the individual and the limits and nature of its freedom constitute a central problem for a great deal of liberal thought.[25] Despite all of the diversity and incompatibilities comprising the various ideas associated with liberalism,[26] it is hardly

Political Economy (London: Penguin), 101. For an excellent and highly illuminating explanation of this method contra "bourgeois historicism," see Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981): es 1-28.

[24] A similar question is raised in Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (New York: Verso, 2009): xxiv-xxv.

[25] While the terms "liberalism" and "individualism" were roughly co-emergent— liberalism entering the languages of western Europe in the 1810s followed by individualism shortly thereafter, "individualism" did not become a favorable description of liberalism until much later in the 19th century, when the meaning of the term shifted "from a term characterizing a society dominated by selfish interests to one denoting the *ideal* of the free individual and his development," Koenraad Swart, "Individualism" in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1962): 86.

[26] For an overview of contemporary understandings of liberalism(s), see Gerald F. Gaus, "The Diversity of Comprehensive Liberalisms," in *Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, (London: Sage, 2004); Jeremy Waldron, "Liberalism, Political and Comprehensive," in *Handbook of Political*

contestable that the various liberalisms are unified by the concern with the freedom of the individual.[27] Of course, how this freedom is conceived along with what is understood to be threatening it are issues of significant contestation among liberal thinkers. Nevertheless, as Judith Shklar sums up in a well-known formulation, "Liberalism has only one overarching aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom."[28] In fact, it would seem that the other cardinal virtues commonly associated with liberalism are crucially interlinked via their efficacy for the serving the freedom of the individual (e.g. toleration, free association—including the free assent of the people as the only source of political authority—and the demand for limiting concentrated and arbitrary power).[29]

Secondly, even as a capacious and pluralistic tradition that nonetheless has a loose but coherently unified theoretical structure, liberalism is also an emphatic "social reality" of a historically-specific sort.[30] Not only are the ideals of liberalism widespread and generally accepted in the contemporary world but they are also deeply anchored in the social institutions, the common understanding, and forms of life of large sections of the world population. In fact, it is precisely by virtue of the dominance of liberal institutions that liberal orientations to the world cannot be easily changed without corresponding changes in political and economic institutions,

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Theory, ed. Gerald F. Gaus & Chandran Kukathas, (London: Sage, 2004) and Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism?," *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014).

[27] Raymond Geuss, "Liberalism and Its Discontents," *Political Theory* 30, no. 3 (2002); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Catherine Audard and Philippe Raynaud, "Liberal, Liberalism," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon (Translation / Transnation),* ed. Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton University Press, 2014).

[28] Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[29] Raymond Geuss, "Liberalism and Its Discontents," 325.

[30] Geuss suggests that since liberalism is so entrenched, there appears to be no "realistic alternative" to liberalism as a comprehensive and theoretically rich "approach to human society and politics" which would be even remotely "morally acceptable" to wide swaths of the population in the West. Ibid., 320.

which are capitalist through and through.[31] I will return to what is meant by capitalism in great detail in subsequent chapters. For now, it suffices to say that liberalism constitutes a necessary object of this dissertation since forms of liberal thought are the primary theoretical reflex of capitalist modernity and, therefore, the dominant theoretical means in which contemporary thinking understands individuality in capitalism.

In recent decades (if not since J.S. Mill), the dominant understanding of individuality within political theory—liberal or otherwise— has become less associated with egoism and atomism and more aligned with the idea of "self-realization"— how we make our way through life in accordance with our values and aspirations which we develop in tandem with our experiences with others in the world. Yet, assessments of this conception of individuality from a number of otherwise incompatible theoretical traditions make it clear that this concept of selfhood has also been beset with anxiety about the growth of countervailing forces, especially encroaching docility, conformity, and complicity, which are seen as corrosive not only for individuality but also for democratic forms of communal life.

For certain liberals, such trends are worrisome in that they threaten the capacity of individuals to live deliberately with an eye to developing the self as an open-ended project capable of transcending received roles and conventions.[32] Likewise albeit more skeptically, those drawing on Foucault as a critic of neoliberalism have argued that the contemporary ideal of the 'self-realized individual' evinces its opposite insofar as it is bound up with the discourses and practices of self-entrepreneurship and human capital, which render self-realization into a subtle

[31] Ibid., 321, 336. For a similar account, see Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, es 147-188.

[32] George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Alex Zakaras, *Individuality and Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, and the Burdens of Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009) and Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2012).

mechanism of normalization that produces docile and controllable subjects while insidiously undermining solidarity, counter-hegemony, and effective forms of resistance.[33]

Echoing the liberals' normative concern over self-realization while also taking seriously the skepticism expressed by readers of Foucault over the neoliberal trappings of contemporary individuality, critical theorists Axel Honneth[34] and Rahel Jaeggi[35] also remind us that theoretical unease about the relation between "individual self-realization" and the social conditions that hamper its fulfillment has defined the very purview of "social philosophy" since at least Rousseau. Nevertheless, Honneth and others also underscore that there has been a marked increase in popular and scholarly attention to this unease since the 1970s, which they argue amounts to the transformation of self-realization into a 'normative paradox,' where the demands for individual self-development have paradoxically come to buttress a neoliberal ideology for the de-institutionalization of social welfare institutions that had previously been the very conditions for supporting self-realization.[36] Within this framework, the ideal for the self-realization of individuals paradoxically recoils into a "social pathology" indexed by "a number of symptoms of inner emptiness, of feeling oneself to be superfluous, and of absence of purpose."[37]

Despite the insights that Honneth and his collaborators have garnered about the significance of socio-economic trends for prevailing anxieties over the individuality of self-

[33] William E Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

[34] Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Axel Honneth and Ferdinand Sutterlüty, "Normative Paradoxien Der Gegenwart – Eine Forschungsperspektive," *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8, no. 1 (2011).

[35] Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[36] Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth, "Paradoxes of Capitalism," *Constellations* 13, no. 1 (2006); Axel Honneth and Ferdinand Sutterlüty, "Normative Paradoxien."

[37] Axel Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization," 7, no. 4 (2004): 467.

realization, this framework suffers from the same fundamental insufficiencies as the other literature referenced above. Like the liberals, contemporary critical theory assumes that the individuality of self-realization had already been achieved – however imperfectly - and now is under assault. Similar to Foucault-inspired writers, Honneth and his collaborators do not clearly explain the relation between discourses about individuality and the social-structural conditions that inform practices and experiences of individuality for actually-existing individuals. Furthermore, by implicitly framing the issue at hand as a self who encounters a society that either facilitates or obstructs her realization, all three frameworks smuggle in a problematic feature of individuality that is specific to capitalist modernity. In other words, each framework presupposes what it purports to explain—the social and historical form of the *relation* between self and society that could account for the seeming paradoxical growth of self-realization amid perceived conformity, docility, and complicity.

Before articulating the general approach that I will use to explain the persistence of these paradoxes (and why I think it is necessary to qualify the idea of paradox with one of contradiction), let us consider in more detail some of the features of the socio-economic trends characteristic of global capitalism since the 1970s that are germane to the study of contemporary individuality.

Crisis of Work

The historical socio-economic context of this dissertation is a global "crisis of work" that has unfolded during the past few decades. The crisis is not simply the historical return of massive inequalities of income and wealth to levels not seen since before 1945.[38] Rather, the crisis is a

[38] For instance, between 1979 and 2007 in the United States, there has been a significant rise in income inequality apparent "in every major data source and is almost universally recognized by researchers" Lawrence Mishel, Josh Bivens, Elise Gould, and Heidi Shierholz, *The State of Working America, 12th Edition* (Ithaca: Cornell University

crisis *of* work. Before detailing the features of this crisis, it is important to point out that the crisis stems from the well-known series of structural transformations in the global economy since the 1970s that is often subsumed under the heading of "neoliberalism." While the concept is problematic and contested,[39] many agree that it pithily albeit incompletely expresses key structural transformations including global trade liberalization, the decentralization and proliferation of financial institutions, the state's shift away from funding social welfare to prioritizing macroeconomic stabilization (e.g. lowering inflation and public debt), and the profound changes in the organization of business enterprises whereby large vertically-integrated corporations give way to horizontal integration.[40] To the extent that the neoliberal policies have become hegemonic,[41] one can even arguably label the epoch of capitalist development since the 1970s as "neoliberal."

The most salient feature of neoliberalism for understanding the crisis of work has been the pressure for increased "labor flexibility."[42] To maximize competitiveness in an increasingly integrated world market, the global neoliberal trend not only has eroded state-sanctioned

Press, 2012): 80. Also see Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

[39] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007): 2–3, 5–38.

[40] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991): 160-162; Tony Smith, *Technology and Capital in the Age of Lean Production* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth, "Paradoxes of Capitalism," 45-46 and Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008): 187–188.

[41] Marion Fourcade, Gourinchas and Sarah L. Babb, "The Rebirth of the Liberal Creed: Paths to Neoliberalism in Four Countries," American Journal of Sociology 108, no. 3 (2002) and Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.*

[42] Flexibility was not only seen as a requirement for labor. The common problem culminating in the neoliberal transformation was one of rigidity: (1) large-scale fixed capital investments presumed stable and strong growth and inhibited flexibility of design; (2) especially in the oligopolistic sectors, entrenched power of organized labor prevented the amelioration of rigidities in the labor market, labor allocation, and contracts, and (3) finally the state too experienced the rigidity of its entitlement commitments when sagging growth in production restricted the increase in state expenditure (attempts to compensate through monetary policy led to a long inflationary wave). Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 142.

protections for labor but also increasingly transferred the burden of risk and insecurity onto the workers themselves.[43] Hence, a major consequence of these trends has contributed to a crisis of work. For Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, this crisis consists of tenacious underemployment (involuntary part-time work) as well as a surge of workers in highly precarious, irregular, temporary, and contingent employment, whose mass proliferation has given rise to the moniker "the precariat."[44] Some economic observers have theorized this trend as a decline in overall job quality.[45] For instance, the composition of job growth in the United States since the 1970s has been polarized between low-paying, low-skill, and precarious work and high-paying, high-skills, more steady work, whereas "semi-skilled, regular employment" typical of middle-income earners has markedly declined.[46] Despite this stratification, *all jobs* are becoming increasingly insecure as ties between employees and employers become more tenuous, layoffs more permanent, and irregular, contingent work arrangements more frequent.[47]

The crisis of work in the Global South during the past few decades has been even more alarming. Although there are significant exceptions within some BRIC countries, low- and middle-income countries have been saddled with deep and persistent levels of unemployment amid climbing urban populations increasingly concentrated into urban slums.[48] Consider that the

[43] Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 1-5, 31ff.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Arne Kalleberg, L., *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

[46] Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs* Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 14. However, the notion that specific, highly sought-after skills characterizes the the contemporary job landscape is highly dubious.

[47] Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*; Mishel, Bivens and Gould, and Shierholz, *The State of Working America.*

[48] Specifically, in Latin America, South Asia, and West Africa, as opposed to China, Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York; London: Verso, 2006): 17. Despite general poverty production in recent decades, larges parts of India's population dwell in slums and have irregular employment. See Jan Breman, *The Labouring Poor in India* (New

global urban population has doubled since the 1980s to about 3.2 billion and these same urban areas are expected to account for nearly all future population growth expected to reach 10 billion by 2050.[49] Nearly 95% of this growth has occurred and is expected to continue in urban areas of developing countries. However, the bulk of this rapid urbanization has taken the form of the "mass production of slums"[50] which have become "a dumping ground for a surplus population" who live in squalid conditions that rival the destitution of the urban poor of Victorian Europe on a scale that by far surpasses it. However, unlike the urban poor in 19th-century Europe who emigrated en masse to the Americas, Australasia, and even Siberia, this new "super-abundance of surplus labor" of the urban Third World continue to accumulate in slums in face of "unprecedented barriers to emigration to rich countries."[51]

While it is outside the scope of this dissertation to consider the various literature investigating the causes underlying the crisis of work, *that* a crisis exists is evident as well as the two principal forces underlying it. We already considered the demand for labor flexibility and its consequences for job quality as the first. The second factor concerns the massive reduction of those employed in manufacturing (often called deindustrialization) as an important aspect of the crisis of work for OECD countries.[52] For example, in the US there has been a steady decline in

York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Jan Breman, *On Pauperism in Present and Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2016).

[49] Davis, *Planet of Slums*: 2.

[50] Ibid., 17.

[51] Ibid., 183. It is no surprise, then, that large numbers of the refugee influx into Europe, which in 2015 swelled to levels not seen since the Second World War, are not only fleeing from war but also from desperate economic conditions. Discussion over this distinction is currently bitterly contested insofar as "economic migrants" are not eligible for refugee status to petition for asylum under international law. Furthermore, right-wing European political parties have attempted to depict economic refugees not only as simply economic migrants but as "welfare seekers" who are demonized as parasites.

[52] Christopher Kollmeyer, "Explaining Deindustrialization: How Affluence, Productivity Growth, and Globalization Diminish Manufacturing Employment," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 6 (2009). While the growth of productivity and wages during the postwar period created a robust middle-income class, since the 1970s this

the share of manufacturing employment over the past 50 years and sizable fall in absolute numbers of those employed in manufacturing in the first decade of the 21st century.[53] There are two important dimensions of this trend in manufacturing. First, deindustrialization does not necessarily denote a decline in manufacturing output but rather a decline in the manufacturing sector's share of total national employment.[54] The second important dimension of the decline in manufacturing employment is that it cannot be attributed solely to the displacement of jobs overseas via trade agreements. For instance, trade agreements such as NAFTA in the 1990s or the ballooning trade deficit between the United States and China since the 2000s cannot fully account for the fact that the percentage of US workers in manufacturing has been steadily falling since the early 1950s.[55] While there is no decisive explanation for the high loss of manufacturing jobs among OECD countries, most economists argue that the phenomenon is not simply the result of trade agreements but also, significantly, labor-saving developments and other leaps in productivity.[56]

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correlation no longer holds. Despite leaps in productivity gains, wages and benefits for non-supervisory workers have either stagnated or declined.

[53] Martin Neil Baily and Barry P. Bosworth, "US Manufacturing: Understanding Its Past and Its Potential Future," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28, no. 1 (2014).

[54] "If labor productivity increases rapidly, deindustrialization can occur even as manufacturing output increases or remains constant" Christopher Kollmeyer, "Explaining Deindustrialization: How Affluence, Productivity Growth, and Globalization Diminish Manufacturing Employment," *American Journal of Sociology* 114(6) :1645. Recognizing the former, Gary Herrigel writes that "US manufacturing sector production volume, for example, is larger, in absolute terms, than it has ever been. Despite the massive growth of Asian economies, the United States has consistently accounted for approximately 25% of worldwide manufacturing value-added since 1980." Gary Herrigel, *Manufacturing Possibilities: Creative Action and Industrial Recomposition in the United States, Germany, and Japan* Oxford University Press, 2010). Unfortunately, Herrigel does not seriously consider the latter issue of relative and absolute share of employment as the central issue connotated by "deindustrialization." Rather, he argues that the popular view that the manufacturing sector is declining and decaying in the US, Germany, and Japan is a wrong-headed "folk sensibility" given that these countries remain manufacturing centers of the world.

[55] Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2015): 4.

[56] Robert Eric Rowthorn and Ramana Ramaswamy, "Deindustrialization: Causes and Implications," in *Staff Studies for the World Economic Outlook,* (Washington DC: Research Department of the International Monetary Fund, 1997); Christopher Kollmeyer, "Explaining Deindustrialization: How Affluence, Productivity Growth, and Globalization Diminish Manufacturing Employment"; Lawrence Edwards and Robert Z. Lawrence, *Rising Tide: Is*

Therefore, the crisis of work is not simply an effect of neoliberal policies for greater labor flexibility or increased global trade but also due to long-term structural transformations in the productivity of labor. We will return to this issue in detail in later chapters. For now, it is only important to point out the relation between this crisis of work and what I am calling the paradoxes of individuality. As we will explore throughout this dissertation, the modern form of individuality is closely tied to the form of waged-work. The individual not only owes its historical emergence to the emergence of a society in which a central social feature is the mass sale of labor-power, but also that the individual's very possibility is determined and constitutively stunted by the form of waged-labor. If there is a historically renewed crisis of work,[57] is there also not a historically renewed crisis of the individual? Insofar as the contemporary form of individuality and the paradoxes it engenders are premised on the institution of waged-work, does the specter of the latter's erosion necessarily entail the decline of the individual? Or, if the paradoxes of individuality can be traced back to contradictions in the social organization of labor in capitalism, do these contradictions offer possibilities other than decline for individuality?

Growth in Emerging Economies Good for the United States? Peterson Institute, 2013); Martin Neil Baily and Barry P. Bosworth, "Us Manufacturing: Understanding Its Past and Its Potential Future"; Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future*.

[57] Given the persistence of unemployment and the pauperism it entails, it could be claimed that a "crisis of work" is by no means historically novel since it appears to be endemic to capitalism despite its historical variations during the past two centuries. However, our contemporary perspective from the early 21st century is heavily laden with the loss of the comparative stability and the hope for full-employment characteristic of the period following WWII to the 1970s, in which developed countries witnessed the simultaneous growth of productivity and wages thereby creating a robust middle-income class. While at the time, this sort of configuration appeared to be indefinite, it has become increasingly clear to a growing number of observers that the characteristics of those decades have proven to be exceptions in the history of capitalism.

Immanent Critique and Contradiction

This dissertation takes its theoretical orientation from the method of immanent critique as classically formulated by Marx, later developed by the first-generation of the Frankfurt School and those building on their work.[58] Immanent critique departs from the notion that human consciousness, including our reflections on it through political and social theory is to its innermost core socially and historically formed.[59] So not only is the shape of human consciousness within the individual "a product of society as a whole," but also how the individual perceives the world is socially mediated.[60] Social conditions then necessarily color philosophical concepts like subject and object and their relation despite the appearance as unproblematically universal by virtue of their abstractness.[61] As Marx and later Adorno argue, the very abstractness of these categories is a function of the specific capitalist society in which they become dominant.

The eminently historical character of immanent critique is tied to modernity *as* historical self-consciousness. If what we mean by "modernity" is the emergence of a historically specific form of social life—the "historical rupture that is modernity"— then it is also the need to narrate

[58] As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 4, I do not consider the first generation's immediate successors such as Habermas and Honneth to be building on their work. Rather, the second- and third-generation develop a very different and incompatible theoretical program very far removed from the critique of political economy.

[59] "The human subjects, whom psychology pledges itself to examine, are not merely as it were, influenced by society but are in their innermost core formed by it. The substratum of a human being in himself who might resist environment—and this has been resuscitated by existentialism—would remain an empty abstraction" Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 119.

[60] While the present discussion is restricted to social and political theory, the same issue holds for the natural sciences as well. For example, see, Gideon Freudenthal and Peter McLaughlin, ed., *The Social and Economic Roots of the Scientific Revolution: Texts By Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossmann* (New York: Springer, 2009). Richard Hadden, *On the Shoulders of Merchants: Exchange and the Mathematical Conception of Nature in Early Modern Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[61] Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1972): 200.

this break.[62] In other words, modernity marks not only an elapsed period that is qualitatively different from that which came before, it also is the self-consciousness of this rupture. When cast in epochal terms, modernity is meant to distinguish the self-understanding of our era from its past.[63]

Insofar as the social theorist inextricably yet self-consciously belongs to the object of theory (i.e. society), an immanent critique requires theory to account for its own position including the possibility of critique within the terms of the theory itself. To be immanent, therefore, the theory and the theorist need to be self-reflexive To simply "posit or assume a standpoint" from which to offer critique would undermine the claim that people and societies are historically and socially constituted, or that somehow the theorist remains unaffected by the society in which she owes her existence.[64] To assume or posit a position from which to analyze society separates the theorizing subject from the object that is theorized (that is to say, does not give mediation the centrality its due) thereby assuming the theorist is not conditioned by or is embedded in its object. Such inattention to social mediation can lead to positing existing social conditions as immutable or essentially non-social such as reifying the object "society" as an entity perennially confronting human beings.[65]

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[62] Richard A. Lee, "The Negative History of the Moment of Possibility: Walter Benjamin and the Coming of the Messiah," in *Rethinking the Frankfurt School,* ed. Jeremy T. Nelson and Caren Irr, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). For an explanation of modernity as a historically-specific form of social life inseparable from capitalism, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 4-5, 392-3. Modernity as historical specificity of a peculiar type is also emphasized by Koselleck, albeit differently as the "temporalization [*Verzeitlichung*] of history" Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 9-25.

[63] Hans Robert Jauss, "Modernity and Literary Tradition," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 329-364.

[64] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 88.

[65] Richard Gunn, "Marxism and Contradiction," *Common Sense* 15, (1994).

In contrast to an immanent social theory, a hallmark of the transcendental standpoint of traditional theory is the inattention to the question of self-reflexivity. In fact, the absence of self-reflexivity unites various theories which are otherwise politically incompatible, such as forms of bourgeois or liberal theory and forms of traditional, or what I will call "worldview" Marxism. It can be said that much of bourgeois theory interprets the world without regard to the socio-historical formation of the knowing subject or his faculties of perception because it relies on the presupposed transcendental autonomy of the individual knowing subject as a metaphysical essence.[66] For classical empiricism, this takes the form of a conscious which merely observes and records, whereas in the Kantian idealist tradition, this takes the form of the universality of the categories of the understanding. Likewise, traditional Marxist theories that rely on a shallow notion of the "demystification of ideology" similarly presuppose a transcendental standpoint which is evident in the claim to immediate access to a fundamental reality "behind" ideological appearances.[67] Therefore, to use Adorno's formulation, both these types of inquiry assume an "Archimedean" standpoint: bourgeois theory hypostatizes the knowing subject and traditional Marxism assumes to be able to take a "position above culture and the blindness of society" by virtue of correct consciousness or class position.[68] Neither position gives an account of how its own theory is socially and historically mediated, which requires embedding one's theory within its theory of society, of explaining the "possibility of its own existence in the nature of its social context."[69]

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[66] Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," 201, 210.

[67] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983): 31.

[68] Ibid. We should understand Marx's comment from *Theses on Feuerbach* that "it is essential to educate the educator himself" in this light.

[69] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 88. For similar points, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente Einer Theorie Der Gesellschaft* [1964] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008): 125-126.

By calling into question the transcendental standpoint, critical theory cannot claim to be "outside" of its own context, which includes appealing to transcendentally valid norms—that is to say, standards of judgement not only of rational description but of rational prescription.[70] In other words, critical theory cannot "judge critically what 'is' from a conceptual position outside its object—for example, a transcendental 'ought.' Instead it must be able to locate that 'ought' as a dimension of its own context, as a possibility immanent to the existent society"[71]

As indicated previously, the status of contradiction plays a central role in immanent social criticism as it provides an essential condition of possibility of a critique which is neither reactionary nor abstractly utopian. Critical theory—as a dialectical theory of society—presupposes a contradictory total social form (a totality) where existing tendencies point to a transformation that is immanently possible and historically viable. If one wishes to radically critique society yet not denying that the critic and the critique are indissolubly a part of society, one must show how criticism is possible. Traditional social criticism often stops at the level of demonstrating the gap between ideals and social reality, so that criticism is understood to be working towards bringing ideals and social reality incrementally nearer. Immanent criticism, of course, relies on confronting ideals with reality but also strives to articulate qualitative transformation that is both immanently possible and emancipatory.

Contradiction brings to light the relation between the present and its future.[72] However problematic, critical theory can be said to find justification in disclosing the potentials for

[70] Hence, norms are not only moral or ethical demands but cover a wider field of justification. Freyhagen describes "normative" to "denote the considerations that provide us with reasons—not just reasons to act…but also reasons to believe…or reasons to admire." In other words, to "make normative claims is to invoke standards of judgement, and that these standards are (part of) the account we give of the reasons we have." Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* Cambridge University Press, 2013): 7.

[71] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 87.

[72] Richard Gunn, "Marxism and Contradiction," 55.

transformation in the present tendencies or development of society.[73] In analyzing how social conditions are historically (re)produced, critical theory suggests they are changeable; in other words: the "social standpoint of conditions consists not merely in the fact that social forms of life have a past but in the fact that they are open toward the future."[74] However, as we will see below, a hallmark of Theodor W. Adorno's immanent approach is the acknowledgment of the limits to the knowledge of an emancipated future which at times is given the shape of a *Bilderverbot;* however, we will also see that the theological origins of this "ban on graven images" are in fact replaced with firmly socio-materialist grounds in Adorno's account.

[73] Craig Browne, "The End of Immanent Critique," *European Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 1 (2008): 9-10.

[74] Stefan Müller-Doohm, "The Critical Theory of Society as Reflexive Sociology," in *Cambridge Companion to Adorno,* ed. Tom Huhn, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 282.

Ch. 1: Contradictions of Liberal Individualism in Contemporary Political Theory

If one surveys recent academic political theory, there seems to be a loose consensus concerning liberal individualism. Political theorists of various stripes—liberal, libertarian, Marxist, communitarian and feminist— have begun to seriously question the validity of the long-standing critique that liberal individualism is essentially abstract and atomistic. While the intensity of this questioning varies greatly, atomistic and abstract individualism is now widely conceived as exaggerated, false, inaccurate, or even wholly mythical.[1] Many of these skepticisms give more nuanced accounts of liberalism's concept of the individual as one who is embedded, sociable, and not necessarily egoistical or self-interested. These defenders of liberal individualism claim that abstraction and atomism are not reflective of liberal individualism *tout court,* that the individualism of classical liberalism has been taken out of the context of its critique of absolutism, or that the supposed atomism and abstraction of individualism are phantoms invented by wily critics of liberalism. Rather than abstract and atomistic, these revisionists within academic political theory has increasingly claimed that embedded, sociable, and not necessarily egoistical or self-interested individuals inhabit liberal individualism.

While these revisions often provide nuanced discussions of liberal individualism, upon closer inspection, they never fully expel atomism and abstraction from individualism. Revisionist political theory has tempered and downplayed the centrality of atomistic and abstract individuals

[1] For some representative accounts, see Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 187-189; Tibor R Machan, *Classical Individualism: The Supreme Importance of Each Human Being* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998): esp. 159-178; Colin Bird, *The Myth of Liberal Individualism* (Cambridge, U.K.;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Douglas J Den Uyl and Douglas B Rasmussen, "The Myth of Atomism," *The Review of Metaphysics* (2006); George H. Smith, *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For a similar assessment of a consensus, see John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

but has not been able to expunge them from liberal individualism. Instructive examples of this trend can be found in the impasse of the communitarian-liberal feud, the dethroning of C.B. Macpherson's once reigning "possessive individualism" thesis, and the scaling back of feminist critiques of abstract liberal individuals.

Contemporary political theory's inability to exorcise atomism and abstraction from individualism leaves the field in a somewhat awkward position: the upshot of much of this literature is that individualism—in its modern, liberal development—*is and is not* abstract and atomistic. When faced with such a contradiction, political theory has attempted either to *deny* the contradiction as mythical or false;[2] to *resolve* the contradiction by adjusting the concept of individualism (i.e. considered as a logical contradiction, it attempts to resolve it by making the concepts more precise, correcting expressions, striving for exactitude, etc.)[3], or to *displace* the contradiction as not one internal to individualism itself but reified as the unavoidable contradiction of "modernity" and "the individual"[4] At best, these attempts have only *described* individualism (usually one-sidedly). Very few contemporary political theorists, if any, have endeavored to explain why individualism as it developed in modernity appears contradictory in this way and what would it take to transform it.

[2] Gerald F. Gaus, *The Modern Liberal Theory of Man* (London New York: Croom Helm St. Martin's Press, 1983); Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*: 187-189; Machan, *Classical Individualism*: es 159-178; Bird, *The Myth of Liberal Individualism*; Douglas J Den Uyl and Douglas B Rasmussen, "The Myth of Atomism"; Smith, *The System of Liberty.*

[3] Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*; Nancy L. Rosenblum, "Thoreau's Democratic Individualism," ed. Jack Turner, A *Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 15-38.

[4] On the various ways formal logic confronts real contradictions, see Evald Vasilyevich Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic: Essays on Its History and Theory* (Delhi, India: Aakar Books, 2008): 320-342. To displace this internal contradiction means to pose it as a contradiction in 'different relations or at a different time' (as Ilyenkov points out); literally, it reifies the internal contradiction as external contradiction of two things, each of which is non-contradictory standing on its own; Examples, which I will detail below, include Rosenblum's *Another Liberalism*.

In the following chapter, I will neither resurrect the critique of liberal individualism as reducible to atomism and abstraction, nor will I shore up the revisionist account of liberal individualism against this critique. The prevalence of the critique of liberal individualism as atomistic and abstract and the seeming failure of political theory to eliminate these features from individualism, I will argue, result from the *fundamentally contradictory nature* of individualism as an objective and subjective feature of modernity.

My aim is not to resolve the contradictions of individualism (since this is not a strictly theoretical problem); rather, I aim to point the way to how political theory might more adequately *explain* existing individualism and its real, immanent possibilities by first *expressing* the contradictions of individualism as necessary contradictions of the object itself.[5] A critical theory of the social form of individualism will better illuminate the connections of its contradictions and can begin to trace out the tendencies of individualism, and assess their political consequences.

I. Impossible individuality? The debate over atomism and abstraction

Until recently, the "abstract" and "atomistic" individual was the dominant feature of the critique of liberal individualism among communitarian, Marxist, and feminist academic political theory. Critics who argue along these lines also strongly condemn these features as not only empirically inaccurate but also socially and politically pernicious in that they are used to *justify*

[5] "For the real questions, the real problems that arise in the movement of the investigating mind, always rise before thought in the form of contradictions in the determination, in the theoretical expression of the facts." Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic*, 342. For a similar account of the primacy of the object, see Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976): 68-86; Adorno, "On Subject and Object," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

and legitimate unsavory aspects of the status quo including unrestrained egoism, wealth inequality, the oppression of women and minorities, and the exploitation of workers and the poor.

While there are numerous differences in how these critics understand abstraction and atomism, the cases we will examine below share a similar understanding of these features. *Abstract* individuals are those abstracted from concrete, embodied, and particular individuals who are posed as fundamentally equal and are endowed with inalienable rights. Such individuals are also deemed *atomistic*— self-centered individuals whose only social relations with others are instrumental toward the fulfillment of their own individual desires conceived of as separate and apart from ties with others. The individual's instincts, faculties, needs, desires, and rights are posed as an "invariant human psychological feature" or are given independently of "sets of actual or possible social arrangements."[6] Hence, the individual human being is abstract in that it is merely the "bearer" of those allegedly invariant features which determine one's behavior apart from the actually existing person. The theoretical instantiation of this type of individual has been given different permutations including rationally self-interested utility maximizers; competitors for scarce resources who instrumentally use others toward their own goals, or as "cost minimizers" who organize their time and personal relations much like a firm.[7]

Recently, however, contemporary academic political theory has increasingly attacked the idea that an abstract and atomistic individual dwells within the heart of liberal individualism. The form of this revisionism I shall examine here concerns the extensive literature written against three prominent critiques of individualism as atomistic and abstract: the communitarian critique

[6] Lukes, *Individualism.*

[7] Marilyn Friedman, "Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989).

of atomism, feminist critiques of abstract individual, and Macpherson's "possessive individual" thesis aimed at critiquing the conception of individualism in "classical liberalism."

In the rest of this section, I will discuss each of these examples in turn by (1) rehearsing the arguments of how liberal individualism is abstract or atomistic; (2) surveying the influential revisionist refutations of these arguments; and (3) demonstrate how in each case a similar impasse is reached.[8]

Atomistic Individualism and the Communitarianism Challenge: 1980s-1990s

Atomistic individualism has been best popularized in contemporary political theory by the so-called communitarian tradition, which in large part began with a number of important criticisms within Anglo-American political philosophy over the portrayal of the individual in John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971).[9] While the precise assessment of atomism varies in the literature, I will focus on its articulation by Charles Taylor as he pens among the most well-known and succinct descriptions of atomism.[10] For Taylor, atomistic individuals are self-centered

[8] If this exposition appears as a brutally long literature review, this is not my intention. Rather, it is an attempt to pose the problem of individualism's contradictory form as well as to generate an adequate framework to explain this as *immanently* as possible. We cannot simply "add"—from "the outside" as it were—categories of social theory and critical historical inquiry to political theory as a more *accurate* representation of the phenomenon individualism. Such a mode of inquiry assumes that the theorist stands over against the theoretical object (e.g. 'individualism,' 'society,' 'political theory'). Such an Archimedean standpoint assumes the separation of the theorizing subject (the theorist) from the theorized object (the subject matter) and risks reifying the object of its theory. I will return to these requirements of a *critical theory* in Chapter Two. For now, we must endeavor to "unfold" the unavoidable social content from political theory's own concepts and categories of individualism. On these requirements of a critical theory, see Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory,"; Richard Gunn, "Marxism and Contradiction"; Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: esp, 15-21, 87-90, 123-127. For an excellent example of an immanent 'assessment, see Marcuse's treatment of Freud in Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization : A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1974).

[9] Prominent examples include Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (February 1, 1984): 81–96; Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992);

[10] Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences,* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal–Communitarian Debate," in

who form their relations with others only insofar as to achieve desires conceived of as separate and apart from ties with others; simultaneously, there is a tendency to neglect or delegitimate any demands originating somewhere other by own desires.[11] The liberal regime of the "primacy-of-rights" is to blame for this egoism, Taylor explains, because obligations to "belong to or sustain society, or a society of a certain type, or to obey authority or an authority of a certain type" are derivative and secondary to individual rights, which are unconditionally binding and naturally given.[12]

Like many accounts of "abstract individualism," Taylor deems Locke as the *locus classicus* of the idea of the primacy-of-rights.[13] Within this frame, society is based on "individual rights"—where "society" is constituted by individuals as an instrument for the fulfillment of individual ends.[14] This insistence on individual rights rests on an atomistic theory of human nature casting human beings as "self-sufficient alone." Taylor points out that this self-sufficiency obviously does not mean the desire or ability to be abandoned in the wilderness, as it is obvious that "[a]ll social contract theorists stressed the great and irresistible advantages that men gained from entering society."[15] But even though social relationships are embraced, individual rights form the bedrock of any possible social arrangement; hence, the individual is obligated only to "his individual choices and the associations formed from such choices." Primacy-of-rights

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Liberalism and the Moral Life, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[11] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*: 58-59.

[12] Taylor, "Atomism," 188.

[13] Lukes also identifies Locke as one of the most important exponents of abstraction Lukes, *Individualism*; Steven Lukes, "Types of Individualism," 2, (1973).

[14] Taylor, "Atomism," 187 and 189. For an example of this type of thinking, see Martha Nussbaum, who approvingly writes: "Liberalism holds that the flourishing of human beings taken one by one is both analytically and normatively prior to the flourishing of the state or the nation or the religious group" Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 62.

[15] Taylor, "Atomism," 190.

theories and those claiming "social nature of man" agree that individuals cannot physically survive alone; the latter differs in that it claims individuals can "only develop their characteristically human capacities in society."[16]

From the moment these claims of atomism were articulated (by what came to be known as communitarianism) they became the object of intense scrutiny within academic political theory and political philosophy. And as is well known, the emerging "debate" is rife with misunderstanding including opponents talking past each other and confusions of what the critique was actually about. Of the many rebuttals by the so-called 'liberals' or 'individualists,' one of the more prevalent themes is that liberal theory never considered the individual as purely an atom. Rather, as Will Kymlicka points out, liberal theory as completely consistent with the idea that individuals are "'embedded' or 'situated' in various social roles and communal relationships" and makes no metaphysical claims about the priority of the individual.[17] Furthermore, that individuals choose their ends does not preclude the influence, presence, and importance of social relationships or community; individuals are not exhausted by the ends they set and seek.[18] Showing that liberal theory is not at essentially opposed to community, critics of the communitarian approach also called into question what exactly was meant by "community" and to what extent communities harbor oppression, exploitation, intolerance, and other questionable features, which they have done so historically.[19]

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[16] Taylor, "Atomism," 190-1.

[17] Will Kymlicka, "Liberalism and Communitarianism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (1988): 181.

[18] Will Kymlicka, "Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (1989); Richard Dagger, "Individualism and the Claims of Community," in *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy,* ed. Thomas Christiano and John Christman, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[19] Dagger, "Individualism and the Claims of Community," 304-307.

As is well known, the debate had evolved into increasingly finer and more arcane minutiae eventually revealing that much of the disagreement was premised on a false dichotomy of (1) "unencumbered" liberal individuals and (2) situated selves embedded in a community.[20] This false binary became evident when it became increasingly clear that the communitarians and liberals were largely arguing for the same thing, namely "a life in which people freely pursue they individual ends while remaining responsible members of the community."[21] The debate between these two camps was over the degree to which "community" serves to support values like individual freedom or toleration which are endorsed by communitarians and liberals alike.[22] To put it another way, the argument was over the *degree* to which individuals are abstract and atomistic. The current prevailing consensus seems to be that liberal individuals are not as "atomistic, abstracted, or self-interested, as its critics tried to suggest."[23]

Faced with the contradiction that individuals appear both abstract and atomistic and not so, the participants of the debate went back to the concepts themselves (instead of following the objective social phenomenon itself) and sharpened and smoothed out the claims behind atomism and abstraction to render the contradiction non-contradictory by transforming the concepts into variable quantities. By adjusting their concepts, they obfuscated a social contradiction by resolving a logical one.

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[20] "Unencumbered" was coined by Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[21] Dagger, "Individualism and the Claims of Community," 304-307.

[22] Dryzek, Honig, and Phillips, "Introduction" In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, 3-41. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Or as Dagger points out: "the debate turns out to be an intramural affair among people who all value toleration and individual freedom"

[23] Ibid. And whether from exhaustion, stalemate, or the seeming inevitable flow of what is considered fashionable in the field, communitarians have, according to one recent assessment, "abandoned the field." Dagger, "Individualism and the Claims of Community," 305.

"Abstract Individuals" in the Feminist Critique of Liberalism: 1970s-1980s

Feminist critiques of liberalism have for a long time singled out individualism as an expression or manifestation of the ongoing the domination of women in liberal society.[24] A diverse number of feminists have insisted on the *abstract* quality of the liberal individual as the lynchpin of its insidious patriarchy insofar as the neutrality of "individual" obscures the inequality of men and women and serves to hide or justify conditions antithetical to feminist demands of inclusion and equality. Alison Jaggar, for instance, claims that individualism relies on the assumption that the "essential human characteristics are properties of individuals and are given independently of any particular society."[25] By abstracting individuals from any particular form, many feminist critics claim that what is obfuscated is "the role of social relationships and human community in constituting the very identity and nature of individual human beings."[26] Furthermore, the abstract individual's instincts, faculties, needs, desires, and rights are "given independently of their social context and are not created or even fundamentally altered by that context."[27]

A number of these charges of abstraction are penned by feminists who emphasize the critique of the social atomism from normatively social, communal, or even collectivist standpoints.[28] Often insisting on a different, more embedded conception of the individual, these

[24] Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power*. New York: Longman, 1983; Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); R. Eisenstein Zillah, *The Female Body and the Law* (Stanford, CA: University of California Press, 1988) and Christine Di Stefano, *Configurations of Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[25] Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, 42.

[26] Marilyn Friedman, "Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community," 275.

[27] Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, 30.

[28] Fox-Genovese claims that we must explore "some ways of imaging the claims of society—the collectivity—as prior to the rights individual." Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991): 9.

critiques have a different attending concept of community as well, which takes on certain collectivist valences; for example, conflict and competition are replaced with "alternative visions of the foundation of human society derived from nurturance, caring attachment, and mutual dependence."[29]

Notably, the theorists who attempt to draw a stark opposition between collectivism and individualism along feminist lines have been criticized by other feminists (even by those who are otherwise critical of liberalism). It has been pointed out that claims of collectivism and community are politically suspect with regard to women's liberation.[30] Not only does the standpoint of collectivity disregard any of the critical resources that individualism can muster against the domination of women (e.g. self-determination, autonomy), lauding collectivity overlooks the fact that many actually-existing communities are shot through with structures of subordination and domination antithetical to feminist goals.[31] Specifically, communities like family, neighborhood, and nation offer troubling paradigms of collectivity or community since the full participation of women in these groups has been proscribed historically and many still have vestiges of exclusion and discrimination.[32]

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[29] Marilyn Friedman, "Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community," 276. Or as Colebrook points out, the ideals of liberal individualism are seen as opposed and contrary to "traditional female virtues" like care, nuturance, empathy, and emotive reasoning. Clare Colebrook, "Feminist Political and Social Theory," in *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Stephen P. Turner, (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011): 177.

[30] L. Susan Brown, *The Politics of Individualism: Liberalism, Liberal Feminism and Anarchism* (London: Black Rose, 2003): 10–37.

[31] Marilyn Friedman, "Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community," 279ff.

[32] Ibid., 279, 283. In a notable and brilliant assessment of the championing of "community" by a motley of socialist, anarchist, and feminist critiques of individualism, Iris Marion Young points out its fundamental connection to the liberal individualism of its critique. Specifically, Young points out that the unity of the polarity of individual and community is the denial of difference and the desire to reconcile heterogeneity and multiplicity, albeit in different ways: "Liberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by anything or anyone other than itself. Its formalistic ethic of rights also denies difference by bringing all such separated individuals under a common measure of rights. Proponents of community, on the other hand, deny difference by positing fusion rather than separation as the social ideal. They conceive the social subject as a relation

While the standpoint of community has been a common feature among certain feminists who are critical of liberal individualism, there are many notable examples of feminist critiques of abstract individualism that do not share this view. Other feminists have argued more effectively that the abstract portrayal of the individual conceals its essentially *masculine character* and serves to hide and legitimate the subordination of women and to justify inequalities of existing society.[33] Hence, appeals to *disembodied* individual persons in the form of the "abstract" individual and the attending concept of individual freedom of choice are examples of "patriarchal fictions" designed to uphold that order.[34] At a surface level, the idea that abstract individuals are really just male individuals obviously points to the fact that the category of the "individual" has historically excluded those outside of the group of "white, propertied, Western men."[35] But is the extension of who counts as an individual necessarily a problem *inherent* in the structure of abstract individualism? It may appear that such individualism could be wholly conducive to the inclusion of women since its guiding principle is an egalitarianism achieved by equal individuals stripped of qualities. However, many feminists rightly reject this claim as

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of unity or mutuality composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality. Communitarianism represents an urge to see persons in unity with one another in a shared whole."Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990): 228.

[33] For overviews of these critiques, see Anne Phillips, "'So What's Wrong With the Individual?' Socialist and Feminist Debates on Equality," ed. Peter Osborne, (New York: Verso, 1991); Virginia Held, "Feminism and Political Theory," ed. Robert L. Simon, (John Wiley & Sons, 2002); Moira Gatens, "Politicizing the Body: Property, Contract, and Rights," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For example, Benhabib, who writes that liberalism's " state of nature metaphor is an affirmation of individualism, autonomy, independence, and self-reliance [where the] male is seen as one who owes nothing to others for the rights to which he is entitled" Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[34] "Patriarchal fiction" is a recurrent concept in the voluminous and adroit work of Carole Pateman. Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* Stanford University Press, 1989); Carole Pateman, "The Fraternal Social Contract," (Stanford University Press, 1989).

[35] Gatens, 2008. For an account of the gradual (and still incomplete) inclusion of women as individuals in the 20th-century, see Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, "From 'Living for Others' to 'a Life of One's Own': Individualization and Women," in *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences,* (SAGE Publications, 2002).

naive. As one recent account puts it: "The supposedly neutral political individual, who has no norms or values other than those that are freely chosen, is in actuality neither politically nor sexually neutral."[36] The extension of formal equality for women in political and civil life has failed to eliminate the substantive inequality women face in liberal society, calling into question the progressive teleology implicit in the normative valuation of abstract individualism.[37]

But just as the claims of possessive individualism and the communitarian challenge, many of these feminist critiques have been mitigated but not eliminated by subsequent criticism. As one recent assessment puts it, it is increasingly clear that many feminist criticisms misrepresented the liberal individuals as "more self-contained, self-interested, and self-centered than was necessarily the case."[38] Martha Nussbaum points out that feminist critiques of so-called abstract individualism (Jaggar in particular) assume unconvincing caricatures of liberalism, which are more akin to economic utilitarianism than the liberalism of Kant, Mill, or even Rawls.[39] Furthermore, Nussbaum argues, these critiques do not allow the individual of liberalism to be anything but egotistical and normatively self-sufficient. Along strikingly similar lines, L. Susan Brown writes that feminist critiques of so-called abstract individualism have little textual

[36] Colebrook, "Feminist Political and Social Theory," 179.

[37] For one account of the lackluster successes of the extension of formal equality for women and the persistent social barriers they face in contemporary society, see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, "Individualization and Women," Some feminists have argued that the problem is not just an insufficient extension of liberal rights but *rights themselves* as well as the paradigm of the *contract* which undergirds them.In other words, feminists like Carole Pateman link the anti-feminist masculine conception of the individual to other fundamental claims of liberal thought

[38] Dryzek, Honig, and Phillips, "Introduction,"

[39] Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*: 59-60.

bases in actual liberal theory and that liberalism does not necessarily depend on conceiving the individual as abstracted from time and place.[40]

In spite of this softening of feminist critiques of individualism, it would seem difficult to completely dismiss the charge that individualism contains some element of abstraction antithetical to feminist goals.[41] And just as with our other examples from political theory, an element of truth remains in the categories of abstraction and atomism. Despite widespread criticism of the feminist critique of abstract individualism, it is difficult to dispute that the idea that the 'abstract individual' serves to legitimate and disguise the subordination of those other than white males in contemporary society. Yet, the revisionist accounts aimed at scaling back the reach of feminist critiques of liberal individualism appear quite persuasive, especially the charge—voiced above by Nussbaum—that critics tend to caricature liberalism instead of treating it as a diverse field of disputation.

Faced with a contradiction of the existence and non-existence of atomism and abstraction, revisionists in contemporary political theory commenting on feminism have attempted to resolve this contradiction by denying it is there; that is, specifically, by attempting to show that 'liberalism' and liberal theory does not in fact embrace or endorse these qualities. To address and flesh out this concern, we now turn our attention to our third example.

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[40] Brown, *The Politics of Individualism: Liberalism, Liberal Feminism and Anarchism*: 17. It is notable that although Brown takes her work as an explicitly anarchist critique of liberal feminism and Nussbaum argues in favor of a liberalism resistant to the critique of abstract individualism, they both reach the same conclusion.

[41] cf. Linda Zerilli, "Feminist Critiques of Liberalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberalism,* ed. Steven Wall, (Cambridge University Press, 2015): 364.

"Possessive Individualism" Revisionists: 1960s-1970s

Predating both communitarian tradition of the 1980s and 1990s and the feminist critiques of abstract individualism which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, the atomistic feature of the liberal individual was famously thematized much earlier in C.B. Macpherson's highly influential *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (1962). Along with this text, Macpherson spends much of his career tracing an account of the atomistic character of individuals from the major works in liberal thought from its "classical" inception of the 17th century into its later forms of the 19th and even 20th century. The extent of his claims was challenged yet few critics denied that Macpherson had accurately identified a genuine dimension of liberal individualism. Much like the upshot of the communitarian dispute, the argument was over degree as most challenges of possessive individualism simply downplayed its extent and significance but never completely denied it. On the one hand, there are a few outright denials of any contradiction, which revisionists argue from the claim that atomism and abstractions are simply fanciful and ideological inventions of anti-liberals to falsely demonize their ideological opponents. On the other hand, a few revisionists critique "possessive individualism" not by disputing its tenets in their entirety but by attempting to justify the limited scope of atomism and abstraction of liberal individualism. Similarly, other revisionists attempt to downplay their significance by attributing them to an avoidable but manageable condition of modernity. As we shall see, these latter two tactics are very much a *displacement* of the contradiction—that abstract and atomistic individualism exists and does not exist—away from one internal to individualism itself and to an external contradiction between "individuals" and "society" or "modernity."

Possessive individualism' Locke's 'classical liberalism'

Macpherson's once dominant framework of possessive individualism argues that classical liberals from Hobbes to Locke presupposed that, at the most fundamental level, the individual is a "proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them."[42] This atomistic individual of possessive individualism is neither a "moral whole" nor a piece of the larger social unit but rather "an owner of himself."[43] Claiming that this ownership assumption undergirded the classical liberals of the 17th century, Macpherson argues that by the 19th century possessive individualism culminates into the idea of human essence as "essentially a consumer of utilities" and as "infinite desirer and infinite appropriator."[44] According to Macpherson, these assumptions of the essence of human-beings emerged in 17th century England because they were "required [by society] in order to justify the change to certain new institutions which were required to realize the great increase of individual and national wealth (and of individual freedom) that was then seen to be possible."[45] Tracking the evolution of a full-blown liberal capitalism, Macpherson argues, this atomistic idea culminates in the utilitarianism of Bentham and James Mill.[46]

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[42] C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* Oxford University Press, 1962): 3.

[43] Ibid.

[44] C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973): 25-26; 32-5

[45] Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*: 27.

[46] Macpherson identifies the rise of a competing conception in the early 19th century. Faced with a "quality of life in market society…to be little or nothing short of an insult to humanity" in the 19th century, appeals to "a higher set of values than those of the market" were made by, according to Macpherson, "moralists as different as Mill and Marx, Carlyle and Saint-Simon, Ruskin and Green, the German Romantics and the English Christian Socialists." The unifying tendency in these disparate thinkers was that "life was to be lived; not to be devoted to acquiring utilities" where the "end or purpose of man was to use and develop his uniquely human attributes" (Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, 32).

Given the scope of Macpherson's project and vast volume of associated literature, I will examine the more manageable dispute over his interpretation of John Locke. Within the frame of possessive individualism, Macpherson makes two arguments about the atomistic character of Locke's individuals relevant to our inquiry: (1) Locke projects features of a market society onto human beings' natural condition thereby justifying and legitimating the unequal distribution of property in a burgeoning capitalist society as natural; and (2) Locke buttresses this claim by surreptitiously introducing a "class differential in rights and rationality."[47] Macpherson's first argument begins with Locke's theory of property, which teems with *social assumptions* of 17th-century market society that Locke assumes to be inherent to the "nature of men and society."[48] Agreeing with many typical interpretations of Locke, Macpherson points out that Locke elaborates a natural individual right to property as the basis of his theory of civil society and government.[49] However, Macpherson's distinctive interpretation is that Locke not only bases the right to appropriate property in natural right and law, but also that he succeeds in removing "all the natural law limits from the property rights" thereby removing restrictions to the appropriation and making a positive case for "an unlimited natural right of appropriation."[50] These carefully removed restrictions take the form of the following caveats: that appropriation must leave "enough and as good" for others; that no one should accumulate that which they cannot preserve or use (spoilage); and that mixing labor with something is required for appropriation. By

[47] Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*: 222

[48] Ibid., 197.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 199 and 203.

defusing these restrictions, Macpherson argues, Locke justifies and legitimates potentially limitless personal accumulation.[51]

Concerning Macpherson's second claim about Locke's class differential, Macpherson attempts to demonstrate that Locke's supposed universalism includes a distinction of rights and rationality between social classes thereby justifying and legitimating unequal property holdings between waged-workers and those who live off their labor.[52] This distinction of rights and rationality according to social class hinges on the idea that quantitative inequalities of property reach a qualitative threshold:

> Once the land is all taken up, the fundamental right not to be subject to the jurisdiction of another rid so unequal as between owners and non-owners that it is different in kind, not in degree: those without property, are, Locke recognizes, dependent for their very livelihood on those with property, and are unable to alter their own circumstances.[53]

In other words, Macpherson argues that Locke's theory of property argues for both universal equality and for a "class differential" that justifies the inequalities of waged-workers and those who live off their labor: "All men were equal in natural rights; yet there were two distinct orders of possession of natural rights." Macpherson bases the latter off of a close examination of Locke's texts but also—crucially—by showing that Locke's social assumptions—*as assumptions*—implied a conception of class differential in human rationality despite being wholly absent from Locke's *Treatise*. A class differential in Locke's theory would have been obvious to readers at the time; therefore, its presuppositions did not have to be argued for explicitly (e.g. the laboring poor's incapacity for reason and its unruly disposition in need of

[51] Within his section on Locke, Macpherson is careful to to point out the character or form of unlimited appropriation is unlimited capitalist accumulation (236) rather than personal avarice and unlimited personal acquisition. However, Macpherson is not consistent with this formulation as he begins to conflate capital accumulation and self enrichment (see below on Macpherson's critics for details).

[52] Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, 221 and 231.
[53] Ibid., 231

strong political authority).[54] The upshot of this obscured differential, according to Macpherson, depicts society as the collection of "free and equal individuals related to each other through their possessions…related as owners of their own capacities and of what they have produced and accumulated by the use of their capacities."[55] It renders plausible that the traditional conception of society as fundamentally hierarchical has been completely overturned.[56]

Macpherson's critics and the rise of the revisionism

Not only have these arguments about Locke have been subjected to intense criticism but also the entire premise of the once "reigning orthodoxy" thesis of possessive individualism.[57] Let us first consider the latter, more global critique of Macpherson. Much of the criticism focuses on the attempt at showing a trend of possessive individualism across two centuries of so-called liberal thought (in the work of Hobbes, the Levellers, Harrington, Locke, Hume, Burke, Bentham, and James Mill). Many scholars argue that such similarities did not in fact share the features of Macpherson's 'model' of a possessive market society that these authors were supposedly legitimating. This attack was often deployed at the level of political vocabularies or languages, where critics have emphasized differences over supposed similarities by highlighting the "motley or plurality of political problems and responses" which endeavored different uses of

[54] Ibid., 222-238.

[55] Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*: 199.

[56] That is, society *as* a "system of relations of domination and subordination between men and classes held together by reciprocal rights and duties." Ibid.

[57] Tully compares the rise and fall of Macpherson's thesis to Weber's on the 'protestant ethic," (*An approach to political philosophy: Locke*") For prominent critiques of Macpherson, see: Isaiah Berlin, "Hobbes, Locke and Professor Macpherson," *The Political Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1964): 444–468; John Dunn, "Justice and the Interpretation of Locke's Political Theory," *Political Studies* 16, no. 1 (1968): 68–87; Jacob Viner, "'Possessive Individualism' as Original Sin," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue Canadienne d'Economique et de Science Politique* 29, no. 4 (November 1, 1963): 548–559; James Tully, "The Possessive Individualism Thesis: A Reconsideration o the Light of Recent Scholarship," in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism: The Intellectual Legacy of C.B. Macpherson*, ed. Joseph H. Carens, SUNY Series in Political Theory (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1993), 19–44; David Miller, "The Macpherson Version," *Political Studies* 30, no. 1 (1980): 120–127.

the same concepts.[58] For instance, property had a broader meaning to the theorists in question which include personal rights and religious and civil liberties.[59] For instance, James Tully argues that, from Hobbes through Locke, "unlimited consumption was not considered rational or morally permissible"[60] and that the idea of "possessive market society" misrepresents the meaning of "political economy" in the texts and what we know of the English "economy" in the 17th-century.[61] After an initial round of narrower criticisms, Macpherson's whole project was put into question as the historical-linguistic turn associated with the Cambridge School became increasingly influential. As Tully points out, criticisms of Macpherson became more sweeping since political theorists and historians of political thought began to pose questions very different from Macpherson's models of legitimation and authority; instead, theorists began to investigate the "*political* problems" that were deemed "central to the theorists of the period."[62]

Now let us consider the challenges brought against Macpherson's reading of Locke's supposed atomism implied by the fact that Locke's theory of property attempts to explain and justify the essentially acquisitive nature of individual human beings *and* to legitimate the massive property inequalities between social classes. As hinted above, one argument against Macpherson was that his whole paradigm is anachronistic. For instance, Tully claims Locke was "not concerned with justifying unlimited accumulation" but was rather interested in "more basic political problems," including "political order, preservation, state-building, obedience and

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[58] James Tully, "The Possessive Individualism Thesis: A Reconsideration in the Light of Recent Scholarship," in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism: The Intellectual Legacy of C.B. Macpherson,* ed. Joseph H. Carens, (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1993): 24. James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge [England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 76-77.

[59] David Miller, "The Macpherson Version," *Political Studies* 30, no. 1 (1982): 124-125; Tully, "The Possessive Individualism Thesis," 25.

[60] Tully, "The Possessive Individualism Thesis," 25.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 25-26.

liberty" with a context of "insecurity brought on by a century of civil wars, religious wars, the Thirty Years' War, and the European wars of the latter half of the seventeenth century."[63] Relatedly, critics have insisted that Locke's use of "property" covers a wide range of concepts including life, liberty, and estate.[64] Tully adds that during Locke's time, property also meant to cover "personal rights, especially religious and civil liberties." Hence, the defense of "property rights" was being deployed by Locke against "absolute monarchs or 'degenerative' representative bodies."[65]

These arguments—especially the multiple meanings of "property"— also undercut Macpherson's argument of Locke's class differential of rights. Locke insistence on the state's duty to protect property implied that the state was not just concerned with the means of production of propertied classes but also with the life, liberty, and property of all men with rights.[66] And as Peter Laslett points out, even if the term "property" *is* limited to material possessions, this would still benefit members of all classes since everyone had *some* property to protect even if "only clothes and tools."[67] Furthermore, the class differential of rationality that Macpherson attributes to Locke was widely criticized as completely antithetical to Locke's universalist inclinations. Jules Townsend perceptively argues that since Macpherson had been ambiguous in his formulations of Locke's views—at one point implying the working class was "incapable of a rational life" and at another arguing they were not capable of a "*fully* rational

[63] Tully, *Locke in Contexts*: 77-78.

[64] David Miller, "The Macpherson Version," 124.

[65] Tully, *Locke in Contexts*: 77.

[66] For a detailed analysis of these claims and Macpherson's subsequent response, see Jules Townshend, *C.B. Macpherson and the Problem of Liberal Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000): 70-77.

[67] Laslett's remarkably obtuse and crass argument is pointed out by Townsend, 70. See Peter Laslett, "Market Society and Political Theory," *The Historical Journal* 7, no. 01 (1964).

life"—Macpherson's critics overturned the entire claim of class differentiated rationality by showing instances of Locke attributing *some* rationality to the laboring poor.[68]

A defeated Possessive Individualism?

The upshot of many of the criticisms of Macpherson is clearly a weakened possessive individualism thesis. It became clear that the thesis was not equally prevalent in all the theorists Macpherson points to, and where it can be said to apply, it was not as strong as Macpherson suggested. Yet, just as with the communitarian challenge, many of the arguments brought against Macpherson turn out to be disputes over the degree of atomism and abstraction. Few critics, if any, argue that the elements of possessive individualism are wholly absent in liberal thought, or that classical liberal theory does not at all resonate with some of these tenets. For instance, some revisionist theorists argue that Locke's atomistic conception of individuals is tempered by his support for charity.[69] Similarly, recall the claim we saw above that Locke deployed atomism as a specifically *political* means to criticize residual feudal relations. For example, after rejecting assessments of Locke's atomism as among the most "resilient of anti-liberal myths," Stephen Holmes writes: "To the extent that [Locke] 'atomized' human self-understanding, he did so for *political purposes*—to attack organic chains of dependence and subordination as well as to undermine dangerous clan and sectarian groupings."[70] Along the same lines, consider the following: despite the fact that critics have called into question whether or not Locke had drawn the fundamental atomistic postulates of human nature from a nascent market society, *very few*

[68] Townshend, *C.B. Macpherson and the Problem of Liberal Democracy*: 71. For Macpherson's formulations, see Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*: 224 and 226.

[69] e.g. Tully and Laslett.

[70] Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*: 193 (my emphasis).

critics have argued that these postulates are *absent* from Locke's theory.[71] Furthermore, irrespective of the intentions of Locke as a political actor in justifying market relations, it is also beyond doubt that these atomistic postulates "do indeed work to justify" such relations despite any qualifications Locke's theory may have.[72] Tully himself acknowledges this by stating that Macpherson's possessive individualists "were not endorsing market relations *as fully* as he claimed or that England was *not as far along* the road to capitalism as he claimed."[73]

Faced with the contradiction that the classical liberalism of Locke portrays and justifies individualism as atomistic and abstract and does not, the debate over Macpherson indicates that contemporary political theory has either tried denying the existence of a contradiction or have attempted to remove it by displacement. We have already seen that denying the contradiction by dismissing abstraction and atomism as fictitious is untenable since even those who claim this end up (unwittingly or not) admitting some features of the atomism and abstraction remain (e.g. for "political purposes"). In other words, the revisionists displace the contradiction by externalizing it as the contradiction between, on the one hand, employing atomism and abstraction as a critique of absolutist politics or the constraints of feudal relations and, on the other hand, liberalism's own self-understanding of individualism.

II. Impasse of False Displacement and its Consequences

To provide another example of political theory's removal of a contradiction by displacement, let us briefly consider Nancy Rosenblum's explanation for the persistence of

[71] Tully went so far as to claim that capitalism simply did not exist during Locke's time, which was criticized by Macpherson supports and detractors alike Peter Lindsay, "Possessive Individualism At 50: Retrieving Macpherson's Lost Legacy," *The Good Society* 21, no. 1 (2012).

[72] Ibid.

[73] Tully, *Locke in Contexts.* 78

atomism and abstraction. Perplexed by the persistence of the critique of atomism and abstraction despite scant textual evidence to show that avowed liberals make these claims, Rosenblum attempts to explain the implicit functions of abstraction in liberal theory, which are political and ideological. She challenges critics who inveigh against liberal individualism as asocial personal isolation for understanding abstract individuals "too literally"; while it may appear that some liberal theorists represent individuals abstractly, she argues, "rarely if ever do they intend such representations to fully describe actual men and women."[74] In other words, these abstract representations do not rest on any essential ontological claim; rather, she argues, they are deployed for certain "political" purposes including defending individuals against "the naturalness and necessity of traditional dependencies or of hierarchical and ascriptive attachments."[75] Similarly, "self-interest" of individuals was employed not to claim atomism but to be used as a political concept opposed to "other more destructive and potentially egoistical forces such as religious zealotry or military glory."[76]

As we saw above in the criticisms of Macpherson, the context-specific explanations of the abstract depiction of individuals have been made many times elsewhere. However, in trying to explain the persistence of abstraction and atomism, Rosenblum adds a crucial and revealing caveat when she argues that "[a]bstract individualism is meant to serve a particular kind of sociability" of modern societies. She writes: "In a heterogeneous society *cooperation* depends on indirectness and impartiality, which in turn requires deliberate indifference to one another of the sort encouraged by the market and contractual relations."[77]

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[74] Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*: 161.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid. (my emphasis).

For Rosenblum, abstraction of this type is unavoidable in a heterogeneous society with high degree of a division of labor and therefore is a necessary technical feature of advanced society. By not looking into the vastly different social forms that the division of labor ("cooperation") takes, Rosenblum conflates capitalist society with heterogeneous society based on an advanced division of labor as such. By doing so, she reduces a complex social question with tremendous political implications to the purview of technical or natural necessity thereby reifying existing society and by extension the phenomenon of modern individualism. Unable to explain the contradiction that modern liberal individualism is and is not atomistic and abstract, Rosenblum displaces it as an external one between individuals and "heterogeneous society."

Given the survey above, it seems reasonable to conclude that while it would be inaccurate to reduce liberal individualism to atomism and abstraction, these are never successfully expelled or expunged from accounts of individualism in political theory. So, it seems we are left with a rather unsatisfying conclusion: within modern-liberal society, individuals are —more or less— abstract, and are —more or less— atomistic.

Or, to put it another way: liberal individualism *is and is not* abstract and *is and is not* atomistic. If contradiction can be expressed logically as A = not-A, or the possibility that A both exists and does not exist, then individualism is indeed a contradiction.[78] In other words, the theoretical impasse (i.e. individualism is and is not atomistic and abstract) that political theory has reached suggests that individualism *is itself* contradictory under prevailing social and political conditions of modernity. As a social phenomenon, individualism is contradictory unity; it exists in the mode of being denied.[79]

[78] Richard Gunn, "Marxism and Contradiction."

[79] I borrow this formulation from Richard Gunn's adroit account in Ibid., 54.

The impasse in political theory is not a product of poor theorizing but results from the treatment of a real contradiction as a logical contradiction. Political theory has largely attempted to resolve this seemingly intractable disagreement by overcoming the contradiction in thought. We cannot to hope to solve a real contradiction in thought but only present it as a necessary contradiction by virtue of a particular socio-historical constellation. In other words, to present a real contradiction in thought and endeavor to explain it, we must preserve it as a contradiction but strip it of the character of a merely logical one.[80]

III. From the Form of Individuality to the Dynamic of Individualization

Before we can begin to explain individuality as a real contradiction—the reasons why and precisely how individualism takes on a contradictory form in modernity—we must delve a bit deeper into the history of political thought for a few important reasons. Firstly, I would like to suggest that the debate over the extent to which individualism is abstract and atomistic has been a recurrent pattern in the history in political thought since at least the 18th century, evidenced in romanticism's critique of liberalism. However, this foray into the history of political thought is not just to add another series of examples of a theoretical impasse; rather, the contrast of romantic and liberal individualism will help use preserve the contradictory aspect of individualism as a theoretical object but remove the semblance that the problem is one of mistaken thinking. By responding to atomism and abstraction from a strict polar opposition, romanticism unearths a vital connection between a contradiction of individualism's features and a contradiction of individualism's historical development; namely, that the social-historical

[80] "If a contradiction arises of necessity in the theoretical expression of reality from the very course of the investigation, it is not what is called a logical contradiction, though it has the formal signs of such but it is a logically correct expression of reality" Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic.*

processes that are the condition of possibility of modern, liberal individualism are also at the same time the sources of its liquidation.

Romantic Individuality and the Critique of Liberalism

As is well known, the Romantic current in the history of political thought, culminating by the mid-19th century, chastises liberal thought and society for embracing the abstract individual, which encompasses the claim that humanity is a collection of essentially similar beings naturally endowed with rights and guided by self-interest. Romanticism claims these are achieved at the expense of not taking seriously the particular, the original, or the spontaneous.

If modernity is historical self-consciousness, as was discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, then romanticism—as the search for that which is absent, lost, or distant[81] —is indicative of modernity's *reaction* against itself, albeit unaware of its own historicity. In its search for that which is seen as lost in modernity and actively suppressed or erased by liberalism, romanticism can be seen as an attempt to "'re-enchant (and re-humanize)" the world by endeavoring to return to something lost (i.e. *re*-establish).[82] Opposite "modern," this return often comes in the guise of "tradition" which is regarded as the preservation of the historical past and

[81] "For in nature as in history, the romantic impulse is not to look for what is present; it is to search out everything distant, absent, as the antiromantic Goethe testifies most beautifully: 'The so-called romantic quality of a region is a quiet sense of the sublime in the guise of the past or, what is the same, solitude, absence, seclusion."Hans Robert Jauss, "Modernity and Literary Tradition," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 358.

[82] Eldon J. Eisenach, *Narrative Power and Liberal Truth: Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, and Mill* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002): 7.

yet has never existed before.[83] In other words, when survivals of the past are preserved *as* tradition, they are "retroactively turned into something entirely new."[84]

As a counter conception of the individual, early German Romantics such as Novalis, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher distinguish individuality [*Individualität*] as uniqueness [*Eigentümlichkeit*] to convey individual originality, uniqueness, and self-realization. The Romantics chose the term individuality to wield against the individualism [*Individualismus*] born of the rational, universal, and uniform standards of the Enlightenment, which was deemed abstract and quantitative and hence sterile.[85]

Within the canon of political thought, the Romantic current of individualism is best known for stressing the importance of *Bildung* or self-development. While by no means the originator of the concept of Bildung, Wilhelm von Humboldt was one of the first thinkers to express the ideals of self-development in explicitly political terms, claiming that "the true end for Man" was the "highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole."[86] Personal freedom and a variety of situations are the pre-conditions for originality—"the individuality of power and self-development" [*Eigentümlichkeit der Kraft und der Bildung*].[87] The growing importance of this concept for political theory at the time coincides

[83] "Traditions are always from yesterday and yet have never existed before; they are neither dead, nor alive, are absent and present at the same time, spectres, as we may call them with Derrida, which haunt exclusively the historically conscious modern man who conjures them up, bans, or exorcises them, according to the respective purposes they will serve." Christian Uhl, "Fukuzawa Yukichi and Miyazaki Tōten: A Double Portrait in Black and White of an Odd Couple in the Age of Globalizing Capitalism," *Critical Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 79.

[84] Ibid., 80.

[85] Lukes, *Individualism*: 17–18.

[86] Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* Liberty Fund, 1993); Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Theory of Bildung [1794/5]," ed. Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann, and Kurt Riquarts, (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2000).

[87] Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*: 10, 12.

with the context of the French Revolution and the perceived need for civic virtue, social responsibility, and knowledge of public issues to temper the risk of social disintegration.[88]

As opposed to the coolly analytic form of liberalism, the romanticism of self-development attempts to theorize "purely personal, intimate responses of individual sensibilities," which often take affective and aesthetic forms.[89] Within the concept of the Bildung of the specifically German Romantic tradition, individual freedom is the "elaboration in the course of a life-history of those singular and irreplaceable qualities by which individuals are distinguished."[90]

The critique by romantics was not just that liberalism portrayed individuals as selfish philistines but that it also had a tendency to flatten difference, to make individuals conform, and in the sameness between individuals, no particular individual is special, unique or important.[91] The romantics' antidote to this tendency was the turn "inward." Romanticism, which understood itself as a response to the breakdown of external forms of reference and order (which could also be labeled disenchantment) searched within for certainty; against the outer-world and reason, the romantic movement stressed the inner-world and imagination.[92] Attesting to this trend[93] in literature, there was a proliferation of the cult of egocentric confessions and autobiographies and the figure of the Romantic hero's inwardly-directed interest. This focus on the inner-

[88] Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism : The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992): 24-25.

[89] Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*: 1.

[90] Axel Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization."

[91] Or, The fear that unites many of the romantics in that liberalism's reliance and centrality of the abstract equality and freedom of individuals renders actual concrete individuals precarious in that they are increasingly subjected to conformity and becoming mere exchangeable and equal examples of a species.

[92] Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research,"

[93] Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective; a Comparative Study of Aspects of the Romantic Movements in England, France, and Germany* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970): 56–57.

development of individual also began to shift the possibility of the perfectibility of the individual—the attainment of self-fulfillment—to be the province of the cultured "exceptional individual" or "great personality."[94]

Simmel's analysis

The romantic perspective allows us to see that the contradictory existence and non-existence of atomism and abstraction reveal that the contradiction *internal* to individualism can be seen more clearly as a series of internal oppositions. Specifically, romanticism links atomism and abstraction to liberal notions that human individuals are abstractly equal, universal, and non-particular; yet, on the other hand, romanticism emphasizes the corollary: that individuals are concrete, embodied, and particular.[95]

Among the first to identify this tension was Georg Simmel, who grouped these features under two descriptions: quantitative individualism and qualitative individualism.[96] Importantly, he argues that the development of each set of oppositions are driven by the same modern social processes: the unprecedented development of the capitalist division of labor.[97] But an even more significant insight, was that Simmel does not just pose quantitative individualism and

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[94] Fritz Richard Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1972): 10.

[95] On the surface, the Romantic conception of individualism does not appear mutually exclusive from is supposed liberal adversary. It was, of course, J.S. Mill who famously endeavors to demonstrate that the ideals and function of self-development and originality articulated by Humboldt underlie liberal freedom and rights (We will return to J.S. Mill in Chapter 3). Other 19th-century thinkers, including Emerson and Thoreau, have been credited with articulating a form (or facet) of liberal individualism—tempered by romanticism's critiques of depersonalized classical liberalism— which is neither akin to Locke's emphasis on individual rights to property nor to Kantian autonomy. William A. Galston, "Liberal Virtues," 82, no. 4 (1988): 1277–1279. Villa, *Public Freedom*, 381fn57; Zakaras, *Individuality and Mass Democracy*.

[96] Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*: 81.

[97] See Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life [1903]," ed. Donald N. Levine, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1971); Georg Simmel, "Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality," ed. Donald N. Levine, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1971).

qualitative individualism as contrasts but indicates their tension renders the whole process of individualization paradoxical; namely, that the social process leading to the development of the modern individual also eats away at it, developing strong de-individualizing tendencies.

Two individualisms and their social-historical origins

To elaborate, the individualism of singleness [*Einzelheit*] is born of the 18th-century's "inner and outer liberation [*Gelöstheit*] of the individual" from the rigid distinctions of caste, guild, and order of the feudal epoch, which were seen as preventing the development of "personal freedom, of intrinsic uniqueness, and of a responsibility for one's self."[98] According to Simmel, the 18th-century witnessed a "different ideal of individuality" based on freedom.[99] For Simmel, this ideal of the "pure freedom of the individual" arose through the clashes of the contradiction between the burgeoning consciousness of individuals and the set of social forms exerting restrictions on this consciousness; these include the privileges of the higher estates, state control of commerce, the guild system, the influence of the church, as well as the continuation of peasant-lord labor relations and interferences into municipal constitutions.[100] The upshot of the clash of burgeoning consciousness in the wake of the liberation of the individual [*Gelöstheit des Einzelnen*] from restrictive social forms was the generation of the ideal of the "mere freedom of the individual" [*bloßen Freiheit des Individuum*].[101]

[98] Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*: 79, 81; Simmel, "Freedom and the Individual," 217.

[99] As opposed to the individualism of distinction [*Auszeichnung*] found in the Renaissance—where conspicuousness was strived for— the 18th-century witnessed a "different ideal of individuality" based on *freedom*. Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 78-9

[100] Simmel, "Freedom and the Individual," 218– 219. See also, Simmel, "Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality," 271-273.

[101] Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*: 64–65.

Just as Marx had noted half a century earlier, the 18th-century individual *appears* free in the absence of over social relations and so the promise of individual freedom is articulated in a historically new way. As Simmel points out, thinkers of the 18th-century insisted that in the absence of overt and oppressive social relations, which "pressed the forces of personality into unnatural grooves," would allow the "unfolding of all the inner and outer values" that had always potentially existed but were arrested by feudal political, economic, and religious institutions; since it was presumed that "nature" did not know these ties, the "ideal of freedom appeared as that of a 'natural' state."[102]

However, by the 19th century, the quantitative individualism of 18th century had entered a crisis and a corollary was erected in the form of qualitative individualism. The equality promised by 18th-century liberalism that was supposed to undergird the idea of "free and self-responsible personalities" had "yet to be realized." In the face of persistent social inequality, Simmel argues, the ideal of the free individual led to the development of another ideal: a *qualitative* individualism of uniqueness [*Einzigkeit*], which "in its innermost nature, is incomparable and which is called upon to play an irreplaceable role."[103] Instead of trying to realize himself in the world, the individual turns to "the idea of the ego" and "the feeling of personality." As both an objective and subjective phenomenon—the process of individualization is both a "historical, real effect" as well as a "yearning and demand"—this qualitative

[102] Ibid., 65.

[103] While Simmel identifies that the roots of this idea are also found in the 18th-century— in Lessing, Herder, Lavater, and Goethe—he argues that its maturation and penetration into the broad social fabric did not occur until well into the 19th-century. Ibid., 79.

individualism of the 19th century "found its preeminent theoretical expression in Romanticism and its practical expression in the ascendancy of the division of labor."[104]

One interpretation of the process Simmel describes is that individualism's turn inward leads to state forms which subordinate the individual to the nation.[105] Romantic individualism became the counterforce against "Western" individualism of cold self-maximizing calculus and erosion of community. Furthermore, this qualitative individuality was increasingly seen to be made possible on the basis of the "identification of the individual self with the unique personality of the culture or nation to which it belonged, and so create a seamless harmony between self and whole that would be damaged if the self-asserted itself in independence from, much less against, the group."[106] This transformation of the primacy of the individual to the primacy of the nation certainly resonates with some interpretations of romanticism which stressed the "resources of the mind," objectified in a culture, were seen as the source of German national identity in contradistinction to the supposed baser preoccupations with money, power, and pleasure in the West.[107]

In that Simmel constantly stresses that *the relations* between individuals within the division of labor take on a life of their own, I find the immediate association with statism to be rather narrow. By insisting on how the process of individualization undergirds both the development

[104] Simmel, "Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality," 272.

[105] Gerald N. Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution, and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787-1802* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[106] Ibid., 4-5. Izenberg adds that this is a marked break from the sort of theory of self-development in Humboldt who regards the state as a potentially significant obstacle to the exercise of individuality

[107] Walter Horace Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: Bildung From Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

and regression (or threatening) of individualism *through the form* of individualism itself, Simmel begins to explain why the current form of individualism appears as an insoluble contradiction.[108]

Dynamic of individualization and de-individualization

While not developed systematically, Simmel hints at how the process, which creates a series of opposing features within the development of individualism, starts to reverse the development: individualization becomes de-individualization. The tremendous growth of the "division of labor" and "free competition" forms a "total organism," which grows out of the interaction of individuals within the division of labor and "shifts, so to speak, to a location high above them." The individual now "requires a powerful political constitution which allocates his place to him, but in this fashion also becomes his master."[109]

Hence, the process of individualization that opened the possibility of individual self-determination now turns back to dominate those individuals by exerting powerful de-individualizing patterns. In Simmel's words, as "objective culture" develops through the ever-increasing division of labor within a capitalist society, the "cultural progress" of the individual plummets as he increasingly becomes "a single cog as over against the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces which gradually take out of his hands everything connected with progress, spirituality, and value."[110]

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[108] cf. Adorno writes that the "form of the individual itself" as well as "its content and configuration" owes its existence to capitalist society while at the same time society exerts overwhelming pressure *preventing* the individual from "realizing himself" as an individual: "The more the individual is strengthened, the more power of the society increases, due to the relationship of exchange which forms the individual." Adorno and Horkheimer, "Aspects of Sociology," 45–46.

[109] Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*: 81.

[110] Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life [1903]," 337. cf. "With us [moderns] too the image of the human species is projected in magnified form into separate individuals—but as fragments" where only "vestigial traces remain" of the faculties Friedrich Schiller, "Sixth Letter from on the Aesthetic Education of Man," in *Reflections on Commercial Life: An Anthology of Classic Texts From Plato to the Present,* ed. Patrick Murray, (New York; London: Routledge, 1997): 217.

However, it is precisely at the crucial moment of showing how the internal features of individualism (as quantitative and qualitative) reveal that the process of individualization begins to become its opposite, Simmel falls behind his own insights. Instead of *preserving* the contradiction of individualism's opposing qualities by tracing its necessary relation with the paradox of individualization as de-individualization, Simmel *displaces* the contradiction as an external one between "society" and "individuals." Consider the well-known opening to "Metropolis and Mental Life:"

> The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain his independence against the supremacy of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life. This antagonism represents the most modern form of the struggle which primitive man must carry on with nature for his own bodily existence.[111]

While a more charitable interpretation might consider this quote as Simmel's critical assessment of second nature, the positivistic trappings of his method belie such a reading.[112] While Simmel links individualization to the development of an advanced capitalist division of labor mediated by the abstract relations of a money economy, he argues that this is just a particular expression of a more fundamental process. The latter is the general tendency that links the development of individualization with the degree to which the "social circle encompassing the individual expands."[113] By distilling an "exhaustive formula" from "one of the great development tendencies of social life as a whole," Simmel reifies the object of study by subjecting his commitments to "social form" to a mental abstraction.[114] In other words, he deploys "social

[111] Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life [1903]," 324 (trans. amended).

[112] For a rather succinct description of second nature as "the autonomization of the results of our own activity: the way our acts elude us in their consequences, the way they generate a monster with a life on its own," see Slavoj Zizek, "Nature and Its Discontents," *SubStance* 37, no. 3 (2008).

[113] Simmel, "Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality," 252.

[114] Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life [1903]," 332.

circles" and "spheres" as categories of the highest level of abstraction in which all particular features of *any* given society or social mediation can be neatly compartmentalized *without* distinguishing real and mental abstractions (I will return to this important distinction in the following chapters); thereby, he assumes that the positivistic scientific ideal of a continuous and hierarchical ordering of categories is already present in the object of knowledge itself.[115]

Sociology of Individualization

Simmel's work is part of a larger tradition within the sociology of individualization. Both classical and contemporary sociology have not only attempted to describe the contours of modern individuality but have also endeavored to theorize the *process* by which these features arise and develop. This process has been theorized under the concept of "individualization," which examines the socio-historical conditions by which "human lives have been extracted from the bonds of family, tradition, and social collectives, which once prescribed in detail how people were to behave."[116] On the one hand, human beings have been "liberated from these detailed determinations to take greater control and responsibility for their own lives."[117] On the other hand, individuals have become more "dependent on a series of modern institutions and structures, including the welfare state, education systems, and labor markets, and that these impose new and often contradictory demands on individuals."[118] Much like the concept of "individualism" in political theory, individualization for social theory contains a diverse set of meanings and covers many types of social phenomena. So capacious is the concept, it appears to

[115] Theodor W. Adorno, "Society [1965]," *Salmagundi* 10-11, (1969): 267-268.

[116] Cosmo Howard, "Introducing Individualization," in *Contested Individualization: Debates About Contemporary Personhood*, ed. Howard Cosmo, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 2.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

teeter on the edge of useless vagueness; as Axel Honneth points out: "there are simply too many social phenomena, too many radical changes occurring in the present, concerning this or that dimension of individualization for us to speak so readily of a pattern of developments."[119] Yet, just as with the richness of the concept of individualism, individualization remains analytically useful to distinguish certain contradictory socio-historical processes.[120]

Although he elides many nuances, the contemporary sociologist Markus Schroer offers a heuristically useful schema for categorizing the vast literature on the sociology of individualization by dividing it into three broad types: negative, positive, and ambivalent.[121] The first approaches individualization as a negative process in which the modern individual is threatened with social annihilation; at bottom, the individual is an "endangered."[122] The second type of literature regards the individualization process as "positive" in the sense of theorizing individualization as a powerful force which breaks down social bonds to such a dangerous degree, that society must increasingly exert countermeasures to prevent disintegration and to support socially cohesive behavior among its members; in other words, the "positive individualization thesis" warns of the danger of hyper-individualization, which can lead to anomic crises which threaten social order.[123] The final and third group considers

[119] Axel Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization," 467.

[120] Indeed, immediately after suggesting the concept of individualization may be unusable, Honneth insists on its intelligibility as a coherent and discrete "social development," albeit acknowledging that individualization could refer to very different phenomena depending of the theoretical framework employing it.

[121] Markus Schroer, *Das Individuum der Gesellschaft: Synchrone und Diachrone Theorieperspektiven* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001); Markus Schroer, "Individualisierung," in *Handbuch Soziologie,* ed. Hermann Korte Nina Baur, Martina Löw, Markus Schroer, (Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften / GWV Fachverlage GmbH, 2008). Schorer's schema is most useful for articulating the unity of the many differences of the literature regarding individualization as ambivalent. Not only does this category more accurately reflect the figures he mentions, it also suggests that much of the literature detailing the ambivalences of individualization miss its critically productive kernel, which below I will argue Marx's approach can lead us.

[122] Schroer, "Individualisierung," 139-141.

[123] In other words,, positive individualization attempts to account for the "dangerous individual" as opposed to the "endangered individual;" hence, what is endangered is not necessarily individual freedom but rather the social

individualization ambivalent and contradictory.[124] On the one hand, this third tradition is an amalgamation of negative and positive individualization; it agrees that individualization can be negative in that it can endanger individuality through de-individualization (e.g. via conformity, discipline, and/or standardization), as well as positive in that it creates individuals dangerous for the social order (via atomization, the breakdown of solidarity and disorientation).[125] On the other hand, however, this third type of literature is more than an amalgamation because, despite many differences, these approaches also articulate several types of *ambivalences* and *contradictions* of individualization.[126]

According to this literature, individualization is ambivalent and contradictory because the process cannot be understood simply as the increasing ability of individuals to free themselves from restrictive bonds; rather, the system of social reproduction does not just permit individualization but demands and compels people to individualize in the midst of powerful conformist pressures. In other words, individualization is not just the one-sided liberation of individuals from constrictive social roles. On the one hand, the social order (and its reproduction) does not just tolerate increasing individualization but *demands* it; individual liberation becomes

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cohesion required for the social order. According to Schroer, the positive tradition runs from Durkheim and Tönnies to Parsons with more contemporary developments in Luhmann and communitarianism. In political thought, this can be seen with Tocqueville and de Maistre. Schroer, "Individualisierung," 140.

[124] Ibid., 140-141.

[125] Ibid., 140.

[126] The major figures of the ambivalent individualization thesis—including Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, and Anthony Giddens— write during the renewed interest in the topic in the 1980s and 1990s. Prior to this, the idea seems to have lain dormant since its first articulation among classical sociological theory of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel. In many ways, the resurgence fell behind many of the insights of its forerunners. Beck, for instance, argues that during the 20th-century, a second individualization has heralded a new social structure which is no longer a "class society" but one of "individual employees." Despite some genuine insights, Beck often conflates social structure with the self-understanding of social actors (e.g. Beck argues that classes no longer exist in the latter part of the 20th-century because an increasing number of people do not think of themselves or identify with specific social classes). Additionally, one cannot help but notice this scholarly resurgence of individualization beginning in the 1980s coincides with the worldwide rise of neoliberalism and the growing ideology of entrepreneurship and individual initiative

compulsion.[127] On the other hand, it has been argued, individualization renders individuals less self-reliant and *more dependent* on institutions like the labor market, the welfare state, and education systems, which can put contradictory demands on individuals.[128] In other words, individualization involves not just increases in personal liberty and self-realization[129] but also the emergence of a new sort of dependency on institutional structures.[130]

As we will see in the next chapter, Marx's critical theory and categories of the critique of political economy surpass the prevailing treatments of individualization in several regards.[131] First, Marx does not just insist on the historical specificity of the modern individual but also attempts to explain *why* it does not at all appear historical, especially for the theorists who first naturalize it during the 18th-century. Secondly, Marx's analysis does not limit these new forms of dependence to easily identifiable state or civil institutions (e.g. the labor market, the welfare-state), but rather understands these relations as an abstract form of compulsion which is objective and temporal. A third advantage of Marx's treatment of individualization is that these new forms of dependence are inseparable from the peculiar simultaneity of the abstract and concrete

[127] Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, "Individualization and Women," 27; Norbert Ebert, *Individualisation At Work: The Self Between Freedom and Social Pathologie* Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012): 2.

[128] Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* SAGE Publications, 2002): 30-33; *Contested Individualization: Debates About Contemporary Personhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Schroer, "Individualisierung," 151.

[129] The contemporary literature maintains that social roles and conventions have increasingly become more uncertain, thereby contemporary individuals "are instead required to assemble their own identity packages from a vast range of competing and contradictory biographical options supplied by institutions" *Contested Individualization.* [This emphasis on choice is not surprisingly reminiscent of neoliberalism.]

See also: Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992): 127ff.

[130] As we will see below, Marx argues similarly (that personal dependence takes on a general form) but does

[131] Even though individuality is not the central focus of his late work, I argue it remains of the upmost of his concerns.

dimensions of individuality and the seemingly inescapable or unavoidable atomism and abstraction of modern individuality.

While Marx does not take up the question of possible transformations of individuality within the history of capitalism, the high level of abstraction at which his categories operate have a different advantage.[132] By demonstrating that the contradictory and incomplete form of individuality rests on a set of inverted social relations, Marx helps us understand the crucial connection between the *form* of individuality and the *dynamic* that underlays individualization. This connection articulates a determinate contradiction which accounts for not only the prevailing shape of individuality but also links it to the possibility of a free individuality. As we have seen above, several sociological theories of individualization correctly point to the process's contradictory or paradoxical features. However, they do not investigate its *critical potential;* in other words, these treatments of individualization's contradictions are essentially *agnostic.* Below, we will see that Marx's emphasis on the possibility of an emancipated society can be found in his critical appraisal of prevailing individuality. By doing so, his approach not only surpasses the agnosticism of more recent treatments but also can be used as the basis of a critical reappraisal—a critique and rescue— of liberal individualism.

In its present state, liberal individualism inadvertently negates its emancipatory dimensions by holding on to anachronistic commitments. More specifically, the realization of the ideals embodied in liberal individualism's commitment to individual freedom demands the self-

[132] The supposed benefits and limitations of Marx's level of analysis has been a vexing issue in Marxian scholarship. While some insist on the necessity of developing "middle range" theories to explain the historically specific configurations and transformations in the history of capitalism since Marx's categories seem unable to do so on their own, others insist that the ability to explain every phenomenon in the capitalist world is not only impossible on the basis of his work but also misses its fundamental importance. There have been very important historical changes in the history of capitalism, especially in the 20th-century, but these do not invalidate the basic critical appraisal of the capitalism given by Marx which makes plausible that another organization of society—which would be better suited to realizing the hope of human emancipation—exists within prevailing conditions which are far from these ideals.

criticism of liberalism's social assumptions and the overcoming of some of its most cherished institutions: free labor and the market as the model and institution of political organization which is supposed to automatically and disinterestedly regulate numerous confrontations between independent and formally free individuals[133]

IV. Conclusions: Preliminary framework for a social form analysis

In this chapter, I have tried to show that contemporary accounts of liberal individualism cannot sufficiently discredit criticisms of its abstraction and atomism; the latter features are seemingly endemic to political theory's conception. After vetted with scrutiny and defended by revisionists, liberal individualism appears hopelessly contradictory: it is and is not atomistic and abstract. How is it possible that actually existing living concrete individuals, who are embedded in networks of relations and enmeshed in various social ties, can also at the same time exist without distinction or qualities (abstract) and function egotistically being oriented to the world as primarily self-driven (atomistic)?

Facing this *social* contradiction, we have seen that academic political theory largely treats it as a logical contradiction. Aside from those theorists who deny the existence of any contradiction (which we have seen is not tenable), others try to displace the contradiction in one of two ways: (1) they displace it as a logical contradiction internal to the conception of individualism itself and try to remedy the problem sharpening their concepts, or (2) they displace this social contradiction by arguing that individuals are inevitably and unavoidably to some degree abstract and atomistic given the complexity and anonymity of the modern social life.

[133] Chapter 4 will explore the possible emancipation of individuality by using the approach of negative critique developed by Theodor W. Adorno. On how the power of the market as the depersonalization of power unifies disparate types of liberalisms, see Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future.*

While we have seen that the first displacement founders since it does not take seriously the idea of a socially real contradiction, the latter displacement moves closer to *explanation* but the implicit social theory underlying their verdicts of inevitability is far too attenuated and end up reifying socio-historical specificities as eternal and natural.

Our review of Simmel has aided us in beginning to explain the persistence of atomism and abstraction as a persistent feature of individualism; by showing how modern, capitalist socio-historical processes undergird the forms of thought on individualism (in the form of liberalism and romanticism), Simmel has valuably shifted the impasse from a dispute over what liberal theorists claim and do not claim over to the realm of the object itself. Crucially, Simmel's analysis points the way to understanding the contradictory features of individualism as products of a specific historical development. However, to move beyond Simmel's limitations and develop of theory to *explain* individualism's contradictions, to identify their tendencies, and assess their political consequences, we need to develop a theory of social form indebted to Marx's critique of political economy, which I will detail in the next chapter.

Ch. 2: Form and Dynamic of Individuality in Marx's critique of political economy

If there is any unity to the vast array of liberal thought since the 17th century, Pierre Rosanvallon suggests, it would be to "search for an alternative to inherited relations of power and dependence."[1] Both the philosophy of the rights of man (the basis of "political liberalism") and the belief in the self-organizing character of economic laws and constraints (the basis of "economic liberalism") attempt to depersonalize the power of subjection; indeed, liberalism made this process of depersonalization "the condition of progress and liberty."[2] Despite all the diversity and incompatibilities comprising the liberal project, the common motivation behind this general proscription has been the freedom of the individual.[3]

However, the cost of securing these arrangements appears to have been paid for by an inherent abstractness in relations between individuals: relations of authority have been depersonalized, but so have relations *between* individuals. In the last chapter, we explored how liberal theorists have largely bemoaned this abstraction and its attending atomization of individuals since the 19th century. Facing mounting criticism, political and social theorists have claimed that these features are *not* the necessary result of liberalism's normative commitments to human dignity, personal autonomy, and privacy; rather, a degree of abstractness and atomization are said to be simply an unavoidable and unfortunate necessity for individuality to exist in a heterogeneous society with a high degree of division of labor.[4]

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[1] Ibid., 155.

[2] Ibid., 154.

[3] Ibid.; Raymond Geuss, "Liberalism and Its Discontents"; Audard and Raynaud, "Liberal, Liberalism," 571. "Liberalism has only one overarching aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom." Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 21ff.

[4] Nancy Rosenblum makes such an argument in *Another Liberalism (*My previous chapter discusses this work and other contemporary liberal theory in detail).

Suffering from a palpably attenuated social theory, assessments of this nature smuggle in socio-economic assumptions that naturalize existing conditions specific to capitalism. By not looking into the "social form" of a heterogeneous society with an advanced division of labor, we risk conflating capitalist society with heterogeneity and the advanced division of labor as such. In so doing, we reduce a complex social question with tremendous political implications to the calculus of technical or natural necessity.

To understand why individuality must exist in a social form which is simultaneously abstract and concrete as well as embedded and atomistic, we need to examine the specific forms of social mediation which undergird such individuals. Indeed, as I will argue below, the basic mediation informing individuality is the commodity character of value producing labor. So, if the form of individuality is nothing but the product of the form of our social relations, then we must grasp the connection between labor and individuality in capitalist society. However, an understanding of the form of individuality through the examination of social relations requires a socio-historical perspective that often falls outside the purview of academic political theory.[5]

By explicating the peculiarly objective form that capitalist social relations take, Marx's critique of political economy indicates that the existing form of individuality and the dynamic of its development (individualization) are not simply logical contradictions rooted in faulty concepts but rather, are real contradictions produced by specific socio-historical conditions. As we will explore below in great detail, Marx's key formulation of this complex of form and dynamic is "personal independence based on objective dependence." I intend to show that Marx's mature critical theory illuminates these contradictions of individuality by deciphering the

[5] The few political theorists who try to account for the role of social relations within the debate over atomism and abstraction demonstrate little attention to the forms of historically determinate social relations. See last chapter.

form of the social relations which produce them. Building on this framework, my core argument is to articulate two types of contradictions at the heart of the modern individual—one of *form* and one of *dynamic*.

Let us first consider the form, which, as the simultaneity of polar opposite features (abstract/concrete and atomistic/embedded), makes the form of individuality occupied by actually existing individuals appear as a hopeless contradiction. In the last chapter, we explored how academic political theory has for the most part inadequately explained this contradiction. Marx's theory, however, explains this contradiction by recognizing its social "necessity." On the one hand, actually existing individuals can most often attain their concrete particularities insofar as they count or are validated as *abstract* individuals; that is to say, they prove their necessity for the reproduction of capital.[6] On the other hand, as functionaries of the reproduction of capital, the primary form in which actually-living individuals are *embedded* is necessarily *atomistic*. The atomistic dimension of these social relations indicates a peculiar "objective dependence" between individuals which allows and even demands that we as individuals assume a specific type of *personal independence,* which has often been overestimated as "personal freedom."

The further examination of this "objective dependence" reveals that the contradictory form of the individual is closely related to the paradoxical character of the dynamic of individualization. In the last chapter, we examined how the sociology of individualization begins

[6] As we will see below, this amounts to successfully selling our labor power whereby we can obtain the means of subsistence as the necessary first condition towards pursuing an individuality even if highly restricted (as we will see, this restricted individuality is what Marx calls "personal independence"). However, insofar as concrete individuality depends on a validated abstract individuality, the former is increasingly subject to the latter; that is to say, one's concrete particularities tend to be increasingly molded, subordinated, and put into the service into the attempt secure one's abstract validity. As we will explore more fully in the next chapter, concrete individuality becomes a mere means for self-preservation, which in turn closely alloys individuality with powerful conformist tendencies.

to describe this dynamic by uncovering a regressive tendency within the progress of individualization. [7]

Marx's analysis of capitalism as a system of objective dependence illuminates this paradox is not simply a social bond of a static nature; rather, this bond of objective dependence is continually constituted by and constitutive of a dynamic process, which exerts itself as objective domination over against actually existing individuals. The form of the individual is generated by and reproduces a social logic to which it is bound; this social logic is, on the one hand, a historical dynamic that has produced immense changes measured by tremendous progress in production and the domination of nature; on the other hand, this social logic is a sort of social stasis in that it ceaselessly reproduces a social order that human beings do not control, which renders them—individually and collectively—objects of domination. To analyze a social order taking the form of an "automatic Subject," Marx develops the concept of capital as self-valorizing value, generated by value-producing labor.

Objective domination does not at first *appear* as domination because, on the one hand, it is inseparable from the form of social relations undergirding personal independence; on the other hand, because this form of domination historically and logically supersedes relations of *personal* domination, it appears that the domination of human beings no longer emanates from human beings themselves. Therefore, instead of domination, this compulsion appears as natural necessity, whether produced by human insatiability, scarcity, or a combination of both. Hence,

[7] That is to say, individualization is characterized, on the one hand, as the series of structural social transformations which have increasingly allowed individuals to free themselves from restrictive bonds of personal dependence and forms of personal domination thereby opening the possibility of the pursuit of self-realization. On the other hand, these same transformations driving the process of individualization also have introduced new forms of impersonal dependency as well as new types of compulsions. See previous chapter.

this process paradoxically reproduces a semblance of freedom (in the form of "personal independence") while blocking its development.[8]

This dynamic process, which Marx analyzes with the concept of capital, is itself contradictory in another regard. As it reproduces a form of individuality whose potential remains unrealized under prevailing conditions, capital also creates the material and social conditions for an emancipated society which would not be based on objective dependence but rather, on "free individuality."[9] The dynamic of capital does so by creating the conditions of non-subsistence labor in its ceaseless quest for surplus-value. The productive powers generated by this pursuit create the possibility "where labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased," effectively emancipating human beings from compulsory surplus labor.[10] It is upon these material foundations created by capital on which "rich individuality" could develop that is "all-sided" in production and consumption. In a post-capitalist society, labor no longer appears as compulsion but rather self-directed towards human needs thereby becoming "the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one."[11]

[8] Individual freedom is true in that it exists as "personal independence;" it is also false because as the apotheosis of individual freedom, personal independence "is more correctly called indifference), free to collide with one another and to engage in exchange within this freedom" Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1973): 163-164.

[9] Ibid., 704.

[10] Ibid., 704ff.

[11] Ibid., 325. For a noteworthy and concise explication of some of these themes, see Iring Fetscher, "Emancipated Individuals in an Emancipated Society: Marx's Sketch of Post-Capitalist Society in the *Grundrisse*," in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, ed. Marcello Musto (New York: Routledge, 2008).

It is important to note that Marx's critique of the abstract domination of capitalist society is not derived from a presupposed free individuality.[12] Rather, the critique analyzes how abstract domination produces a form of individuality which exists in the mode of being denied; that is to say, it is as a *contradiction* that the prevailing form of individuality contains a positive conception of individuality that points towards its own overcoming and the realization of a free individuality.[13] In other words, what is "constituted" by capitalism is not only domination but also — inseparably— the critique of it.[14] Hence, the critique neither presupposes a "human essence"[15] which has been "colonized," nor does it imply that the potential for overcoming this domination derives from some sort of activation of a slumbering revolutionary consciousness.[16]

[12] Henning makes a similar argument vis-a-vis character masks. Christoph Henning, "Charaktermaske und Individualität bei Marx," in *Marx-Engels Jahrbuch,* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009).

[13] It could be argued, as Henning does, that Marx understood his critique as a contribution to the idea of the return of the Subject in political philosophy (as the positive moment). Reichelt makes the same point but instead of collective subject, he writes of the collective construction of a "self-conscious social unity" in place of the inverted and autonomized form of social existence we currently inhabit. Ibid. See also Helmut Reichelt, "Social Reality as Appearance: Some Notes on Marx's Conception of Reality," in *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism,* ed. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis, (Hants, England: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2005): 41; Fetscher, "Emancipated Individuals in an Emancipated Society," 107-119.

[14] In short, the critique is entirely immanent to its object (our modern capitalist social world). These points, including the status of "normative grounds" will be elaborated in Ch. 4.

[15] It has been well established that there is a unity of Marx's thought which belies a notion of epistemic break; however, his works of 1845-6 mark a crucial progression where he qualifies his idea of a human essence as was articulated in the 1844 manuscripts. Consider the 6th thesis on Feuerbach: "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations." By abstraction from the historical process, Marx argues, Feuerbach could not avoid but "to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract – isolated – human individual…Essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as 'genus', as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals." eds., *Marx Engels Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1976b): 3-5.

[16] We can find an example of the latter position in Georg Lukàcs, who argues that the self-consciousness of the proletariat is precisely the act of creation in which the subject of creation maintains its identity and finds itself as realized in the process of creation and in what it creates. In other words, the proletariat objectifies itself against its own reified existence thereby becoming a class; by doing so, it discovers itself both in its negation (reified social relations) and as non-identical with its negation, thereby constituting itself as the practical identity as the subject-object of history. See Part 3 of "Reification and Consciousness of the Proletariat" in Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

I. Marxism and individuality

Any discussion of Marx's work—especially his mature critique of political economy—unavoidably requires some discussion of the history of Marx*ism* in order to orient the theoretical framework discussed in this chapter. For our purposes, I will argue that interpretations which understand the critique of political economy as a socialist political economy misunderstand the labor theory of value as a labor theory of wealth, thereby subordinating the emphasis on individual freedom to collective and communal self-determination. On the other hand, those interpretations which emphasized the *critique* of political economy correctly interpret Marx's approach to the labor theory of value as a critique *of* labor in capitalist society, thereby highlighting Marx's concern with how individual freedom could be achieved in a post-capitalist society. In other words, those strands of Marxist thought which sought to critique capitalism from "the standpoint of labor" tended to reject appeals to individual freedom.

Worldview Marxism

Given the centrality of Marx's thought for worker's movements and socialist politics across the globe over the past 150 years, his work comes to us heavily varnished by these movements. Despite the many differences in the various forms of Marxism—Maoist, Leninist, Trotskyite, autonomist, or (post)-*Operaismo* to name but a few— a distinguishing feature has been that each has transformed Marx's theoretical analysis of the fundamental structure of capitalist society into a worldview [*Weltanschauung*] that operates as an identity-constituting framework revealing one's place as a worker and socialist within a totalizing explanatory cosmology.[17] There are two significant features of worldview Marxism germane for the present

[17] Michael Heinrich, *Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Schmetterling Verlag GmbH, 2004): 20ff. Also, Iring Fetscher, *Marx and Marxism* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971): 148-181. Heinrich dates the emergence of worldview Marxism with Engels' influence over the German SPD (founded in 1869), specifically the publication of *Anti-Dühring* and its condensed version *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, which was

inquiry: the first is the positive conception of proletarian labor; the second is the normative significance of community against the centrality of the individual which was taken to be a hallmark of "bourgeois" individualism.

Let us first consider the positive valuation of proletarian labor common to the various forms of worldview Marxism. Within these theoretical orientations, capitalism is understood to be primarily a form of class rule of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, a form of domination which does not appear as domination insofar as it is disguised by the formal freedom and equality of citizens in the political sphere as well as buyers and sellers in civil society. However, it is by owning the means of production that the bourgeoisie consistently have a bargaining advantage over workers who only have their laboring capacity to sell for the means of subsistence. Overcoming capitalism would amount to the abolition of the bourgeoisie by re-appropriating the means of production as the common property for the proletariat. So, while capitalism survives by the exploited toil of the proletariat, a post-capitalist society would be one in which the proletariat would be realized as the proper subject of history. In short, we have the critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor.

While my characterization of worldview Marxism ignores many nuanced differences between competing forms, they all share a crucial component in their respective analyses of

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one of the most influential and popular Marxist texts prior to the First World War. But despite the aim of criticizing Eugen Dühring's comprehensive system of socialism with the "correct" positions of "scientific socialism," Engels had paradoxically opened the path to the development of worldview Marxism later developed by Social Democratic propaganda and Karl Kautsky, who was among the leading Marxists theoretician after the death of Engels in 1895. Subsequently, what had characterized Marxism at the end of the 19th century was a series of scattered conceptions including an economism which reduced ideology and politics to "economic interests" and a deterministic understanding of history in which the end of capitalism would inevitably be brought on by a proletarian revolution. Despite deep disagreements between various Marxist camps, worldview Marxism deepened with the development of Marxism-Leninism after 1914 and especially after Lenin's death in 1924 when his largely polemical writings fully ossified into a dogmatic system of philosophy when combined with already existing Worldview Marxism producing official Marxist versions of philosophy ("Dialectical Materialism"), history ("Historical Materialism") and political economy ("Marxism-Leninism").

capitalism that we must examine in some detail: the conflation of value with wealth. Marx's deployment of a labor theory of value has long been misunderstood as a labor theory of *wealth*. With no distinction between value and wealth, labor theories of wealth maintain that it is labor everywhere and during all historical epochs which is the sole source of wealth.[18] In Marx's own day and well into the present, various socialists have held fast to this idea with significant consequences for their critique of capitalist society and how individuality was to fit into their visions of an emancipated society. Marx explicitly and repeatedly makes a distinction between wealth and value as well as qualifies and specifies how "labor" (i.e. what form of labor) is constitutive of each.

For Marx, material wealth is that which, when consumed, satisfies human needs of any sort.[19] However, what makes something "useful," and therefore satisfies a need, "does not dangle in mid-air" [*schwebt nicht in der Luft*] but rather serves a *definite* purpose." Hence, utility is conditioned by the material dimension of its specific usefulness which is "*independent* of the labor amount of labor required to appropriate its useful qualities."[20] Marx writes that even if the amount of labor required to produce a loaf of bread was "reduced by 95 per cent as a result of some invention," its usefulness would be unaffected, adding with characteristic wit: "It would lose not a single particle of its use-value even it dropped ready-made from the sky."[21] Therefore,

[18] In other words, Marx's claim that labor is the substance of value is taken to mean that *labor* is the *source* of wealth. Such a facile interpretation ignores the great lengths that Marx took to develop the interconnection of the substance, magnitude, and form of value—which is historically specific and interconnected moments of a dynamic totality. (For a very clear discussion of these three sides of value, see Isaac Ilyich Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (Quebec: Black Rose Books, 1973): 107-123.

[19] Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977): 125.

[20] Ibid., 126. My emphasis. While at this point Marx emphasis the "physical properties of the commodity," it would be a mistake to see the commodity simply as an external goods for Marx explains the commodity character of services to be the simultaneity of production and consumption.

[21] Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970): 36.

wealth— as that which is useful—is not constituted by labor alone. Likewise, the magnitude of wealth is not measured by the labor required for its production but by the quantity and quality of what is produced, which is determined by not only labor but also nature, which Marx eventually demonstrates includes objectified knowledge via science and technology.[22]

Value, in contrast, is constituted by labor alone, but a very specific *form* of labor specific to capitalism. We will return to this in section three below. For now, it is only necessary to point out how worldview Marxism ignores the distinction between value and wealth and thereby imbues value-producing labor as proletarian labor with the highest normative significance. Since laboring activity as well as the organization of working class movements required high degrees of cooperation and participation from the members making up these groups, a high normative significance has also been placed on notions of community over the individual.

In other words, the second important feature of worldview Marxism follows from the first: an exaltation of allegedly proletarian values including community, solidarity, and collectivity against the egoism and self-interest associated with "bourgeois individualism." Such a bifurcation of values and the branding of individualism as particularly bourgeois and hence antithetical to communism has been largely the product of Mao, Lenin, and political writers within the canon of "official Marxism" instead of the works of Marx himself.[23] While more serious theoretical works and scholarly treatments of Marx's thought infrequently entertain such

[22] While many commentators rightly refer to the "Gotha Program" and "Notes on Wagner" for a discussion of this distinction, Marx insists already in *Contribution* and *Capital* that labor is not the sole source of material wealth.

[23] For instance, Mao "Combat Liberalism." For an overview of this current and a list of sources, see Peter Jehle, "Individualismus," in *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus,* ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, (Hamburg: Argument, 2004): 926- 929.

unqualified condemnations of individualism, nevertheless, such denunciations of bourgeois values, contra socialist collectivism, indeed persist.[24]

Even among several prominent "Western Marxists," including Georg Lukács, Louis Althusser, and Henri Lefebvre, the centrality of the free individual is largely confined to simply a form of bourgeois ideology. For instance, part of Lukács' reification thesis is that bourgeois consciousness takes itself to be the subject of its own activity, which mistakes its submission to the alienated objectivity of capital as its own willed and conscious activity, as the realization and affirmation of its own individuality.[25] For Althusser, transformative contradictions are to be found only as the accumulation of structural contradictions in the system and not in social agents themselves, which strongly suggest that the ideas of autonomy and efficacious action of the individual are part and parcel of an ideological mystification. For Lefebvre, the "individual" as a tenet of the concept individualism in bourgeois society represents an ideological apparatus in the priority its content gives to the efficacy of individual human agency.[26]

Nevertheless, more contemporary commentators correctly hold that Marx's critique is consistent and compatible with many of the features associated with liberal individualism, such as self-determination and autonomy.[27] The most significant group of these writers include those who have emphasized Marx's humanism, which became a significant interpretation after the

[24] Jehle cites Gramsci**.** "Socialist collectivists" who underplay the importance of free individuality include Wood, *The Retreat from Class,* 1986; Pepper *Eco-socialism* 1993, and Cranston, 1976. cited in Adrian Little, *The Political Thought of Andre Gorz* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

[25] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*: 166.

[26] Henri Lefebvre, *The Sociology of Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982): 117.

[27] Loyd D. Easton, "Marx and Human Individuality,"; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Mind and Politics; an Approach to the Meaning of Liberal and Socialist Individualism.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Russel Keat, "Individualism and Community in Socialist Thought," in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy,* ed. John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben, (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981); Ian Forbes, *Marx and the New Individual* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

discovery and publication of the "Young Marx" beginning in the 1930s with the works written in Paris known as *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.[28] However, by setting themselves against the rigid economism propagated by the traditionalism of worldview and official Marxism, humanist interpretations of Marx largely confined their analyses to his earlier writings, overlooking how the concern of free individuality not only persists in his mature writings but is also greatly expanded and substantiated.[29]

Critical Theory and the "New Reading" of Marx

A small but growing community of interpretation—the New Reading [*Neue Marx Lektüre*]—has emphasized Marx's *critique* of political economy as a critique of labor distinct from an identity-constituting worldview Marxism which affirms labor.[30] This return to Marx's *critique of* political economy, as opposed to a "Marxist political economy," became widespread only beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, largely originating within West Germany.[31] This dissertation is in spirit of the latter tradition, which has certainly ventured to articulate how Marx's critical theory is amenable to a conception of free individuality but rarely in a sustained fashion and without an emphasis on redeeming the promise of free individuality from liberalism.

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[28] For a prominent Humanist interpretation see Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961).

[29] Among the few exceptions includes Carol C. Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Theory of Social Reality* MIT Press, 1980).

[30] As with any theoretical orientation, differences can be found among its adherents including Reichelt, Backhaus, Heinrich, Postone, Arthur, the "Open Marxism" of Gunn, Psychopedis, and Bonefeld, as well as the *Wertkritik* school, whose best known representative is the late Robert Kurz. For a literature review, see et. al. Milchman, "Communisation and Value-Form Theory," *Endnotes* 2, (2010).

[31] For a comprehensive history, see Ingo Elbe, *Marx im Westen: Die Neue Marx-Lektüre in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965* (Berlin: Akademic Verlag GmbH, 2008). Of course, there are many exceptions. Among an earlier generation from the 1920s including I.I. Rubin and Evgeniĭ Pashukanis, who published in Russian in the Soviet Union and Georg Lukacs and Karl Korsch, who published in German. I would also include Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse in this vein, albeit they published in the three decades following the 20s. I intend this dissertation to be in the spirit of the latter tradition, which has certainly ventured to articulate how Marx's critical theory is amenable to a conception of free individuality but rarely in a sustained fashion and without an emphasis on redeeming the promise of free individuality from liberalism.

The hallmarks of the return to Marx throughout this literature include: (1) an emphasis on the historical specificity of Marx's categories of the critique of political economy and his attending powerfully self-reflexive account; (2) recovering the use of these categories in Marx's critical theory not as an articulation of a socialist political economy but as the critique of political economy aiming to illuminate manifestly non-economic domains of capitalist modernity, and (3) understanding Marx's forward-looking orientation to tracing out how features of a possible post-capitalist society are created and continue to inhere with capitalism but not in a way that suggests the overthrow of capitalism is a teleological certainty underwritten by some supposed iron laws of history.

Let us very briefly consider these three features in some more detail and spell out their interrelation.

Central to Marx's critique of political economy are the categories such as commodity, value, labor, money, capital, and surplus-value, which Marx insists are adequate for the *historically specificity* of the capitalist social world.[32] However, since commodities, exchange, and money are common to many different types of societies throughout history, they do not appear to be historically specific to capitalism.[33] But *only* in societies based on the capitalist mode of production do "the products of human labor *universally* take on the form of

[32] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 100-108; 270ff; 487-8 This specificity has often been overlooked or misunderstood in Marxism for the obscurity of his historical method. This includes his readers' conflation of his method of inquiry with his method of presentation in the beginning of *Capital,* which was mistakenly read as a historical instead of a logical progression. This error, which arguably began with Engels was later entrenched by Plenkenov. For instance, Engels' mistaken understanding that "simple commodity production" corresponded to an actual historical period was standard in East German textbooks until the late 1980s. Michael Heinrich, "Reconstruction or Deconstruction? Methodological Controversies About Value and Capital, and New Insights From the Critical Edition," in *Re-Reading Marx: New Perspectives After the Critical Edition*, ed. Riccardo Bellofiore and Roberto Fineschi, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 75. For a comprehensive account, see Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital the New Dialectic and Marx's Capital:* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004).

[33] Marx, *Contribution*: 58; Marx, *Grundrisse*: 156; Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 125.

commodities" whereby the categories of commodity, labor, exchange, etc. form a system constitutive of the reproduction of society.[34] Hence, Marx's insight is not merely that labor is the substance of value and the magnitude of value is measured by labor time, for this had been maintained in various permutations by political economists since at least the 17th century.[35] Rather, Marx's crucial contribution to the critique of political economy is examining "why labor is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product."[36] By looking deeply at the forms of expression of labor and its products from a historical perspective, Marx not only discovers the distinct historical specificity of their form in capitalism but also uncovers how the prevailing forms in capitalist society contain the possibility of historically new forms.

Marx's approach does not simply privilege production and material circumstances in the study of social life as an unproblematic first principle but insists on their historical specificity by scrutinizing their social form. Marx elaborates the specific socio-historical circumstances of labor as it exists in capitalist society that makes it "value-creating" by developing a theory of social forms to account for the necessity of social relations in capitalism to take specific and peculiarly objective forms.[37] In other words, the categories of the critique of political economy are not merely "economic" but grasp essential features of the modern capitalist world.[38]

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[34] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 187.

[35] Ibid., 173-174. As is well-known, Marx goes on to specify these by showing that the substance of value is *abstract* labor and the measure of value's magnitude is *socially-necessary* labor time. I will return to these below.

[36] Ibid. Marx rightly credits himself as the first to systematically address the question of form in these matters.

[37] The most important elaboration of social form is the value-form, which we will return to below. Backhaus was one of the first to point out the intimate connections between the logical structure of the value-form and its socio-historical content. Hans-Georg Backhaus, "On the Dialectics of the Value-Form," *Thesis Eleven* 1, no. 1 (1980): 107.

[38] Despite his well-known criticisms of Hegel's view of the state, it is clear that Marx agreed with Hegel's assessment that "political economy ... is one of the sciences which have originated int he modern age as their element [*Boden*]" and therefore should be taken as particularly revealing about the constitution of the social world.

Describing these categories as "forms of being and determinations of existence" [*Daseinformen und Existenzbestimmungen*], Marx is keenly aware that the categories of political economy, when grasped critically, express dimensions of cultural, epistemological, and historical significance.[39] Indeed, Marx himself describes his late work as undertaking a "critique of the economic categories"[40] for the "categories of bourgeois economics…are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore, objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production."[41] However, for Marx, the science of political economy had overwhelmingly obscured these relations for it did not inquire into the social form of these relations, which appeared to political economy as essentially non-social. By demonstrating the historical specificity of the categories, Marx revealed not only their transitory status as being predated by radically different relations, but also by revealing their essential *dynamism,* thereby suggesting that the capitalist organization of production contains within itself the principle and means of its transformation into an emancipated society.

In light of the centrality of these three dimensions of Marx's work, the New Reading of Marx helps us re-orient Marx's critique of political economy as an immanent critical theory.[42] One of the major upshots of this approach is to take Marx's work as a critique *of* labor seeking to

G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991): §189. For a detailed discussion of Hegel's critique of political economy—both in the *Philosophy of Right* and his earlier, more radical version in his Jena writings—and their relation to Marx, see Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital the New Dialectic and Marx's Capital*.

[39] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 100-108.

[40] Marx, *Letters on* Capital (London: New Park Publications, 1983): 51.

[41] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 169.

[42] For further discussion of critical theory, see Introduction above and Chapter 4 below.

abolish the proletariat as opposed to worldview Marxism's critique *from* the standpoint of labor seeking the realization of the proletariat.[43]

II. Individuality as "personal independence based on objective dependence"

As noted in the opening of this chapter, even though the promise of a free individuality motivates much of Marx's thought, his analysis neither presupposes a free individuality outside of determinate social forms nor provides an explicit theory of individuality. However, in the preparatory works of *Capital,* especially the *Grundrisse,* offer essential insights to developing a critical understanding of the socio-historical nature of modern individuality and its tendencies including possible emancipation.

One of the richest insights into the historical forms of individuality can be found in a commonly cited yet infrequently plumbed passage from the *Grundrisse:*[44]

> Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productivity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on *objective* [*sachlicher*] dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time. Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social capacity [*Vermögen*] is the third stage. The second stage creates the conditions for the third.[45]

In this passage, Marx's insight is twofold. On the one hand, he formulates the *form* of modern individuality as "personal independence" which is the product of determinate forms of social relations which are "objective." On the other hand, Marx sketches out a process of development that links specific forms of individuality to specific forms of society. The first stage is

[43] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination.*

[44] The only sustained assessment of these passages I am aware of is Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology.*

[45] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 158 (trans. amended).

characterized by limited productivity and social relations that take the form of personal dependence. The second stage, "personal independence based on objective dependence," reflects the social form of capitalist modernity in which "objective dependence" establishes both the historical conditions for the emergence of a new form of individuality as personal independence and creates the conditions for a higher social form—a post-capitalist society— which could be based on free individuality.[46] The second stage establishes those conditions not only by providing the social ground for the development of personal independence (which he carefully distinguishes from free individuality) but also by tremendously developing human productive capacity. However, despite the fact that objective dependence allows for the development of personal independence by overturning forms of personal dependence and domination, the peculiar objective quality of this new form of dependence is precisely and paradoxically also that which blocks the development of a "free individuality" within capitalist social relations; yet, at the same time revealing it as a possible basis for a post-capitalist social organization.

However, in order to explicate these claims, the *Grundrisse* needs to be read in light of Marx's development of the critique of political economy up through *Capital.*[47] Consulting one text without the other would give a distorted conception. On the one hand, the *Grundrisse* offers many insights into forms of individuality and their transformations, but lacks a clear systematic analysis of the how the capitalist social forms which underlie these forms of individuality also

[46] Ibid. amended, emphasis original.

[47] Aside from the now well-worn debate over the relation between the "Young Marx" of the 1840s and the Marx of *Capital*, another debate, albeit lesser known, has increasingly grown around the development and possible transformation of Marx's critique of political economy after 1857. The debate concerns the relation of the manuscripts— from *Grundrisse* (1857-8), the early draft of the *Contribution* known as the "*Urtext"* (1859) as well as the massive notebooks written between 1861 and 1865— and the works Marx published during his lifetime, especially *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital*'s two editions published in 1867 and 1872, respectively.

exert an abstract domination.[48] On the other hand, in *Capital,* Marx foregoes extensive attention to forms of individuality since his focus is on the systematic presentation and explication of capital as mode of domination—that is, the explication of the 'autonomization' of social relations with its own logic *as* capital. Therefore, reading *Capital* alone for Marx's analysis of individuality risks serious misinterpretation.[49] In other words, we must reconstruct Marx's insights into individuality as articulated in the *Grundrisse* by reading them in light of the more refined categories of *Capital* including labor, commodity, value, and capital.[50]

However, in the interests of clarity of presentation, I will first explicate Marx's remarks in *Grundrisse* concerning capitalist society as a social form characterized by personal independence based on objective dependence before delving into the categories of the critique of political economy in the section that follows.

[48] In other words, in the *Grundrisse,* Marx investigates the implications of the critique of political economy in a highly illuminating way before working out (or at least *presenting)* this systematic character. For a similar analysis of the relation of the these two works, see Helmut Reichelt, "Why Did Marx Conceal His Dialectical Method?," in *Open Marxism Vol. 3: Emancipating Marx,* ed. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, John Holloway, and Kosmas Psychopedis, (London: Pluto Press, 1995).

[49] Marx's categories in *Capital* seem completely at odds with giving an account of individuals as fully endowed 'agents' since they are portrayed simply as character-masks, which has led some interpreters to conclude that Marx views individuals *only* as the expression of economic roles and interests. For a critical review of this misreading, see Henning, "Charaktermaske und Individualität bei Marx."

[50] Interest in this development is undoubtedly related to the renewed efforts of MEGA, which continue to the present day. For some recent overviews of MEGA's activities and their consequence, see James M. Brophy, "Recent Publications of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA)," *Central European History* 40, (2007) 523-537.

Personal dependence and pre-capitalist individuality

Despite the great variety of historically existing societies pre-dating capitalism,[51] their social form is based on "relations of personal dependence."[52] Within such societies, personal dependence characterized all spheres of social life including the social relations of material production such as the social division of labor and the distribution of wealth.[53] The social form of personal dependence has two important implications for our argument: the limited form of individuality and the personal form of domination.

Historically, relations of personal dependence were inseparably also "personal relations of domination and servitude."[54] Despite being overtly social "appear[ing] at all events as their own personal relations,"[55] these relations were also based on the "natural or political super- and subordination of individuals to one another."[56] Therefore, such social relations are not only

[51] An important feature of Marx's historical method is that it does not presuppose a linear causal concept of history. Emphasis on social form allows Marx to isolate certain features that may be common to various societies (feudal, Asiactic, ancient) in a manner that does not presuppose their historical-temporal sequence. Insistence of "personal dependence" is one instance of this method. Marx was fully aware that he was deploying an abstraction made possible by his historical present, in that the types of "personal ties" are of an astounding variety including blood, kinship, *hommage*, leige, etc. What allows Marx to group this motley together are the objectified social bonds of capitalist society, which are their very opposite. For a discussion of the various types of ties of personal dependence in European feudalism, see Bloch, *Feudal Society* Vol. I and II. For an excellent discussion of Marx's historical method, see Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1973): 165-196.

[52] That is, "regardless of the character… patriarchal, ancient, or feudal," these societies mediated their social activity though relations of personal dependence Marx, *Grundrisse*: 158-159.

[53] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 170.

[54] Ibid., 247fn. cf. 173.

[55] Ibid., 170.

[56] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 159. Relations of personal dependence are, of course, not "purely personal relations" in that they have historically taken on "an objective character within their own sphere, as for example the development of landed proprietorship out of purely military relations of subordination." However, Marx adds that the objective character on which relations of personal of dependence relied on "still has a limited, and primitive character" (Ibid., 165).

functional vis-a-vis the distribution of wealth and the division of labor, but are also located within definite social hierarchies structured and traversed by overt and unequal power relations.[57]

Within these social forms based on personal dependence, individuality was of a highly limited form. As Marx writes, individuals "appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole" and entered into relation with each other "only as individuals imprisoned within a certain definition, as feudal lord and vassal, landlord and serf, etc., or as members of a caste, etc. or as members of an estate, etc."[58] As a member of a social group with clearly delineated functions, an individual faced nearly insurmountable obstacles to pursuing or developing "personal talents, capacities, abilities, [and] activities" beyond those that were expected of their station.[59] Individuality in its modern form was largely impossible in a social form where the "specific, objective existence [was] predetermined for the individual."[60]

Personal Independence: modern individuality and the semblance of freedom

The independence of modern individuals is the expression of the peculiar, historically-specific form of social relations underlying the capitalist mode of production, which Marx articulates as "personal independence founded on objective [*sachlicher*] dependence."[61]

[57] Marx's expresses the overtness of both the material and power characteristics of this relation in a well-known passage: "every serf knows that what he expends in the service of his lord is a specific quantity of his own personal labor-power." Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 170, 713-714. For comments on the social forms of unfree labor, including slavery and serfdom, in pre-capitalism, see Marx, *Capital* Vol. III: 958.

[58] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 163.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., 487.

[61] Ibid., 158. "personal independence founded on *objective* [*sachlicher*] dependence**"** where "individuals are subsumed under social production [*gesellschaftliche Produktion*]…as their doom" [*Verhängnis*] as 'fate' or 'doom' and not *Schicksal* as fate or destiny]."

Individuals acquire personal *independence*[62] since objective dependence requires previous forms of personal *de*pendence to be extinguished or subordinated (an issue, as we saw at the opening of this chapter, which was of great importance to the liberal theoretical tradition according to Rosanvallon).[63] In place of these personal ties, arises the relations of equal exchange between proprietors of commodities, which formally accords with notions of freedom and equality. Freedom, for exchange is a "voluntary transaction; no force on either side; positing the self as an end in itself, as dominant and primary [*übergreifend*]."[64] Equality, in that the universal medium of exchange effaces all qualitative differences, so that a "worker who buys commodities for 3s. appears to the seller in the same function, in the same equality—in the form of 3s.—as the king who does the same."[65]

The development of such objective dependence allows for the emergence of a specific form of independent individuality which appears as individual freedom because the moments of formal freedom and equality in buying and selling give the impression that dependence traversed by power relations—domination— has been overcome. Insofar as buyer and seller necessarily and practically "recognize one another reciprocally as proprietors, as persons whose will penetrates their commodities" in act of exchange, each of them, as an individual, "is reflected in himself as its exclusive and dominant (determinant) subject."[66] Indeed, compared to relations of

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[62] In *Capital,* Marx seems to increasingly conflate "personal independence" with the "isolated individual," (cf. Marx, *Capital* Vol. III: 169-170) which are of course related but to distinguish them gives us better traction to reveal the kernel of truth in even the most vulgar individualistic ideologies.

[63] *"*The ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc. are in fact exploded, ripped up" Marx, *Grundrisse*: 163.

[64] Ibid., 244.

[65] Ibid., 246. See also *Capital* I: 621, where Marx suggests that the fact the wage-relation forms a mass of workers "composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages," it forms the conditions of a "more humane development" and "a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes."

[66] Ibid., 243-244.

a "merely local connection resting on blood ties, or on spontaneous or master-servant relations," relations of objective dependence appear to be the flourishing of individual independence and non-domination.

Another feature of objective dependence important for the development of individuality is that with the liquidation of formal distinctions between individuals based on personal dependence, individuals are no longer formally restricted to predetermined stations within the organization of society. The fact that they must sell their capacity to work in order to survive opens the possibility of cultivating previously unobtainable "personal talents, capacities, abilities, [and] activities."[67]

However, it is objective dependence itself as capitalist society that necessarily blocks the development and transformation of personal independence into "free individuality."[68] Whereas the social form of "personal independence based on objective dependence" had historically superseded those social forms of personal dependence, Marx articulates the possibility of a "third social stage [*Stufe*]" characterized as "free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and the subordination of their communal social productivity as their social capacity."[69]

Therefore, as is well-known, Marx also reveals and unabashedly skewers the highly ideological pretensions of the sorts of freedom and equality implied by this personal independence. Marx writes that such independence "is at bottom merely an illusion" which is

[67] Ibid., 163.

[68] Ibid., 158.

[69] Ibid., 158, trans. modified.

"more correctly called indifference."[70] Individuals are free insofar as they are "free to collide with one another and to engage in exchange."[71] This independence only appears as freedom "for one who abstracts from the conditions, the conditions of existence within which these individuals enter into contact" where such conditions prove themselves to be "independent of individuals" and beyond their control.[72] Or, as Marx writes in a well-known passage: "The Roman slave was held by chains; the wage-laborer is bound to his owner by invisible threads. The appearance of independence is maintained by a constant change in the person of the individual employer, and by the legal fiction of a contract."[73]

Although ideological and in some sense false, the semblance of individual freedom and equality also contains a truth content but not only because personal independence allows for a greater latitude of individual freedom compared to the individual immersed in ties of personal dependence. Rather, more significantly, the limits of personal independence charges the demand for a free individuality with a normative significance made possible by the development of material conditions that reveal personal independence to appear as a disfigured and stunted form of individual freedom.[74] However, Marx's idea here is not simply that the normative power of unrealized ideals can transform a society because, as he points out, the ideals of freedom and equality articulated by existing society are "merely the idealized expressions" of the "exchange of exchange-values."[75] In other words, instead of just pointing out the gap between ideals and

[70] Ibid., 163-4, which Marx calls "reciprocal isolation and foreignness" in Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 182. For more of Marx's discussion on the semblance of freedom, see Ibid., 280 and 640 as well as the *Urtext* in eds., *Marx Engels Collected Works* Vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987): 461.

[71] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 164.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 719, my emphasis.

[74] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 240ff.

[75] Ibid., 245.

their realization, Marx theorizes their overcoming, or, what Adorno calls "promise" which theory can help "rescue" from prevailing concepts.[76]

Objective Dependence as Objective Domination

In contrast to personal dependence, the social form of "objective [*sachlicher*] dependence" is specific to capitalist society and consists of a radically different form of social mediation with peculiarly *objective* features.[77] We can distinguish two related aspects of this objectivity. The first is that the principal form that the relations of dependence take are no longer those of overt superior and subordinate within personal networks. By losing their personal foundation, the relations of dependence take the form of external and exchangeable things. In other words, as a form of dependence, exchange is objective in the sense that it is through the objects of exchange, that human beings confront one another in their pursuit to acquire the means to live. Furthermore, this pursuit also becomes increasingly individualized as the individual becomes increasingly responsible for securing a function in society to which they could acquire these means, whereas in social forms based on personal dependence one's function is largely predetermined. Compared to previous forms of dependence mediated by personal relations, the daily social interactions of human beings become steadily less personal as their relations are increasingly mediated by exchangeable things, most glaringly money.[78]

[76] We will return to these ideas in greater detail both in Ch. 4 and the concluding chapter.

[77] Gould argues that the objective forms of dependence include "money or exchange," capital, and the machine (Gould, Carol C. *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Theory of Social Reality*. MIT Press, 1980: 16).

[78] "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment' " *Manifesto* eds., *Marx Engels Collected Works* Vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976b): 486-487.

In section III below, we will consider the several determinations of these objective forms in more detail, specifically as the products of labor in the form of commodities and capital. For now, it is enough to point out that the second dimension of objectivity follows from the first. Namely, that upon closer inspection, the exchangeable things that constitute this form of dependence as objective are revealed to be moments in a dynamic system that *objectively* confronts individuals as a series of compulsions that do not immediately appear to be coercive but rather as an outcome of an unavoidable and fate-like natural necessity. In other words, while the centrality of exchange in objective dependence obtains its objective character through the mediating function played by objects of exchange, these thingly means by which human beings interact take on a life of their own as "an objective relation *which is independent of them.*"[79] Such independence of the relations themselves is already evinced by the "very necessity of first transforming individual products or activities into exchange value, into money" thereby obtaining and demonstrating "their social power in this objective [*sachlichen*] form."[80]

While Marx will develop this second dimension of objective dependence with the analysis of capital, in the *Grundrisse* he begins to explain how relations acquire an objective form as over against the people whom they mediate by noting the growing need to consult "lists of current prices, rates of exchange, [and] interconnections between those active in commerce through mails, telegraphs."[81] In this passage, Marx explains such necessity as an indication that the "world market" is becoming a "system of general social metabolism" growing in scale and reach as it subsumes or displaces previous ties of personal dependence across the globe. Indeed, the

[79] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 158 (my emphasis). Despite the turns in the development of his thought and the seemingly ceaseless debates over the continuities and discontinuities in Marx's thought, the concern that the product of human activity dominates human beings colors his thought from the 1844 Manuscripts to *Capital.*

[80] Ibid., 161.

[81] Ibid.

expansion of the world market is not only a quantitative transformation in terms of expansion but also a qualitative transformation of the system of dependence into something increasingly autonomous [*Verselbstständigung*].[82] That is, "individuals now produce only *for* society and *in* society"[83] whereas individuals had previously produced for definite needs in pre-capitalist social forms of personal dependence. Such definite needs determined production but how these needs were determined, as suggested above, was inseparable from super- and subordinate relations and in no way should be understood idyllically. In short, the autonomization of relations of dependence suggests that "social production is not subsumed under individuals" but rather "individuals are subsumed under social production."[84]

However, since the compulsion to produce for definite needs is no longer directly mediated by overtly personal relations of domination, the compulsion to produce "*for* society and *in* society" appears to emanate from the aggregation of the personal needs and desires of individuals themselves, and not as an "alien" force.[85] Such misrecognition stems from the fact that objective dependence is *objectively* social but "not *directly* social" in that the organization of society and the ends of human activity are not the result of conscious deliberation among human beings acting in concert (regardless of the political form that may take).[86] Rather, as Marx continues in this passage: "social production exists outside of them as their doom [*Verhängnis*]."[87]

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[82] Ibid., 160.

[83] Ibid., 158 (my emphasis) and 163.

[84] Ibid., 158, (trans amended).

[85] Ibid., 245.

[86] Ibid., 158; cf. 488

[87] Ibid., 158 (trans amended).

Domination, personal and objective and the role of class

Marx's description of objective dependence as a development of the relations of personal dependence also suggests a significant transformation in the form of *domination*. Above, I mentioned that societies organized by relations of personal dependence are attended by forms of *personal domination*, and that capitalist society, which is organized by relations of objective dependence, is attended by forms of *objective domination* that are impersonal and abstract.[88] We also reviewed that given the explicit nature of personal domination in societies organized by relations of personal dependence, the abolition of relations of personal dependence allowed for the emergence of the independent individual. However, we can now understand why the dissolution of personal forms of domination appears to be the abolition of relations of domination *as such*. However, as Marx remarks, the relations of objective dependence are "very far from being an abolition of 'relations of personal dependence'; they are the dissolution of these relations into a general form."[89]

At first glance, the idea that personal relations of dependence and domination take on a "general form" suggests that the motley forms of super- and subordinate relations of rank, estate, caste, and so on have been streamlined into the centrality of the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whose particular class characteristics are disguised by formal freedom and equality. On the one hand, such an assessment is true insofar as capitalist society is the product of human history, which has hitherto been the "history of class struggles," and continues to be

[88] Not all forms of domination and servitude in the prevailing world are identical with this form of compulsion. However, insofar as nearly the entire world has become traversed with relations of objective dependence, theories of other sorts of domination would seem to at least need to articulate the *relationship* between objective domination of capitalist society with other types of domination, be they gender, sex, racial, ethnic, etc.

[89] Ibid., 164.

traversed by class hierarchies.[90] However, on the other hand, domination's "general form" in capitalist society is not simply the continuity of class society.[91] In the passages on the historical analysis of forms of personal dependence, Marx does not even mention "class" but rather "definite relations" including caste, estate, and so on. More importantly, to interpret the "general form" of personal dependence as simply the class rule of the bourgeoisie jettisons the detailed descriptions of the nature of objective relations and ignores the nuance of Marx's analysis of class struggle in *Capital.* Social classes are an essential feature of capitalist society and their conflicts are often the locus of brutal exploitation, however, classes and their antagonism are themselves derived from the form of capitalist social organization. Class struggle is a feature of the capital relation itself; class struggle is not the fount of capitalism's contradictory nature but rather an effect or expression. In *Capital,* Marx contends that the capitalist process of production as a total process—which includes the process of reproduction of the entire society and its members—produces commodities and surplus value. But it also reproduces the capital-*relation* itself, which reproduces the mutually antagonistic working class and the bourgeoisie. The antagonism of exploiter and exploited—the wealthy and the common—does not reproduce the social system as a whole; this antagonism is a mere feature of the reproduction process. That is to

[90] *Manifesto* in Marx and Engels, *MECW* 6: 483.

[91] However, it would be a mistake to claim that there is a radical break between personal and abstract domination, as they each are forms of *domination.* In other words, while there are vital differences in the form of domination intrinsic to capitalistic society (i.e. alienation), the nature of this domination contains strong elements of continuity. Marx points out that personal and overt forms of domination can have their own mystifying effect. For example, in the Middle Ages where "serfdom forms the broad basis of social production… the dominance [*Herrschaft*] of the conditions of production over the producers is concealed by the visible relations of domination and servitude, *which appear as the direct mainsprings of the production process*" (Marx, *Capital* III: 970, my emphasis. The peculiar continuity and transformations of domination, as well as the historical emergence of the *possibility* of abolishing domination make up some of the central aims of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Stanford University Press, 2002).

say, the system of the universal exchange of commodities reproduces the classes whose composition and antagonism presuppose the exchange of labor-power.[92]

That relations of personal dependence take on a "general form" cannot be sufficiently explained by the dependence of one class on another or by the domination of some groups by others. Rather, as we will explore in greater detail in the next section, objective dependence is also a form of domination that is abstract and socially general. Indeed, such domination is characterized by Marx as alienation insofar as the relations of objective dependence are "nothing more than social relations which have which have become independent and now enter into opposition to the seemingly independent individuals; i.e. the reciprocal relations of production separated from and autonomous of individuals."[93] It is in this manner that the relations of objective dependence are "merely the elaboration and emergence of the general foundation of the relations of personal dependence."[94]

It is precisely the abstract and general character of objective dependence that falsely suggests that relations of domination have been overcome. Insofar as "the ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc. are in fact exploded, ripped up," the emergent general form of dependence appears to unshackle the individual and thereby "seduces the democrats."[95] Indeed, that the relations of objective dependence constitute a form of "spontaneous interconnection…[a] material and mental metabolism which is independent of the knowing and willing of individuals," it "has been said and may be said that this is precisely the

[92] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 725-746.

[93] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 164. See also Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 202-3, 169-70.

[94] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 164.

[95] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 163.

beauty and greatness of it."[96] In other words, it is certainly remarkable that the relations between human-beings in capitalist society can and do function without need of conscious human direction or even knowledge of these operations.[97] Yet, insofar as the relations of human beings have become "separated from and autonomous of individuals," such a form of dependence is neither democratic, nor the product of conscious human activity. By taking on a general form, relations of dependence are not overcome but themselves become our "lord and master."[98]

III. Critique of political economy as the critique of individuality

As we have seen, the *Grundrisse* reveals a great deal about the intimate connection between the form of individuality in capitalism and the specific social relations of which it is an expression, including why the truncated form of personal independence is falsely seen as individual freedom *tout court*. In the previous section, we also followed Marx's analysis of objective dependence primarily via the exchange of commodities and the growing autonomy of social relations as exemplified in the world market. In this section I would like to deepen the analysis of "personal independence based on objective dependence" by drawing on the analysis that Marx provides in *Capital* of the social form of labor and the form of value, or simply, the "value-form." By deploying the categories of labor, value, and commodity I will elaborate the insights Marx provides in *Grundrisse* on the connections between forms of social relations and individuality in order to address the problem that began this chapter. This problem, if you recall, is to explain the social necessity of the contradictory form of individuality (as simultaneously

[96] Ibid., 161.

[97] "They do this without being aware of it" [*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 166-167.

[98] Marx, *Grundrisse,* 164.

abstract/concrete and atomistic/embedded) and its relation to paradoxical dynamic of individualization as de-individualization.

Form of labor and individuality

Above we discussed that the historical form of modern individuality is essentially the product of the specific form of the social relations in modern society.[99] Hence, the form of individuality in capitalist society appears as personal independence because the corresponding form of social relations (expressed by that independence) is objective dependence. Now, we must extend the analysis of objective dependence in order to explain the contradictions endemic to the form of individuality— the simultaneity of its abstract and concrete as well as its atomistic and embedded dimensions—which we have seen in the last chapter have often been inadequately grasped by academic political theory.

With the categories of the critique of political economy, we can reach the following conclusion: actually-existing individuals obtain their *concrete* specificity only insofar as they "count" or are "validated" as *abstract* individuals, which means that in order to secure their means of subsistence they must successfully and continually sell their labor-power. Likewise, since the dominant form that individuals confront each other in capitalist society is as owners of commodities, the preponderant *form* in which actually-living individuals are *embedded* is necessarily *atomistic*. Certainly, other forms of social embeddedness based on familial, ethnic, or geographic features may exist in addition to the atomistic relations, but in a society based on waged-labor it is atomism that characterizes the predominant manner of acquiring the means of subsistence. Likewise, one could reasonably argue that atomism is inescapable in a society based

[99] The individual presupposes the species, which presupposed society, which never exists as such, but is always a specific society.

on exchange, especially in the contemporary context of an ever more enveloping global economy.

Labor and social mediation

To render this explanation of the contradictory form of individuality plausible, we must once again examine the peculiar social character of *labor* in capitalism. Let us first reconsider a pre-capitalist form of society where *personal dependence* characterizes all social relations including relations of production, the distribution of wealth and the division of labor. Here the mediation of labor and its products are subsumed, organized, and mediated by other types of more overt social relations including those of kinship, the family, or master-servant relations.[100] Within these societies, the *social form* of labor and its products are indistinguishable from their *natural or particular form*.[101] In the Middle Ages, for instance, labor and its products "take the shape, in the transactions of society, of services in kind and payments in kind."[102] Because ties of personal dependence, such as lordship and bondage, constituted the primary form of social relations, it was "the distinct labor of the individual in its original form" that constituted the specifically *social* character of *labor* in that society.[103] Marx points out that a similar qualitative social form of labor can be seen within the peasant family who produces many of its own products in that the social character of the labor and the products are stamped by the "specific social imprint of the family relationship" and the division of labor within the household.[104]

[100] Ibid., 170ff. Also see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 150ff.

[101] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 171.

[102] Ibid., 170.

[103] Marx, *Contribution*: 33.

[104] Ibid.; Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 170-171.

In capitalist society, however, labor takes on a social character wholly different from its natural and particular forms (i.e. concrete laboring activities). Labor no longer appears only in its qualitatively distinct forms because it is no longer subsumed under other social relations. Rather, labor gains an unprecedented significance as constituting a social relation *itself* instead of being mediated by other types of social relations. Marx illustrates this changed function of labor in capitalism by describing how it obtains a "two-form social character." On the one hand, it must satisfy a "social need" determined within the social division of labor and, on the other hand, it must "satisfy the manifold needs of the individual producer."[105] However, in capitalist society the products of labor are not directly consumed by the producers but are exchanged for the means of subsistence. Hence in capitalism labor can "satisfy the manifold needs of the individual producer" only insofar as this labor can be universally and equally exchanged with any other kind of useful labor.[106] In other words, whereas the social character of labor had been subsumed under other social relations within societies based on personal dependence, labor now acquires peculiar independence as a social relation that mediates itself. Marx strains to underscore this vital point with our inherited concepts: "the conditions of labor which creates exchange value are *social determinations* of labor or *determinations* of *social labor,* social however not in the

[105] In other words, labor in capitalist society serves two specific functions: (1) labor as the means of production and (2) labor as the means of acquiring the necessities of life.[105]}Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 166). (See also Grundrisse, 156-7; 158).[105] I borrow this description from Moishe Postone, who characterizes this twofold social character as "labor as the means of production" and "labor as the means of acquisition." As we will discuss below, Postone also clarifies Marx's category of "abstract labor" as the form of abstract social mediation, we could also call labor as "socially mediating activity." See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 150.

[106] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 166. Cf. *Grundrisse*, 156-7; 158.In other words, labor has a two-fold *social* character in that it functions as (1) a means of production and (2) as the means of acquisition; the function labor has acquired a new social significance vis-a-vis its role in pre-capitalist social formation: *now*, labor *itself* constitutes a social mediation. On the idea of "abstract labor" as self-mediating social relation, see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 123-185.

general sense but in the particular sense, denoting a specific type of sociality [*Gesellschaftlichkeit*]."[107]

However, the majority of those who labor in capitalist society do not acquire the means of subsistence by exchanging the direct products of their labor but by exchanging their labor capacity as a product—that is, as a commodity (i.e. "labor-power.").[108] The widespread sale of this capacity to labor for a definite amount of time as an exchangeable thing to those in control of the means of productionindicates the ascendency of the commodity-form as a central category for capitalist society.[109]

Following the two-fold form of the commodity as the "direct unity of use-value and exchange-value," the commodity labor-power is also a unity of two dimensions.[110] On the one hand, labor has a *concrete* character as "purposive productive activity" which gives the commodity its particular useful aspects.[111] On the other hand, labor is universally exchangeable insofar as the commensurability of different concrete laboring activity rests on a common substance: a "spectral objectivity" as being homogenous "human labor in the abstract," or "abstract labor."[112] However, it would be a mistake to conceive the abstract and concrete aspects of labor as independent from one another. As Marx writes in the first edition of *Capital:* "there

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[107] Marx, *Contribution*: 31-32 (trans. amended).

[108] If capitalism were characterized by the former, we would not encounter a world of those who sell their capacity to labor but a society of independent producers and self-proprietors. For example, while yeoman agriculture certainly existed in no small number in parts of the world in the development of capitalism, such an organization of agriculture became incompatible with large-scale industrialized farming and consequently become a tiny minority in industrialized countries.

[109] According to Marx, the defining features of a capitalist is not simply *ownership* of capital but an agent whose "subjective purpose" is the valorization of value, or the capitalist is capital personified. Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 254-255.

[110] Marx, *Contribution*: 41.

[111] Ibid.; Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 131-137.

[112] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 128.

are not two differing kinds of labor lurking in the commodity, but rather the same labor is specified in differing and even contradictory manner—in accordance with whether it is related to the use-value of the commodity as labor's product or related to the commodity-value as its merely objective expression."[113] So, even in labor's twofold social function as described above, its concrete *and* abstract dimensions are equally vital for if labor is to fulfill a social need within the division of labor, it must exist as "a definite useful kind of labor" (i.e. concrete labor); yet, at the same time, if labor is to function as the means of acquiring subsistence for private laborers, it must be universally exchangeable as abstract labor.[114]

It is important to note that it is *not* the case that all concrete labor is abstract by virtue of a subjective evaluation of numerous kinds of concrete labor as "labor in general." Labor is not abstract because of the act of thinking labor in its generality, but rather abstract labor is socially general because it exists as a general social mediation.[115] However, the crucial dimension of understanding labor as a social relation is that abstract labor—just as the value of the commodity—can never be expressed as such. Rather, the products of labor —both as concrete and abstract labor—take on an objectified form, initially in the form of the commodity. Therefore, just as the use-value of the commodity serves as merely the material bearer [*Träger*] of its exchange-value, the "concrete labor become the form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labor."[116] At bottom, this inversion of concrete and abstract is rooted *not* in *our*

[113] Karl Marx, "The Commodity [1867 Edition]," in *Value: Studies By Karl Marx*, ed. Albert Dragstedt, (London: New Park Publications, 1976): 16.

[114] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 166. Marx is quite explicit that concrete labor has a social dimension, however, the social dimension of utility does not serve as the form of social mediation in capitalist society; rather, between commodity and commodity, use is irrelevant as the interchange has been reduced to a purely quantitative relation. See, Marx, "The Commodity," 31-32.

[115] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 152.

[116] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 150. Marx makes this formulation much clearer in the appendix to the first edition of *Capital*: "Within the value relation…the abstractly general counts not as a property of the concrete, sensibly real; but on the contrary the sensibly-concrete counts [*gilt*] as the mere form of appearance or definite form of realization

ability to abstract through our mental faculties but rather is rooted within the value-relation, which is a "real abstraction."[117]

Hence, what gives labor its abstract character is not a supposed physiological identity of heterogeneous concrete labors but rather that labor acquires and expresses a *social character* separate from its natural, particular, or concrete characteristics.[118] The objective character of identical human labor as value is "purely social."[119] As mentioned above, no longer is labor simply concrete productive activity toward a specific end ("concrete labor") that is mediated by other overt social relations as they were in pre-capitalist societies. In capitalist society, labor is not only concrete but also functions as a social relation that is itself self-mediating. However, abstract labor is not only socially general because labor constitutes the mediating connection between all producers in capitalist society, but also because the nature of that mediation is socially general as well.[120] As concrete labor, each laboring activity taken together constitutes a vast collection of various concrete labors within the social division of labor, whether they are

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of the abstractly general" (Appendix, 139-40). As Marx himself adds, this "inversion [*Verkehrung*] makes understanding difficult" (Ibid., 140).

[117] Although the concept is derived from Marx, he never uses the term "real abstraction." (cf. "abstraction in action, Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. II: The Process of Circulation of Capital* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991): 185. "The conversion of all commodities into labor-time is no greater an abstraction, *and is no less real* [*reele*], than the resolution of all organic bodies into air" (my emphasis). As Toscano succinctly puts it, real abstraction for Marx is *neither* "the extraction of an essential kernel of reality from the fleeting figures of historical development" *nor* an intellectual "separation of general forms from concrete life" Alberto Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," *Rethinking Marxism* 20, no. 2 (2008): 275. For other discussions of real abstraction, see Ilyenkov, *Dialectics of Abstract and Concrete;* Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, and Helmut Reichelt, "Marx's Critique of Economic Categories: Reflections on the Problem of Validity in the Dialectical Method of Presentation in Capital," *Historical Materialism* 15, (2007).

[118] Those approaches that consider abstract labor as physiological category have what could be called labor-embodied theories of value or "substantialist conceptions of value," which assume that value as a substance can be found in a single commodity. For critique of "substantialist conceptions of value" and abstract labor see Helmut Reichelt, "Problem of Validity"; Heinrich, "Reconstruction or Deconstruction?," 90-94; Werner Bonefeld, "Abstract Labour: Against Its Nature and on Its Time," *Capital & Class* 34, no. 2 (2010); Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's* Capital (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012): 49.

[119] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 138-139.

[120] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 152.

weaving, tailoring, or teaching. As abstract labor, each laboring activity functions in the same way as a social mediation. However, if the totality of laboring activities are taken together as abstract labor, they do not constitute a vast collection of individual abstract labors but rather "a general social mediation…socially total abstract labor. Their products thus constitute a socially total mediation—value."[121]

Therefore, value is not only a historically-specific form of wealth as discussed above, but is also the predominant social relation in capitalist society. However, one of the major difficulties in analyzing how value constitutes a social mediation is that it is inseparable from its objectification in the products of labor. That is to say, if the substance of value is "purely social," this social quality takes on an independent expression in the products of labor. In other words, labor's objectifications— as commodities and capital—have a dual form insofar as they are both products of concrete labor and objectified forms of social relations.[122] To understand the significance and implications of the fact that social relations between people in capitalism take the form of things and the crucial relation to the form of individuality, we now turn to Marx's analysis of the value-form.

Value-Form as Social Form of Individuality

Certainly one of the most difficult aspects of Marx's critique is his analysis of the value-form, the importance of which has been underscored by the New Reading.[123] As the unity of use-value and exchange-value, the commodity has a "natural form" and a "value-form."[124] If the

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

[123] The classic texts on this overlooked dimension of Marx's analysis include Hans-Georg Backhaus, "On the Dialectics of the Value-Form."

[124] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 138.

commodity's value-form functions as the means by which commodities relate to one another as values, then we can see that the value-form is the commodity's *social* form: "*Social form* of the commodity and *value-form* or form of *exchangeability* are thus one and the same thing."[125] Much of the discussion around the value-form concerns the elaboration of its primary aim according to Marx himself: "to show the genesis of the money-form" as the conceptual derivation of the necessity of a universal equivalent in a capitalist society along with money's fetish character.[126] It is in the latter, the value-form's intimate connection to the fetish, where we can begin to understand the connection between the social form of labor and the social form of individuality in capitalism.

As is well-known but often incorrectly understood, the fetish character of the commodity and of money concerns the expression of social characteristics as natural and directly perceptible so that their social dimensions do not appear social at all.[127] However, the occlusion is not an illusion which can be conjured away by correct consciousness but a real illusion emerging from the objective form of social relations in capitalism.[128] For instance, the commodity is a "sensuous supersensuous thing" insofar as it contains sensuous properties as a use-value and a spectral objectivity as value; yet the former expresses the latter so the commodity's social dimensions

[125] Marx, "The Commodity," 28-29; Karl Marx, "The Value-Form [1867]," *Capial & Class* 4, (1978): 140.

[126] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 139, trans. amended; 188ff

[127] Marx, *Capital* Vol. III: 963.

[128] Marx provides a far clearer explanation of the fetish in the Value-Form appendix of the first edition of *Capital*, which is worth quoting at length: "It is a definite social relation of the producers in which they equate [*gleichsetzen*] their different types of labour as human labour. It is not less a definite social relation of producers, in which they measure the magnitude of their labors by the duration of expenditure of human labour-power. But within our practical interrelations these social characters of their own labors appear to them as social properties pertaining to them by nature, as objective determinations [*gegenständliche Bestimmungen*] of the products of labour themselves, the equality of human labors as a value-property of the products of labour, the measure of the labour by the socially necessary labour-time as the magnitude of value of the products of labour, and finally the social relations of the producers through their labors appear as a value-relation or social relation of these things, the products of labour . Precisely because of this the products of labour appear to them as commodities, sensible-supersensible [*sinnlich übersinnliche*] or social things." Karl Marx, "Value-Form," 142.

appear simply to be inherent to its sensuous properties. However, what makes the commodity's value-objectivity [*Wertgegenständ*] fetishistic is not simply that a social dimension inheres in a natural-sensuous dimension but that its social character cannot be discovered within the commodity-body [*Warenkörper*] itself but only within its relation to other commodities; that is, in exchange.[129] Like the commodity, the money fetish is a result of the money-*form* as the independent manifestation of value, or, the universal general equivalent. However, the object (e.g. the piece of paper or coin) that functions as money can only function as money because all other commodities relate to it *as* money. The thing serving as money, then, appears to possess this ability as a socio-natural property of the thing. Marx suggests that the fetish character of the money form is even more striking than the commodity form in that while a commodity possesses an objective value-objectivity in addition to an objective physical use-value objectivity, money, insofar as it is an independent manifestation of value, appears directly as a value-thing [*Wertding*], or, as an abstraction appearing as a thing.[130]

Due to the complexity of the value-form analysis and the presentation of the fetish character of the commodity under a separate heading in *Capital,*[131] it is easy to overlook the significance of Marx's remark that the enigmatic characteristics of the commodity- and money-form are rooted in nothing other than the *forms* themselves.[132] Not simply a colorful addendum to Marx's analysis of the commodity, the fetish character of the commodity follows from his

[129] "So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond" Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 177.

[130] This analysis of the money form can help explain the persistence of bourgeois conceptions of money as purely fictional, merely symbolic, or as possessing an intrinsic value. Ibid., 235-237. Heinrich provides an excellent summary of these points, p 71-79.

[131] In the first edition of *Capital,* the fetish character of the commodity was enumerate as the "fourth peculiarity" of the value-form.

[132] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 164.

analysis of the value-form.[133] Indeed, in the first edition of *Capital,* the fetish is one of the of four "peculiarities" [*Eigentümlichkeiten*] of the "equivalent form of the commodity," which Marx describes as "the *form* in which it [the commodity] is directly exchangeable with other commodities."[134] In addition to the fetish, the three other peculiarities are (1) **"**use-value becomes the form of appearance of its opposite: value" wherein a natural form "conceals a social relation," (2) "concrete labor becomes the form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labor," and (3) "private labor takes the form of its opposite, namely labor in its directly social form."[135] We have already explored the first peculiarity of the "equivalent form" in the observation that the use-value serves as the form of appearance of value insofar as the most various use-values are universally equivalent, so that value gains an objective expression in the body of the commodity. Here, I would like to briefly explore the second and third peculiarities since they reveal a great deal about the form of individuality as abstract/concrete and atomistic/embedded.

Simultaneity of abstract and concrete

The second peculiarity—that concrete labor serves only as an expression of abstract labor— follows not only from the form-determinations of the commodity[136] but also from the very nature of capitalist production: the production of use-values intended for exchange.[137] Qualitative differences between concrete laboring activities are wholly irrelevant from the point

[133] For an analysis of mistaken interpretations of this sort, see Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*: 5-60.

[134] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 147.

[135] Ibid., 148-152. See also Karl Marx, "Value-Form."

[136] As discussed above, abstract labor is not a *special type* of labor expenditure but the function of labor in capitalism as value-producing and a form of social mediation.

[137] Thus, Marx characterizes the capitalist production process as the unity of the labor process— "purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values" —and the valorization process—the production of value continued past the point of where the value of labor-power has reconstituted itself in the produced commodity as the reconstituted elements of the value of its inputs plus surplus-value. Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 283-306.

of view of labor's capacity as value-producing. As Marx points out: "the labor represented in the product of labor only goes to create value insofar as it is undifferentiated human labor, so that the labor objectified in the value of a product is in no way distinguished from the labor objectified in the value of a different product."[138] The specific laboring activity of concrete labor does not count as value-producing unless objectified into a commodity which is then sold. In this manner, the equalization of the products of labor is proven in practice.[139]

The crucial point revealed about the process of validation, however, is that the essence of the commodity, labor, and the entirety of the capitalist production process is abstract. Yet, at first glance, the commodity, labor, and production immediately appear, respectively, only as a useful-thing, purposeful activity, and the objectification of laboring activity into something useful (i.e. the labor process). After critical analysis, however, these dimensions serve only as the necessary form of appearance of their opposite: value, abstract labor, and the process of creating value (the valorization process). Due to the peculiar form-determinations of value, these latter dimensions are disguised. What is missed, then, is that within the value relationship "the abstractly general counts [*gilt*] not as a property of the concrete, sensibly real [*sinnlich wirklichen*]; but on the

[138] Karl Marx, "Value-Form," 140.

[139] Therefore, the practical truth of this constantly-occurring abstraction requires no theoretical "proof" but rather an analysis seeking "to grasp and explain *theoretically* the process of equalization of commodities…in close connection with the equalization and distribution of social labor in the process of production." Economistic critiques of labor theories of value attribute to the theory a purpose alien to it—namely "to find a *standard* of value which would make it possible in practice to compare and measure the quantity of various products in the act of market exchange…[in] the absence of of precisely established units of labor with which to measure various forms of labor different from each other in terms of intensity, qualification, danger to health, etc." Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*: 125.

contrary, the sensibly-concrete counts as the mere form of appearance or definite form of realization of the abstractly general."[140]

In a similar manner, actually existing individuals obtain their concrete particularities of individuals by proving their validity as abstract individuals. Consider that the overwhelming majority of actually-living individuals rely on the sale of their labor power to acquire the means of subsistence. However, it is not simply the means of subsistence that one acquires via waged-labor but the possibility, however constrained, of developing one's capacities *as an individual*. Not simply from the activity undertaken in waged work, which for many would afford little room for such pursuits, but by the relative independence gained from the non-necessity of personal dependence that is paid for by subordinating oneself to objective dependence.[141]

There is another crucial similarity between the abstract essence of concrete labor in commodity producing society and the figure of the abstract individual. As was discussed in the previous chapter, critics of the abstract individual traced its abstraction back to the figure of the equal bearer of rights, which serves to both smuggle in certain egoistic assumptions of individuals (such as instrumentally and freely chosen relations) and occlude politically salient features (such as structural inequalities based on race and sex). Likewise, we reviewed how revisionists retorted by arguing these features of abstract individualism are hardly ever explicitly endorsed by liberal theorists except as rhetorical exaggerations against the vestiges of feudal privilege. Furthermore, some revisionists add that if some of these traces of abstract

[140] Marx, "Value-Form," 139-140. This inversion of abstract and concrete appears absurd to sense only insofar as we continue to confuse thought determinations with social determinations which in no way depend on our thought of them to exist. I will return to this point in Chapter 4.

[141] Despite all of its palpable shortcomings, the ability of women (most notably bourgeois) to enter the workplace on an increasing scale nevertheless widened the latitude for personal independence by weakening the structural foundations for the *patria potestas* of the domestic sphere. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, "Individualization and Women,"; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 2009): 721-751.

individualism can be found within liberal conceptions of the world, they are rooted *not* in liberal norms or institutions but in man's inherent "unsociable sociability"[142] or from the nature of cooperation in developed, heterogeneous, and modern societies.[143]

Based on the analysis of the value-form we can now understand some of the truth and falsity of these assessments of the abstract individual. The abstraction inherent to the conception of the individual as a bearer of rights as the basis of the legal subject in liberal juridical theory follows directly from the centrality of commodity owner in capitalist society. However, the analysis of the value-form shows that this connection is far deeper than the more commonplace criticism that the abstract basis of the law is simply a weapon of class interest where the "democracy of the market" is used to veil the despotism of the workplace and the structural inequality of bargaining position between buyer and seller of labor-power.[144] Rather, the analysis of the value form (or, the social form of the commodity) illustrates the objective basis, necessity, and, hence, reality of the abstract individual in capitalist society. Specifically, the abstract individual reflects the form of the human subject whose relations with others are mediated by objects,[145] or, a system in which social relations "appear as what they are… material relations between persons and social relations between things."[146] The individual for whom "[a]ll concrete peculiarities which distinguish one representative of the *genus homo sapiens* from one

[142] This term is best known from Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* but is a persistent theme in Enlightenment philosophy. For further discussion, see Allen Wood, "Kant's Fourth Proposition: The Unsociable Sociability of Human Nature," in *Kant's Idea for a Universal History With a Cosmopolitan Aim a Critical Guide*, ed. James Schmidt Amélie Oksenberg Rorty.

[143] e.g. Rosenblum. See Chapter. 1

[144] C. J. Arthur, "Editor's Introduction (1978)," in *The General Theory of Law & Marxism [Revised]*, ed. C. J. Arthur, (Transaction Publishers, 2003): 39.

[145] Evgeniĭ Bronislavovich Pashukanis, *The General Theory of Law & Marxism* [Revised] (Highland, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003): 113.

[146] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 166.

another dissolve into the abstraction of man" finds its expression in the legal subject as the bearer of rights because of the commodity character of capitalist society.[147] Just as the fetish character of the commodity makes it appear as if the social character of a thing arise from its sensuous-natural properties (e.g. that a useful thing is exchangeable because it is useful), one can see the fetish character of the individual with reference to the legal relation. Indeed, natural law begins with the axiom that "each person possesses his body as a free instrument of his own will" thereby attributing a definite social relation of a human-being within a specific social configuration to a natural-inherent property of the human being.[148]

Insofar as the commodity owner gains its universal significance by the fact that most people in capitalist society have only their labor power to sell, it is arguable that the ultimate basis of the abstract individual is the real abstraction of labor in commodity production. This idea requires some elaboration.

Actually-existing individuals are, on the one hand, a collection of human beings with various concrete particularities. On the other hand, actually-existing individuals are abstract insofar as they count as juridical bearers of rights or economic bearers of interests. Although codified in law and in economic textbooks, the abstraction of individuals is not simply established ideally.[149] Rather, the abstraction of actually existing individuals into identical units obtains a practical truth via the exchange of commodities, above all the commodity character of waged-labor. The reduction of the different kinds of concrete labor into abstract labor "is an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production. The conversion of all

[147] Pashukanis, *General Theory of Law*: 113.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Hence, it is not surprising that *de jure* equality, say before the law, is demonstrably fanciful when considering a number of socially salient group characteristics

commodities into labor-time is no greater an abstraction, and is no less real, than the resolution of all organic bodies into air."[150] In other words, as Rubin explains in his brilliant analysis, the "equalization of labor in a commodity economy is not established by some previously determined unit of measurement, but is carried out through the equalization of commodities in exchange."[151] Yet, paradoxically, the real abstraction of individuals— practically achieved through the exchange of their labor thereby validating each individual as identical moments of total social labor[152]—also seems to be the conditions of possibility for developing and expressing any sort of concrete individuality! It seems that the concrete dimensions of individuals (and of labor) are mere by-products or accidents of their abstract dimensions. Furthermore, the failure to prove in practice the validity of the concrete as an expression of the abstract seems to remove the very condition of possibility of the concrete. To illustrate this dimension of the paradox with reference to the individual, consider that the use-value of the commodity labor-power for the one who sells it is its ability to acquire the means of subsistence. However, if this "capacity for labor remains unsold, this is of no advantage to the worker."[153]

Atomism as a form of embeddedness

To explain how the preponderant *form* in which actually-existing individuals are *embedded* is necessarily *atomistic,* let us turn to the third peculiarity of the equivalent form—that as an equivalent, private labor takes the form of its opposite, namely labor in its directly social form. Commodity production presupposes the conglomeration of private labors in the sense that the

[150] Marx, *Contribution*, 30.

[151] Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*: 127.

[152] Marx writes that "Labor, which is thus measured by time, does not appear in the act [*in der Tat*] to be the labor of different subjects, but on the contrary the different working individuals seem to be mere organs *of* the labor." Marx, *Contribution*: 30-31 (Trans. amended and original emphasis restored).

[153] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 277. We will return to the massive implications of this paradox in the next chapter.

totality of laboring activities is not a function of planning but is organized spontaneously. Various private labors (or private economic units) are formally independent from one another but become expressions of social labor in exchange and therefore count as moments within total social labor. Likewise, they achieve valid uniformity when practically reduced to homogenous units of undifferentiated labor time. In other words, "anarchy in the social division of labor" follows directly from the commodity character of the products of labor.

As we explored in the last chapter, while atomism is widely condemned by liberal theory, it follows precisely from the self-organizing dimensions of the capitalist social division of labor which, as we saw previously, "seduces the democrats" for it seems to be the only manner in which relations of dependence and domination can be depersonalized.

Likewise, the atomism engendered by the capitalist social division of labor also serves to buttress and encourage egoistic and privatist tendencies. Although liberal theorists rarely if ever advocate egoism, self-centeredness, or the disregard and indifference to others, they often overlook how atomistic social conditions engender these qualities, many of which individuals adapt in order to survive.[154] Yet, at first glance, atomistic features including egoism, self-centeredness, and disregard of the community are not seen to be the products of definite social relations but accorded to the individual's natural disposition.

If it is "only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labor" where "the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities," then it follows that it is only in a commodity-producing society in which

[154] Villa makes a similar point by explaining that the turn away from public concerns is not so much fueled by "craven materialism" but by rampant anxiety of one's personal and familial precarity. Dana R. Villa, *Public Freedom* Princeton University Press, 2008). Capitalist modernity's compulsion for increasing numbers of individuals to adopt a set of particular dispositions is also, obviously, at the heart of Weber's critique of rationalization.

individuals confront each other as atoms in a "relationship of reciprocal isolation and foreignness."[155]

Dynamic of capital and dynamic of individualization

As we have seen above, the form of individuality is yoked to the form of labor in capitalism. By revisiting the categories of the critique of political economy, we were able to explain the simultaneity of abstract/concrete and atomistic/embedded via the form of labor and the form of individuality. At the outset of this chapter, I suggested that the categories of the critique of political economy can link the two seemingly disparate issues of form and dynamic together: specifically, the form of individuality and the contradictory dynamic of individualization as de-individualization.

Another way of expressing this connection between form and dynamic could be stated as follows. The form of the individual is generated by and reproduces a social logic to which it is bound; this social logic is, on the one hand, a historical dynamic that has produced immense changes measured by tremendous progress in production and the domination of nature; on the other hand, this social logic is a sort of social stasis in that it ceaselessly reproduces a social order that human beings do not control, which renders them—individually and collectively—objects of domination. As an "automatic Subject," this social logic is described by Marx as capital (i.e. value-creating labor generates self-valorizing value).

On the basis of what was elaborated above we are now in a better position to understand that labor, which undergirds the form of individuality, and capital, which explains the historical-dynamic of individualization, are conceptually linked via the category of value. Previously, we

[155] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 152; 182

saw that the sociology of individualization begins to describe this dynamic by uncovering a regressive tendency within individualization as de-individualization. In light of Marx's critique of political economy, this contradictory process can be explained by the paradoxical development of capital vis-a-vis individuality: specifically, the self-negating tendency of value-producing labor. Below, we will explore how Marx's concept of "the changing organic composition of capital" explains how living labor is increasingly rendered superfluous through the development of science and technology as the predominant form of the production of use-values (e.g. the automation of production requiring increasingly less human labor). However, since value remains the dominant social form of wealth, living labor continues to be needed in production (as the substance of value) although it is increasingly anachronistic as a factor in the production of use-values (i.e. material wealth).

This dynamic of capital is also simultaneously regressive. Insofar as individuality is predicated on a specific form of labor in capitalism (which explains its abstract/concrete dimensions), the development of capital suggests this form of labor is also becoming increasingly superfluous, thereby systematically undermining the individual's very individuality through the deprivation of their means to life. In other words, although the system of commodity production had historically been coeval with the production of modern individuality, this system's own internal logic of ever increasing productivity continually renders living labor superfluous. In the next chapter, we will see how this superfluousness appears as the superfluousness of living individuals.

By considering Marx's discussion of the substance of value and its measure—abstract labor and the labor time socially necessary for production—I hope to sketch the following: the form of the individual is generated by and reproduces a dynamic which repeatedly confronts

human beings with two opposed tendencies: (1) the continued subordination to a socio-historical dynamic constituted as an alienated historical subject that renders human beings as fungible and disposable objects (or, to express the same process with different categories: value-creating labor generates self-valorizing value); and (2) the possibility that human beings could no longer be objects but subjects of their own destiny through the re-appropriation of the wealth-producing capacity created by capital as their commonly held and controlled species capacity (in other words, the abolition of value-producing labor and, hence, capital).[156] In other words, the analysis of the contradictory dynamic of (de)individualization will cede insight into its possible overcoming as the basis of a social form based on free individuality, which we will explore in the final chapter.

As an important aside, it is worth noting that the inseparability of form and dynamic also has to do with the complex and often baffling systematicity of capitalist society. Attempting to grasp "the economic law of motion of modern society," Marx subjected the real systematicity of the object with a systematic approach adequate to it.[157] But since "the present society is no solid crystal, but rather an organism capable of transformation, and constantly engaged in a process of transformation," Marx's critique of political economy is not itself a closed system.[158] In other words, Marx does not provide a positive economic science, but a critique of modern society that grasps its structure and dynamic tendencies with reference to the theory itself (i.e. self-reflexivity); in short, as the young Marx wrote to Arnold Ruge in 1843, the task of critique aims for "self-clarification…to be gained by the present time of its struggles and desires"[159]

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[156] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 704-712.

[157] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 92, cf. 133.

[158] Ibid., 93. Unlike Hegel, who considers his system as the culmination of the Absolute.

[159] https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm

Dynamic character of substance and measure of value

In the first part of this chapter, I introduced Marx's crucial distinction between material wealth and value, wherein the former is characterized as independent from labor while the latter depends wholly on labor time expenditure. Later, we explored how it is not simply labor which is the substance of value but labor in its (real) abstraction. To further develop this determination, we now need to explore the close relation between the substance of value (abstract labor) and the measure of its magnitude as "socially necessary labor-time."[160]

If the substance of value is constituted by the expenditure of abstract labor, the measure of its magnitude is not simply labor time but labor time *socially necessary* for production.[161] Socially necessary labor-time is first elaborated by Marx as simply a description of the prevailing rate of productivity, described as "the labor time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labor prevalent in that society."[162] Such a description is a further specification of the measure of the magnitude of value as labor-*time*, which is socially average as opposed to merely individual (hence, "more unskillful and lazy" labor does not generate more value even though it takes an above-average amount of time produce some particular commodity). In addition to skill and intensity, Marx lists various other factors determining the prevailing (socially average) time

[160] "The labor-time materialized in the use-values of commodities is both the substance that turns them into exchange-values and the therefore into commodities, and the standard by which the precise magnitude of their value is measured." Marx, *Contribution*: 31.

[161] Even among some astute commentators like I.I. Rubin, socially necessary labor time is given scant theoretical significance. Postone highlights the centrality of time and its social constitution as a norm (Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 186-192; 286-291. Heinrich critiques Postone's conception as supposedly overly technological focus. However, I argue, if we expand our understanding of socially-necessary labor time as not only a description of productivity, and a norm or standard which must be adhered, but also underscoring its function as a regulatory law insofar as it allocates labor and determines what should be produced, we can see some similarity between Postone and Heinrich. (Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* [trans. Alexander Locascio. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012]).

[162] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 129.

it takes to produce any given use-value at a given historical moment within a given geographical area: the average degree of skill, the level of science and its application via technology, and the conditions of the natural environment.[163]

However, socially necessary labor-time is not simply a description of productivity but also a mechanism in what Marx calls the "autonomization of value," or the abstract domination of human beings by the form of social relations in capitalism. There are two closely related dimensions of socially necessary labor-time in this capacity as the regulator of human fate: on the one hand, socially necessary labor-time is a form of *abstract time* that is *social* and *necessary,* and on the other hand, socially necessary labor-time is a mechanism in the distribution of social labor. I will consider the latter in the next chapter. For now, it is only necessary to understand the former: the compulsion of "abstract time" and "social necessity,"[164] which was already evident in the peculiar qualities of value as the specific social form of material wealth in capitalist society that we explored above. Recall that in Marx's analysis of the commodity, the substance and measure of value is altogether different than those of its use-value, or its dimension as material wealth. Yet, the commodity is the unity of value and use-value insofar as value is the social form of material wealth in capitalist society and is constituted by labor alone, whose magnitude is measured by labor time.[165] While the at first this unity seems unremarkable, the value-form of wealth expressed by the commodity contains a significant tension, which Marx traces back to the twofold character of labor as concrete and abstract: "In itself, an increase in the quantity of use-values constitutes an increase in material wealth. Two coats will clothe two men,

[163] Ibid., 129-130.

[164] Postone, 190ff

[165] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 131.

one coat will only clothe one. Nevertheless, an increase in the amount of material wealth may correspond to a simultaneous fall in the magnitude of value."[166] The labor represented in value remains unchanged by boosts in the productivity of the labor expressed in use-values because the former is measured by labor time expenditure alone, in which the same labor always yields the same amount of value per unit time. To understand the dynamic character of how the production of a surplus of value yields ever increasing amounts of use-values, we need to look at the capitalist production process more closely in the next section.

Capital as objective domination

Previously in this chapter we discussed the impersonal, abstract, and non-localized form of domination within objective dependence according to the *Grundrisse.* In that text, the sources of domination appeared to be emanating from the world market as a system of social metabolism and from relations between people that have become autonomous (and in turn, such relations dominate them as things, most glaringly money).[167] Marx develops these insights with the categories of labor and capital. The compulsive character of labor was already explored above in the discussion of labor's role as socially-mediating activity. Without the means to independently objectify one's labor in into a commodity that can be successfully exchanged, most human beings in our society of commodity owners have only their labor-power to sell as a commodity to obtain the means of subsistence.[168] As is well-known, Marx at various points discusses the historically-specific and accidental circumstances under which such a compulsion became

[166] Ibid., 136-137.

[167] For a discussion of money as the most striking form of the domination of relations over individual, see Hans-Ernst Schiller, *Das Individuum im Widerspruch: Zur Theoriegeschichte des Modernen Individualismus* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2006): 152ff.

[168] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 272.

necessary in the historical creation of the waged-worker.[169] However, the point is that the worker is coerced to continue to sell their working capacity in order to survive. Therefore, "the worker belongs to *capital* before he has sold himself to the capitalist. His economic bondage is at once mediated through, and concealed by, the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of masters, and the oscillations in the market-price of his labor."[170]

Therefore, insofar as the determination of the labor time by social necessity expresses a norm to which producers of commodities *must* adhere, 'socially necessary labor-time' is far more than a description of a rate, but also a determination of an abstract domination. This domination is constituted by the capitalist form of production: the process of creating surplus-value by means of producing material wealth or useful things.[171] Insofar as socially necessary labor-time is a rate which determines what 'counts' or is validated as socially *necessary* labor-time, it acts as a 'regulative law of nature' in determining the magnitude of value in the same way as does 'the law of gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top on him'.[172] If the "value character of the products of labor" can only be secured when these products "act as magnitudes of value," yet "[t]hese magnitudes vary continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers," then the means of production in the form of capital can hardly be said to be simply "the means" that human-beings consciously direct to fulfill their self-determined needs. Rather, human-beings' "own movement within society has for them the form

[169] Ibid., 270ff; 874ff; Marx, *Grundrisse*: 459-498; Lars Geer Hammershøj, "The Social Pathologies of Self-Realization: A Diagnosis of the Consequences of the Shift in Individualization," 41, no. 5 (2009).

[170] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 723-724.

[171] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 157-165.

[172] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 168, 129, 433ff, 557.

of movement made by things [*Sachen*], and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them."[173]

The compulsion to increase productivity on the part of the capitalist can be understood as follows. If an individual capitalist produces more use-values in a given quantity of time than the prevailing social average, this more productive capitalist in effect spreads the same amount of exchange value over more use values than the other capitalists his competitors. In effect, by lowering the "individual value… below their social value" of each commodity, the capitalist can sell them "above their individual but below their social value" thereby outselling his competitors to "command a more extensive market." The "law of the determination of value by labor-time"—while appearing as the "coercive law of competition"— "makes itself felt to the individual capitalist who applies the new method of production… by *compelling* him to sell his goods under their social value" and "forc[ing] his competitors to adopt the new method."[174]

All capitalists, in the struggle to create surplus value, will always eventually adopt this new method, and this shortened labor time will become normalized into the new socially necessary labor time. The individual capitalist can only gain an extra surplus value during the interval that it takes for his competitors to catch up. By creating more and more use values within a given quantity of time, the capitalist seeks to cheapen his commodities below that of its social value.[175] Every time the rest of the capitalists adapt to the new heightened productivity, socially necessary labor time renews itself as the norm in decreasing the value imbued in each commodity, and drives the capitalist to increase productivity to shorten labor time and decrease

[173] Ibid., 167-168.

[174] Ibid., 434-436.

[175] Material wealth is merely a "bearer of exchange value," the "material shape taken by a given number of hours or days of social labour" (Ibid., 293, 297).

the value of labor power below its social value in an endless process. Each new gain in productivity only yields short-term boosts in value while increasing the amount of material wealth produced and materials consumed.[176] The need for increasing productivity leads to the development of machinery that revolutionizes the labor process and renders human labor power increasingly superfluous for the creation of use-values. However, surplus value "does not arise from the labor-power that has been replaced by machinery, but from the labor-power actually employed in working with the machinery," because the system still operates on the regulative law of socially necessary *human* labor time as the measure of value.[177]

Capital's changing organic composition

Capital's organic composition concerns the extent to which the composition of capital *as value* (the ratio of variable to constant capital) is determined by its technical or material composition (the relation between the means of production and living labor power). A major consequence of increasing the productivity of labor is the need to increase the amount of the means of production to such an extent that this increase also becomes a condition of any further gains in productivity. The application of machinery or any other means of automation is a consequence of increased labor-productivity but only the further application of these means can increase productivity any further resulting in a "diminution of the mass of labor in proportion to

[176] This dynamic is what Postone calls the "treadmill effect" —"On the one hand, increased productivity redetermines socially necessary labor time and thereby changes the determinations of the social labor hour. That is, the abstract temporal constant which determines value is itself determined by the use value dimension, the level of productivity. On the other hand, although the social labor hour is determined by the general productivity of concrete labor, the total value yielded in that hour remains constant, regardless of the level of productivity. This implies that each new level of productivity once it has become socially general, not only redetermines the social labor hour but, in turn, is redetermined by that hour as the 'base level' of productivity" Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 289.

[177] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 530.

the mass of means of production moved by it, or in the diminution of the subjective factor of the labor process as compared with the objective factor."[178]

As we will explore in the next chapter, one dramatic consequence of the organic composition of capital is that the number of workers falls in proportion to the mass of the means of production thereby rendering the total mass of labor-power necessary for capital accumulation to steadily decline. Marx indicates that such a trend has a devastating effect on the working population insofar as the changing organic composition of capital produces a "relatively surplus population." That is to say, an ever-greater proportion of living labor-power is rendered superfluous for capital while, at the same time, capital's ever-increasing drive for short-term gains in surplus-value extraction continues to boost productivity thereby allowing the population to grow.[179]

Conclusion: Towards Liquidation or Emancipation

We have seen that Marx's categories of the critique of political economy raise several key dimensions of modern individuality and its theoretical reflection in liberal theory: (1) the nature of the individual freedom (personal independence) as it appears as more highly developed from previous forms of individuality (2) how the social preconditions (objective dependence) of individuality also necessarily restricts the scope of individual freedom to personal independence; (3) how these conditions that both develop and undermine this historically unprecedented form of individuality, also develop the conditions for a transformed society in which the form of social relations and the form of individuality are no longer in tension. In other words, it is on the basis

[178] Ibid., 773-774.

[179] Ibid., 781-802.

of "personal independence based on objective dependence" arises the possibility of a social from of "free individuality" in which social relations are subsumed under actually living individuals instead of the opposite: actually living individuals ruled by relations existing over against them.

By examining individuality with a critical social theory informed by the mature Marx, this project suggests that for political thought (including so-called normative theory) to explain what it purports to grasp, it must also self-consciously be a social theory of prevailing socio-economic conditions; that is, a critical theory of society. By theorizing the prevailing form of individuality as a multifaceted contradiction, my argument addresses two longstanding problems in academic political theory. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the political theory of liberal individualism has been structured around an apparently irresolvable opposition between the accusation of abstraction and atomism as well as its denial, such that neither side succeeds in decisively defeating or explaining the persistence of the other. By explaining the prevailing form of individuality as a function of the peculiar interplay of abstract and concrete and atomistic and embedded, I argue that the impasse within political theory is the clash of two equally correct yet one-sided accounts of liberal individualism.[180]

Another consequence offered by grasping individuality as a social contradiction seems to explain why, since at least the late 18th century, the emergence of the so-called "freedom of the individual" has simultaneously been condemned as the apotheosis of the individual's unfreedom.[181]

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[180] The difficulty in understanding modern individuality is that, as Marx writes, the "epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations." (Marx, *Grundrisse,* 84). The prevailing epoch of the "most developed social relations" is also, according to Marx, "not directly social" (Ibid., 158) since individuals are still subsumed under their social relations which exist over against them instead of vice versa.

[181] On how this peculiarity can be found in 18th century French writers, see Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity.*

In short, as was argued in the previous chapter, the contradictions of liberal individualism—which seem to either be an irresolvable normative assessment or the persistence of logical contradiction rooted in poor theorizing—are actually the expression of real social contradictions, which are reflected in thought but not recognized as such. Of course, even a critical theory cannot hope to solve a real social contradiction by "correct" theory. However, by more adequately posing the problem, a critical theory of individuality allows us to recognize and de-naturalize a longstanding and politically-consequential social contradiction. Such a theory could do so by explaining how certain social contradictions are socially necessary only under prevailing conditions, which are socio-historically specific and therefore possibly transitory.

By the conclusion, we will see how Marx's form-categories reveal individualization's two tendencies, which pull the individual in two opposing directions: liquidation and emancipation (Ch. 3 and 4).

Ch. 3: Liquidation of the Individual and the Superfluity of Human Beings

In the following chapter, I argue that by reading Adorno's thesis of the "liquidation of the individual" in light of Marx's critique of political economy, we are able to develop a clearer account of the status of contemporary individuality that is only partially revealed by what Honneth calls the "normative paradox" of self-realization. Through Adorno and Marx, we will see that the promise of individuality as self-realization and its self-undermining tendencies are both rooted, paradoxically, in the same socio-historical relation - the centrality of the organization of labor by the temporal logic of capitalist valorization. As expressed by Marx's concepts of "socially-necessary labor time" and "relative surplus population," the mechanisms and effects of this logic reveal that Adorno's consistent yet often overlooked allusions to objective economic conditions, especially the reduction of human labor to abstract labor time, suggest that as long as the capitalist social structure prevails, the superfluousness of waged-work is experienced as the superfluousness of human beings. However, it is precisely within the structure of the temporal domination of human-beings by the product of their activity, inheres the potential for an emancipated society in which human beings are not deemed superfluous but rather, waged-work. The possibility of an emancipated individuality continues to persist amid its relentless denial because the social logic that prepares this horizon also produces, paradoxically, the individual's absolute fungibility, which not only drives conformist and complicit tendencies but also undergirds the increasingly superfluousness of actually-existing individuals for the reproduction of capitalist society.

Adorno's thesis of the liquidation of the individual explicitly takes up the objective socioeconomic conditions as well as the subjective experiential elements of the individuality of self-realization as it is produced, constrained, and deformed through the social relations specific

to capitalism, or what Adorno calls the "totally socialized society" [*die total vergesellschaftete Gesellschaft*]. By emphasizing the individual's feelings of "coldness," "superfluousness", and "powerlessness", Adorno's analysis of the liquidation of the individual lends clarity to Marx's insight that as long as the capitalist social structure prevails, the superfluousness of waged-work is experienced as the superfluousness of human beings.[1] However, it is precisely within this contradiction—in the ongoing liquidation of the individual—that we can detect an immanently emancipatory potential that is directly tied to the organization of work and social time.

In what follows, I will first review Adorno's analysis of the contradiction of individuality, which can be understood in three registers: individuality as a means of self-preservation, individualism as a mode of social conformity, and individualization as the liquidation of individuals. These three interrelated moments turn on Adorno's understanding of the "exchange-principle" which is inseparable from his critique of "identity thinking." I argue that if we view these categories in light of Adorno's critique of individuality, we can begin to see a striking affinity — which might otherwise be missed — with Marx's mature critique of political economy which explicates the alienation of human-beings collectively and individually as the domination of human beings by the product of their activity. Or, in a more specifically Marxian register, as the abstract domination by capital (or, self-valorizing value), which is made possible by a specific regime of wealth based on objectified time mediated by a specific form of labor. Despite Adorno's frequent and strong allusions to the conceptual vocabulary of Marx's critique of political economy, many interpretations downplay or even ignore these passages. Indeed, prevailing interpretations largely regard Adorno's work as abandoning the critique of political economy in favor of an increasingly totalizing critique of the instrumental character of reason

[1] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 609.

oriented to the domination of nature. Within such a philosophy of history, the liquidation of the individual is explained as simply the logical outcome of Adorno's pessimistic theoretical framework. To the contrary, as I will argue below, the liquidation of the individual should be understood as a thoroughgoing account of the contradictory tendencies within the existing form of the individuality of self-realization.[2]

Only by returning to Marx's *Capital* will we be able to understand the significance of Adorno's engagement with the critique of political economy.[3] Therefore, in the latter half of this chapter, I will reconstruct a brief but detailed explanation of Marx's concept of "socially-necessary labor time" and "surplus population." As we will see below, the essential connection between Adorno and Marx concerns their complementary insights into the temporal nature of capitalist social domination, which, when subjected to critical analysis, reveals the conditions of possibility for an emancipated society, which is to say, a society governed by *human* needs and imperatives as opposed to the needs and imperatives of the alienated product of human activity.

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[2] First raised by Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) and later expanded by Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* Columbia University Press, 1986) and Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1991). Their critique claims that the first generation of critical theory, especially Adorno, developed a critique of reason that was so "totalizing" that the critical capacity of philosophy and the social sciences to reveal truth was irretrievably compromised. So wedded to the received interpretation, more recent commentators simply ignore Adorno's constant references to the economic conditions of society, labor, labor-time, and exchange in his discussion of the liquidation of individuality. For important exceptions to this line of interpretation, see Dale Shin, "The Precarious Subject of Late Capitalism: Rereading Adorno on the "liquidation" of Individuality," ed. Zubin Meer, (Lexington Books, 2011), Dirk Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* transcript Verlag, 2011), Helmut Reichelt, *Neue Marx-Lektüre: Zur Kritik Sozialwissenschaftlicher Logik* (Hamburg: VSA, 2008): Ch. 2.

[3] This analysis calls into question a longstanding view of otherwise very different interpretations that Adorno had abandoned the critique of political economy starting in the early 1940s and maintained an implicit and blatantly problematic model of "state capitalism" based on the work of his colleague Friedrich Pollock. Barbara Brick and Moishe Postone, "Critical Pessimism and the Limits of Traditional Marxism," *Theory and Society* 11, no. 5 (1982); Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*: 149-163; Honneth, *Critique of Power*: 57-96. For recent reiterations of this interpretation along with a summary of the state capitalism thesis, see Tobias ten Brink, "Economic Analysis in Critical Theory: The Impact of Friedrich Pollock's State Capitalism Concept," *Constellations* 22, no. 3 (2015); Manfred Gangl, "The Controversy Over Friedrich Pollock's State Capitalism," *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 2 (2016). An important exception to this is Braunstein (2011), who rejects the view that Adorno's work was based a theory of state capitalism.

The analysis offered by this chapter can be called a "critique and rescue"[4] of individuality which means that an essential element of the critique of this constellation of individuality within the totally socialized society is the question of what can be saved, rescued, or redeemed—that is, what is to be made right—within this precarious situation of individuality. We will explore this question more fully in the next chapter. The present chapter prepares us for this transition.

"Torn between oppositions"

Throughout his work, Adorno insists that modern individuality exists as a contradictory unity of formation and disintegration in that the social-historical processes which give rise to modern individuality simultaneously threaten it with liquidation. Adorno's notion of this paradoxical progression and regression has long been theorized in classical and contemporary sociology with the concept of individualization.[5] Taking the work of Georg Simmel and Jacob Burckhardt on the birth of modern individuality as a point of departure, Adorno's theory of individuality is above all concerned with the contradictions in the process of individualization, which cannot be understood simply as the expansion of personal liberty through the dissolution of restrictive social bonds such as estate, status, or rank. Rather, the emergence of the individual is possible because it was coeval with the development of a specific form of society which, on the one hand, grants individuals unprecedented independence from interpersonal relations of domination, thereby allowing and even demanding an unprecedented latitude for self-development and self-reliance. On the other hand, the same process leaves individuals *more* dependent on objectified, impersonal relations typified by those often associated with the modern

[4] Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction* Duke University Press, 2009).

[5] The importance of this framework and its shortcomings were discussed in Chapter 1.

state and the market economy.[6] In other words, the socio-historical development of modern individuality should be understood neither as a linear historical rise and subsequent decline, nor as simply as an expression of a fundamental antithesis between individual and society. Rather, insofar as modern individuality is made possible by a social formation that also fragments, alienates, and liquidates actually existing individuals, the prevailing form of individuality exists as a contradiction; that is to say, it exists in the mode of being denied.

For Adorno, to be an individual is not only a social determination but one particular to a specific form of society. If we understand the individual as an "indivisible sample of the human species" who is an "*empirical* subject of speech, thought, and will",[7] then it is obvious that individuals are found in every form of society. However, as Adorno points out, such a description of the individual amounts to nothing more than the idea of biological individuation, which, even on its own terms, presupposes the species; any discussion of the human species, furthermore, presupposes society. Yet, society *as such* is just as abstract as "the individual" since society always assumes a particular *form*. Hazarding a definition, the term "individual" for Adorno means a human-being who differentiates their own interests and aspirations from others and likewise establishes their self-preservation and self-development as a norm.[8]

Akin to Marx's analysis of individual freedom as personal independence, Adorno points out the *independence* that individuals experience as "freedom" suggests that freedom amounts to pursuing one's "own ends, which are not immediately exhausted in social ones; to this extent it

[6] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 200. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 259.

[7] Dumont, *Essays on Individualism*, 62.

[8] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 46 and Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (New York: Verso, 2005): 164.

[freedom] coincides with the principle of individuation."[9] Hence, for Adorno, such a notion of freedom within capitalist society "remains appearance…no less than individuality generally." Indeed, freedom and individuality remain appearance because, as Adorno writes, the "law of value asserts itself over the heads of formally free individuals. They are unfree, according to Marx's insight, as its involuntary executors, and indeed all the more thoroughly, the more the social antagonisms grow, in which that conception of freedom first formed."[10] It is within this form of the individual as it exists in capitalist society that Adorno diagnoses a crisis.

Dimensions of Liquidation

The contradiction of the individual can be best understood as a constellation of interrelated phenomena including individuality as a means of self-preservation, individualism as a mode of social conformity, and the individual's ongoing self-liquidation. While we will proceed to examine each instance of the contradiction in turn below as it crops up in seemingly different spheres of social activity, such a separation is strictly heuristic. As we will see below, these various facets of the contradiction of individuality have their objective social basis in the form of labor in capitalist society.

The first moment of the contradiction is that in capitalism the existence of modern individuality is increasingly rendered a mere *means* of self-preservation. Echoing Marx's insight from the *1844 Manuscripts* that life becomes simply a means to life and therefore a lifeless thing, Adorno underscores the stark contrast between individuality's potential and individuality's disfigurement when yoked to self-preservation.[11] Individuality is essentially *inessential* for the

[9] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 258.

[10] Ibid., 258 (trans. amended).

[11] Theodor W. Adorno, "Society [1965]," 151; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 244-245.

survival of individual human-beings. As merely a means and therefore a by-product of self-preservation, the prevailing form of individuality experiences freedom as simply "the *possibility* of sustaining one's life."[12] Such "freedom" to pursue one's own needs amounts to the "cover-image [*Deckbild*] of the total social necessity, which compels the individual towards *ruggedness,* so that it survives."[13]

Individuality's reduction to a means of self-preservation closely tracks its conformist tendencies. The critique of such tendencies comprises some of the better-known features of Adorno's thought which he develops through the idea of pseudo-individuality in his analysis of the culture industry. The essence of this idea can be most clearly seen in one's choices as a consumer, where individuals mistake as their own acts of choosing what really is chosen *for them* on the basis of the increasing standardization of cultural products.[14] While recent scholarship has rightly helped disabuse the impression of Adorno as the mandarin social critic, the interpretation of the culture industry writings tend to restrict the analysis of conformism to the sphere of consumption, which is then often taken to be historically specific to the Fordist postwar era of the mass production of consumer goods including what was previously considered relatively autonomous products of culture. As a result, Adorno's insights tend to be distorted as parochial and historically anachronistic.[15] Nevertheless, Adorno also consistently explains the hallmarks of conformity as adapting, adjusting, submitting, and ultimately identifying with one's *function* within the capitalist social division of labor. Indeed, conformity is not just *molding*

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[12] Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006): 6.

[13] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 258-262.

[14] Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* IX, (1941): 25ff and Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gephardt, *Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982): 278ff.

[15] Shane Gunster, *Capitalizing on Culture: Critical Theory for Cultural Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

one's self to fulfill a social function within the division of labor but also in expressing gratitude for it in so far as this function lasts.[16] In other words, not only is conformity through consumption a product of the organization of labor, but also that social conformity creates an "atmosphere of social contentment."[17]

The objective bases of seemingly subjective dimensions of conformism can be understood if we see that the ultimate *criterion of self-preservation* in a capitalist society is the individual's "successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schema assigned to it."[18] Self-preservation increasingly requires that individuals relinquish their individuality - "blurring the boundary between itself and its surroundings, and sacrificing most of its independence and autonomy."[19] This abstractly coercive demand to seek out and fulfill a function cuts across the class dimensions of capitalist society in that the individual can preserve themselves either through the successful sale of their labor power, or acting as an agent or "bearer" [*Träger*] of capital by carrying out of the logic of capital's endless drive to accumulate. Whether proletarian or bourgeois, the individual "must mold themselves to the technical apparatus body and soul."[20] As Adorno puts it most strikingly in a lecture: "Humankind has reached a point today where even those on the commanding heights cannot enjoy their positions

[16] Theodor W. Adorno, "Society," 145.

[17] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth," in *Soziologische Schriften II.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, *Gessamelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003): 44. For a similar analysis of the deeply conformist trends in individualistic societies, see Fromm, *Escape from Freedom.*

[18] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21-22.

[19] Theodor W. Adorno, *Current of Music* (London: Polity, 2014): 462.

[20] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 23 and Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente*, 115-116.

because even these have been whittled away to the point where they are merely functions of their own functions."[21]

Therefore, despite allusions to powerful interests, groups, or cliques in his earlier writings, Adorno later more frequently explains class domination as being increasingly subsumed under the anonymous rule of the social process [*Vergesellschaftung*].[22] Within this context, Adorno often explains that the compulsion for individuals to conform and to adapt is both *objective* and *abstract*. It is objective, insofar as it is a consequence of the socio-historically specific form of capitalist social relations in which the majority of actually-living individual human beings reproduce themselves by obtaining a function within the reproduction of capital. This domination is abstract insofar as it appears to emanate from the seemingly indubitable facticity of existing conditions, which exerts itself like a force of nature on human-beings, worker and bourgeoisie alike[23]. Although class society persists, "ancient social oppression…has become anonymous."[24]

Hence, conformity is *not* primarily driven by the individual's incapacity or indolent unwillingness to develop their individuality (contra J.S. Mill, Thoreau, and other strands of aristocratic individualism).[25] Rather, individuals tend to conform by virtue of the objective threat

[21] Adorno, *History and Freedom*: 6 and 178-180. Also see Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Stanford University Press, 2003): 116-117 and 124-125.

[22] The term *Vergesellschaftung*, which has plagued English translators of Adorno for decades. If one looks at Adorno's English language works, he himself often uses the term "socialization." Frederic Jameson, in his translation of Adorno's seminal 1965 essay "Society," sometimes translates the word as "social rationalization" and at other times, far less accurately, as "penetration by the market economy." Theodor W. Adorno, "Society," 151.

[23] Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," 124-125; Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente*, 115-116, and Adorno, *History and Freedom*: 6 and 178-180.

[24] Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," 116.

[25] The priority that Adorno gives to the objective condition of conformity does not mean that Adorno argues we are utterly powerless to resist conformism. He stressed the importance of a democratic education which would buttress this resistance. Through his work and radio programs, he endeavored to give his audience the tools to think and

of being impoverished, ostracized, and even annihilated via forced economic exclusion.[26] As he writes in the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment:*

> It is the concrete conditions of labor in society [*konkrete Arbeitsbedingungen in der Gesellschaft*] which enforce [*erzwingen*] conformism - not the conscious influences which additionally render the oppressed stupid and deflect them from the truth.[27]

The priority of the objective conditions of labor, however, does not suggest that the analysis of these conditions is sufficient for understanding the vicissitudes of social conformity, diagnosing its deleterious psychic effects on the consciousness of the individual, or, as we will explore below, for accounting for the relation between conformism and the ongoing catastrophe Adorno places under the heading of "Auschwitz." However, such an analysis of these conditions of labor [*Arbeitsbedingungen*] remain vital insofar as they comprise the conditions of possibility [*Möglichkeitsbedingungen*] for the phenomena associated with the liquidation of the individual. Furthermore, because Adorno does not fully elaborate but rather alludes to these conditions, they can be easily misunderstood or overlooked. Hence, a certain reconstruction of Adorno's thought made possible by a specific reading of Marx is necessary.

In addition to the subordination of individuality to self-preservation and the rising pressure of conformity, the on-going liquidation of the individual can be detected in the paradox

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judge for themselves which is most powerfully articulated in Adorno's discussion of the techniques of manipulation in fascist propaganda. See Theodor W. Adorno, "Democratic Leadership and Mass Manipulation (1949)," in *Vermischte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986); Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 89-104 and 191-204. For secondary sources that discuss the centrality of Adorno's concern with education, thereby helping disabuse the idea that Adorno's thought is elitist and pessimistic, see Stefan Müller-Doohm, "Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas-Two Ways of Being a Public Intellectual," *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, no. 3 (2005); Volker Heins, "Saying Things That Hurt: Adorno as Educator," *Thesis Eleven* 110, no. 1 (2012); Shannon L Mariotti, "Adorno on the Radio: Democratic Leadership as Democratic Pedagogy," *Political Theory* 42, no. 4 (2014).

[26] Adorno, "Society," 149 and Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 211.

[27] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 29 (my emphasis).

that the social proliferation of individuality simultaneously reduces individuals to mere exemplars - individualization becomes de-individualization.[28]

> Through the mediation of the total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity.[29]

As was suggested above, social conformity constitutes a crucial aspect of individuality's liquidation insofar as it manifests what might be called "subjective de-differentiation*"* - the erasure of idiosyncrasies, the erosion of the ability to think for oneself, and so on. Nevertheless, the ongoing liquidation of the individual cannot be fully explained by the growing disappearance of the independent ego under the pressure of social conformity alone. Rather, the liquidation of the individual has a far more sinister dimension - namely, that the ultimate expression of being made into an *example* of the species is to have one's individuality *literally* liquidated. In the section of *Negative Dialectics* entitled "After Auschwitz", Adorno writes: "Genocide is absolute integration which is everywhere being prepared, where human beings are made the same - polished, as the military calls it - until they are literally cancelled out, as deviations from the concept of their complete nullity."[30] As Gerhard Schweppenhäuser suggests: "In the concentration camps it was not the historical-philosophical construction of the individual that was liquidated, but actual individuals. They were literally liquidated; but first they were de-individualized, reduced to mere numbered examples of species."[31]

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[28] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 18 and Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 125.

[29] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 29.

[30] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 354ff (trans. modified).

[31] Schweppenhäuser, Gerhard. *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*. Translated by James Rolleston. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

To understand the relevance of Auschwitz for Adorno's analysis of the on-going liquidation of individuality - the terrifying ease at which the commensurability and fungibility of human-beings can become superfluousness and expendability - we must first note that the constellation of issues Adorno places under the heading of "Auschwitz" include trends in society that are more widespread than the camp bearing its name or even the immense Nazi apparatus of organized murder despite the particular significance of their horror. Rather, Adorno understands Auschwitz as the most extreme manifestation of the regressive tendencies in the development of modern civilization that he and Horkheimer describe as the "dialectic of Enlightenment" wherein Auschwitz marks a transformation - a "qualitative leap" in the "progress towards hell" - an expression of the ever-sameness that Adorno calls suffering in "pre-history" and an index of the paradoxical persistence of regressive tendencies within "progress."[32]

Important elements of this tendency that are salient for understanding the liquidation of individuality include the present form of society based on the exchange-principle, its fate-like control of human-beings, and the pervasive powerlessness felt by society's "captive membership", all of which are rooted in the objective socio-historical conditions which had made and continues to make Auschwitz possible.[33] Chief among these objective conditions include "the present form of the organization of labor", which links the experience of "superfluity" - the feeling of the "insignificance of each of us in relation to the whole" - with the social reality in

[32] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*: §149. Ibid. Borrowing the term from Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, what Adorno understands as 'pre-history' is all hitherto history up until the present. It is a thoroughly reflexive concept since it is the *possibility*, latent within the development of the productive forces in capitalism, which would allow human beings to individually and collectively self-determine *human* history that casts all hitherto history as 'pre-history'.

[33] Adorno, *Critical Models*: 191.

which every individual is "absolutely fungible and replaceable."[34] I will return to this crucial point in the next section.

The subjective dimensions of the liquidation of individuality form a crucial part of the conditions of possibility for the "relapse into barbarism" of Auschwitz because these dimensions are the reflex of the objective organization of labor in present society.[35] For instance, Adorno points out that Auschwitz "would not have been possible" without "coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity [*der Kälte, des Grundprinzips der bürgerlichen Subjektivität*]."[36] As the profound indifference to whatever may happen to "everyone else except for a few to whom they are closely bound", coldness helps perpetrate atrocity:

> The inability to identify with others was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred in the midst of more or less civilized and innocent people…*one pursues one's own advantage before all else* and, simply not to endanger oneself, does not talk too much. That is a general law of the status quo. The silence under terror was only its consequence.[37]

The mechanism at work between coldness and atrocity is that conformism also tends to erode the individual's "power of resistance" meaning that "people also forfeit those qualities by virtue of which they are able to pit themselves against what at some moment might lure them again to commit atrocity."[38] The "general law of the status quo" that engenders coldness mirrors the experience of surviving as an atomized functionary of the capital relation, most often experienced when selling one's labor-power in exchange for the means to life. Hence, coldness is

[34] Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001): 109 (trans. amended, my emphasis).

[35] Adorno, *Critical Models*: 192.

[36] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 355 (trans. modified).

[37] Ibid., 201, my emphasis.

[38] Ibid., 193.

the result of the "subjection of life to the process of production."[39] The propensity to this disposition - coldness as "indifference to the fate of others" - haunts everyone under capitalist conditions due to the fundamental "precondition" in which the individual exists as an "isolated competitor."[40]

Liquidation of Individuality and the temporal "conditions of labor"

To understand the meaning and implication of Adorno's repeated allusions to the conditions and organization of labor as the key elements behind the liquidation of the individual within the objective social process, we must once again turn to Marx's critique of political economy. Adorno's analysis itself points directly in this direction. In *Negative Dialectics,* Adorno argues that the condition of possibility for the identity of individuals and hence their absolute fungibility is the "exchange principle", which he explains as resting on "the reduction of human labor to an abstract general concept of average labor time."[41] If we consider Marx's concept of "socially necessary labor-time" [*gesellschaftlich notwendige Arbeitszeit*], we will more fully understand the significance of labor-time as an objective social condition of the on-going liquidation of individuality - both as the erosion of the historical anthropological type of the relatively autonomous bourgeois individual as well as the absolute fungibility of actually living individual human beings. By illustrating the temporal character of the social form of wealth as well as the temporal dimension of the distribution of social labor in capitalist society, socially necessary labor-time provides an important insight into the fundamental heteronomous

[39] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*: 30.

[40] Adorno, *Critical Models*: 201.

[41] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 149.

character of capitalist society, where "[t]ime is everything, man is nothing; at most he is time's carcass."[42]

In the previous chapter, we considered socially necessary labor-time as the compulsion of "abstract time" and "social necessity." Here, we will explore its relation to the fungibility and superfluousness of human beings by turning to the function of socially necessary labor-time as a mechanism of the distribution of social labor. Marx points out that what counts as "social labor" is neither predetermined, nor fully known by producers in advance. For the private labor expended in the production of commodities to be validated as social labor, it must prove to be a valid expenditure of socially necessary labor-time. Socially necessary labor-time is validated through exchange, or the transformation of a commodity's value into a universal equivalent (the money-form) through its sale.[43] Prior to the sale and realization of the value of the commodity, social labor-time exists "in a latent state so to speak" because the "point of departure is not the labor of individuals considered as social labor, but on the contrary, the particular kinds of labor of private individuals…which *proves* [*gilt*] that it is universal social labor."[44] Therefore, Marx adds: "Universal social labor is consequently not a ready-made prerequisite but an emerging result."[45]

Although what counts as "socially necessary" is not a product of planning, it can be approximated by the producers in advance, however, can only be confirmed through sale.[46]

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[42] Marx and Engels, *MECW* Vol. 6: 127. For a detailed explanation of how socially necessary labor time operates as an abstract social norm, see Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 191. For the concept's relevance for the distribution of social labor, see Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value.*

[43] On the centrality of the concept of validation (*Geltung*) for Marx's critical appropriation of value theory, see Helmut Reichelt, "Problem of Validity."

[44] Marx, *Contribution*: 45.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 202.

Hence, even if a quantity of commodities is produced under the prevailing rate of the time socially necessary for their production, there is the possibility of expending *too much labor time* on their production if they remain unsold (which is part and parcel of the wholly crisis-ridden mechanism of validation inherent in the commodity-form in that its value is realized until its sale). Considering this possibility in light of the temporal dimension of validation, Marx writes:

> If the market cannot stomach the quantity [of linen] at the normal price of 2 shillings a yard, this proves that *too great a portion of the total social labour-time has been expended in the form of weaving.* The effect is the same as if each individual weaver had expended more labor-time on his particular product than was socially-necessary [47]

One can imagine that if a warehouse full of commodities that were produced according to the prevailing rate of socially necessary labor-time could not be sold, the value of these commodities effectively evaporates despite absolutely no changes to their material qualities. Value is not "embodied" within commodities simply because they are products of labor.[48] Commodities only prove they are embodiments of value by their sale for what makes the products of labor into commodities is the result of a social process.

Socially necessary labor time and "socially unnecessary" human-beings

A dramatic consequence is implied by the logic of socially necessary labor-time, which strongly resonates with Adorno's claim that the objective conditions of labor ultimately undergird the liquidation of individuality. If the quantity of *labor-power* produced remains unsold then too much labor time has been allocated in the production of labor-power. Insofar as the commodity labor power remains inextricably bound to actually living human beings who rely

[47] Ibid., 202 (my emphasis).

[48] Numerous mistranslations of the term "presented" [*dargestellt*] as "embodied" [*verkörpert*] in Fowkes' translation of *Capital* can obscure this crucial point by suggesting that the objectivity of value is physiological instead of social (e.g. *dargestellt* would be better translated as "expressed" on pp. 131 and 136). For a critical overview of embodied theories of value, see Alfredo Saad Filho, *The Value of Marx: Political Economy for Contemporary Capitalism* Routledge, 2002): 21-33.

on its sale to acquire the means of subsistence, the macabre implication is that the persistence of mass unemployment and the specter of its increase suggests that that too much social labor time has been expended on the production of "socially unnecessary" human beings. According to the logic of capitalism's self-regulating distribution of social labor, the production of labor-power is increasingly unnecessary.[49] However, insofar as capital requires waged-labor for its reproduction (for it is the source of all new value and hence surplus value), this paradoxical tendency renders capitalist society as an ongoing and self-perpetuating social contradiction. Furthermore, insofar as actual living human beings and labor-power are inseparable, capital continually produces poverty and destitution of an ever-increasing global population. That the commodity labor power is inextricably linked to living individuals is not a concern for the logic - the "regulative law" - governing what counts as socially necessary. If their labor power remains unsold, such workers are "rendered superfluous" - that is, no longer "necessary for the self-valorization of capital."[50] The crisis of the obsolescence of waged-work appears as the obsolescence of human beings.[51]

Individuals face liquidation not only because they are absolutely *fungible* but also because a great majority of whom are increasingly unnecessary for the logic of capital accumulation. Marx's insights into capital's necessary production of a "relative surplus population, or industrial reserve army" further develops Adorno's analysis of how objective conditions of labor underlie the liquidation of individuals, even though the significance of the theory of the industrial reserve army is often restricted to its "positive" function in the accumulation of capital. However, what is less often discussed in the concept of the industrial

[49] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 782.

[50] Ibid., 557.

[51] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 391.

reserve army (and which bears directly on Adorno's concerns) is that the portion of the working-class made relatively superfluous is "always increasing"[52] despite counteracting tendencies such as the emergence of new markets and industries.[53] One paradoxical feature of capitalist production is that its tendency to increase social wealth is paid for by the increase of poverty via economic exclusion of masses of human beings. On the one hand, capitalist production tends to massively increase the productivity of social labor; that is to say, a "constantly increasing quantity of means of production may be set in motion by a progressively diminishing expenditure of human power" by means of the development of machinery and large-scale industry.[54] On the other hand, this increasing productivity made possible by the changing organic composition of capital makes it increasingly more difficult for workers to find or expect steady employment, or, to sell their labor-power.[55]

The results of this paradox are twofold. First, an ever-increasing proportion of the working-class is relegated to different strata of the industrial reserve army as capital requires an ever-decreasing expenditure of living human labor for its accumulation. Secondly, the absolute population of the working-class swells despite an increasing proportion of whom are confined to the reserve army.[56] In the ceaseless thirst for surplus-value, capital drives down the proportion of necessary to surplus labor-time in the production process. This drive to reduce necessary labor-time explains the increase of the population amid the precariousness of waged-work and the threat of immiseration because the reduction of necessary labor-time means that "the *production*

[52] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 783.

[53] Ibid., 785.

[54] Ibid., 798.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

of workers becomes cheaper, more workers can be produced in the same time, in proportion as necessary labor time becomes smaller or the time required for the *production of living labor capacity* becomes relatively smaller."[57] In other words, capital tends to "increase the laboring population, as well as constantly posit a part of it as surplus population."[58]

Although it appears as "overpopulation", the surplus population is "purely relative" because it is not determined by the availability of the means of subsistence as such (e.g. the scarcity of resources), but rather to the social conditions of producing these means. There is no "absolute mass of means of substance" [59]because "the number and extent of his [the human-being] so-called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves products of history" [60]- hence, there are no "natural" laws of overpopulation. What is considered surplus population in capitalist society is determined by a "surplus of *labor capacities*" over and beyond those laboring capacities necessary *for capital*. Hence, the "decrease of relatively necessary labor appears as increase of the relatively superfluous laboring capacities - i.e. as the positing of surplus population."[61]

A cursory consideration of the massive global population growth in recent decades in the Global South seems not only to corroborate Marx's analysis of the growing surplus population but even surpasses the speed and scale Marx could envision. The global urban population has doubled since the 1980s to about 3.2 billion and these same urban areas are expected to account

[57] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 400; Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 433ff.

[58] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 399; Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 798.

[59] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 608.

[60] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 275.

[61] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 609.

for nearly all future population growth expected to reach 10 billion by 2050.[62] Nearly 95% of this growth has occurred and is expected to continue in urban areas of developing countries, in which capital-intensive production in the countryside continues to drive a massive amount of the rural population into the cities. [63] Significantly, the draw to the cities is not due to the availability of work but to desperation, expressed in the fact that the bulk of this rapid urbanization has taken the form of the "mass production of slums" [64]which have become "a dumping ground for a surplus population"[65] who live in squalid conditions that rival the destitution of the urban poor of Victorian Europe on a scale that greatly surpasses it. However, unlike the urban poor in 19th century Europe who emigrated en masse to the Americas, Australasia, and even Siberia, this new "super-abundance of surplus labor" of the urban Third World continues to accumulate in slums in face of "unprecedented barriers to emigration to rich countries."[66] In this analysis of the explosion of the slums and the shocking depths of their squalor, Mike Davis echoes Adorno's analysis of the social preconditions of "progress towards hell": "The child witches of Kinshasa, like the organ-exporting slums of India and Egypt, seem to take us to an existential ground zero beyond which there are only death camps, famine, and Kurtzian horror."[67]

[62] Davis, *Planet of Slums*: 2.

[63] Ibid., 16-17; Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 795-796.

[64] Davis, *Planet of Slums*: 17.

[65] United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements* (London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2003): 175, cited by Davis.

[66] Davis, *Planet of Slums*: 183. It is no surprise, then, that large numbers of the refugee influx into Europe, that in 2015 swelled to levels not seen since the Second World War, are not only fleeing from war but also from desperate economic conditions. Discussion over this distinction is currently bitterly contested insofar as 'economic migrants' are not eligible for refugee status to petition for asylum under international law. Furthermore, right-wing European political parties have attempted to depict economic refugees not only as simply economic migrants but as 'welfare seekers' who are demonized as parasites.

[67] Davis, *Planet of Slums*: 198.

The tendency of capital accumulation to produce a relatively superfluous population on an expanding scale is one of the key objective conditions for the liquidation of individuals and constitutes one of the fundamental antagonisms of capitalist society. Adorno signals Marx's analysis of the surplus population when he points out that "a society which in its absurd present form has rendered not work, but people superfluous, predetermines, in a sense, a statistical percentage of people whom it must divest itself in order to continue to live in its bad, existing form."[68] Therefore, on the one hand, it appears that "by continuing to live one is taking away that possibility from someone else, to whom life has been denied." On the other hand, "if one does live on, one has, in a sense been statistically lucky enough at the expense of those who have fallen victim to the mechanism of annihilation and, one must fear, will still fall victim to it."[69]

Conclusion: Emancipation from temporal domination?

We can now see that the temporal dimension of the alienated character of capitalist society forms a crucial link between Adorno's critique of individuality and the critique of political economy, thereby making explicit the political economic basis of Adorno's critique of individuality. At bottom, Adorno tells us the liquidation of individuality is tied up with the "principle of identity" for the latter - as it is derived from the universal exchangeability of commodity-producing labor - reveals that a free individuality is hardly expressed by the relative independence of actually-existing individuals today, who are constituted yet dominated by a specific regime of production whose social form of wealth is based on an abstract form of time.

Within the capitalist mode of production, all human beings are identical and hence fungible in that their laboring capacity represents the total social labor of society but only insofar

[68] Adorno, *Metaphysics*: 113 (my emphasis).

[69] Ibid., 113.

as it is validated through the successful sale of their labor-power. If it remains unsold, it is not validated, or does not *count.* Above, we saw that with reference to Marx's analysis of the validation [*Geltung*] of value and the growing superfluity of waged-labor by means of the concept of socially necessary labor-time, we can better understand Adorno's move from identity as the basis of equivalence and commensurability to identity as the mechanism of superfluity, expendability, and liquidation that reaches its horrific zenith in what Adorno calls Auschwitz.

Although the analysis of socially necessary labor time further illuminates Adorno's assessment of the liquidation of individuality, it also points the way to conceptualizing its rescue. The truth element within the production of an "overpopulation" and the glint of a redemptive moment is the fact that capital makes unnecessary, not human beings, but waged-labor. According to Marx, what has hitherto characterized the contradictory form of modern individuality could cede to a new social form: "Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and the subordination of their communal social productivity as their social capacity."[70] The dynamic of the capitalist social form prepares the grounds for this transformation because capitalism "despite itself" is "instrumental in creating the means of *social disposable time*, in order to reduce labor time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone's time for their own development."[71] The "free development of individualities" requires that necessary labor time is reduced to the barest minimum which presupposes a society freed from a form of wealth based on the "*theft of alien labor time*" by the self-valorization of capital.[72]

[70] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 158 (trans. amended).

[71] Ibid., 158 and 708 (my emphasis).

[72] Ibid., 708.

In other words, the objective social conditions constituted by "the conditions of labor" and its temporal dimension (which appears at first glance to have little relation to shape of individuality) form the hinge between the promise of individuality and on-going liquidation. The essential connection between Adorno and Marx concerns their complementary insights into the temporal nature of capitalist social domination, which reveals the conditions of possibility for an emancipated society, which is to say, a society governed by *human* needs and imperatives as opposed to the needs and imperatives of the alienated product of human activity.

Ch. 4: Critique Rescue of Liberal Individualism

Up until this point, we have been examining individuality as a historically emerging social phenomenon intrinsic to the contemporary forms of human social existence, consciousness, and experience that forms a keystone in liberal society and the doctrine of liberalism. In the following chapter, we will once again turn to the concept of individuality but here we will begin to articulate its emancipatory tendencies. As we have seen already in the previous chapters, there exists an objective tendency that Marx expresses through the changing organic composition of capital, which continually creates the possibility of a general reduction of working time for all human beings which could potentially lead to a fundamental and radical reshaping of the social division of time, which would be the precondition for an emancipated society based on free individuality.[1]Astride this objective tendency attends a subjective correlate within the concept of individualism. Although inseparable from a specific determination of the human being (modern individuality) as well as a historical dynamic (individualization), the concept of *individualism* as espoused by broadly liberal notions obtains its specific shape by unavoidably expressing a *norm* that could be conducive to a demand for society to emancipate itself from the objective domination bound up with the commodity form of labor. Indeed, it is precisely within the articulation of the normative centrality of the individual within liberalism, we can come to evaluate "individualism" as a critical concept that points beyond existing conditions.

However, the potentially context-transcending norms expressed by liberal individualism are entwined with ideology that functions to legitimate the existing form of individuality and the capitalist society it depends on despite all of contradictions, limitations, and counter-tendencies.

[1] Marx, *Grundrisse,* 704ff. For discussion, see Chapter Two.

Liberal individualism's normative centrality of the individual can smuggle in far-reaching assumptions about the ontological primacy of the individual vis-a-vis society as something absolute, i.e. unconditioned. By falsely presupposing the dichotomy of individual and society, the individual becomes endowed with remarkable abilities such as self-transparency and self-mastery thereby suggesting individuals are responsible for their own fate despite living under social conditions that exert a monstrous fate-like power. One example of this line of thinking is the presumption that the conditions in which individuals find themselves are largely if not entirely the consequences of their own decisions, actions, or inactions.[2] While such notions have been criticized or amended by defenders of the liberal tradition, the belief in the sovereignty and inviolability of individual "choice" still informs much of the literature in contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy. [3]

Nevertheless, if we denounce the falsity of such notions as purely "ideological," then we risk misusing the concept because, as we will explore, ideology is not simply false belief but false belief that claims to correspond to reality out of objective social necessity. Hence, the critique of ideology is not simply to disabuse false consciousness but to reveal through ideology's untruth something true about the wrong state of existing conditions. For above all, ideology is justification and therefore contains a rational element insofar as it attempts to understand the world albeit to affirm it.

[2] For instance, a highly vulgar form would be something like people are impoverished because they let themselves become impoverished, thereby assigning responsibility for conditions which individuals largely do not actual control and suggesting those who suffer from deprivation have only themselves to blame. Albeit clad in respectable philosophical dressing, those associated with "luck egalitarianism" maintain a similar position.

[3] For instance, the notion that individual is assumed to not be socially embedded has been shown to be a caricature of liberalism. See Chapter 1 above.

Certainly, the critique of ideology of individualism is possible by confronting concept with reality. Insofar as the ideology of liberal individualism attributes properties and capacities to individuals that could only be acquired or made possible under radically transformed social conditions, ideology tacitly denounces existing conditions.[4] However, this kind of ideology critique leads to a potential pitfall inherent to immanent social criticism: by critiquing a state of affairs for not living up to its ideals—or demonstrating the gap between concept and reality—critique loses the ability to detect social tendencies that point toward the overcoming of existent society. In other words, immanent critique limits itself to the critique of "what is" on the basis of "what is" as opposed to the critique of what is on the basis of what could be.[5] Given the overwhelming dominance of existing conditions—what Max Weber likened to an "immense cosmos"[6]— immanent critique risks turning immanently affirmative. On the other hand, it is precisely within this "could be" that the promise of emancipation dwells yet neither as an abstract possibility nor as a detailed blueprint for a future society.

One of the underlying reasons that critique can remain blind to transformative tendencies is what Adorno calls "identity thinking" as the dominant form of thought in capitalist society, which misses its object by substituting the conditions of thought for social conditions by surreptitiously conflating the logical order of concepts and the formalism of thinking with the social order of existing conditions. The latter, then, are assumed to be bound by the logic of non-contradiction, which would reject the possibility that social relations constitute real contradictions. Instead of thinking "what is" (e.g. matter, the object, society), identity thinking

[4] Deborah Cook, "Adorno, Ideology and Ideology Critique," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27, no. 1 (2001).

[5] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 89-90.

[6] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.*

ends up thinking thought and hypostasizes its products. A hallmark of identity thinking is an inadequacy to grasp social-material existence in its particular form which can be shown to contain the immanent possibility of an emancipatory transformation beyond existing conditions. Every form of identity-thinking—including forms of thought that wish to transform society—remains trapped within existing conditions. For identitarian thought the critique of "what is" can only be done from the standpoint of what is. The possibility of "what could be" as the horizon of a re-organized society constituting a form of human life hitherto never achieved is either denied as impossible, or appears as abstract utopian thinking. Either way, identity thinking's smug dismissal of the possibility of another world serves only to re-affirm the existent.

To avoid this pitfall while attending to the deeply socio-historical conditions of thought, critical theory can only point to social emancipation *negatively.* Negative critique amounts to the critique of existing society from the standpoint of its immanently-possible transformation, which can be adequately done through a social-materialism that can grasp immanent possibilities that point beyond existing conditions while being adequately sensitive to the limits of what can be achieved in thought alone. As we will see by the end of this chapter, Adorno calls this form of critique "negative dialectics."

In this chapter I will argue that Adorno's social-materialism helps us articulate a critical theory of individuality as the critique "of what is" on the basis "of what could be." Adorno points the way to a *rescue* of liberal individualism's critical content or its "promise" and it can do so in a markedly more fruitful manner than could liberal theory itself. Within liberalism, critical potential is often understood as the "context-transcending" power of universal principles, or the ability of liberalism to be reflexively critical of the imperfection of actually existing liberal institutions, where that imperfection is thought to found in an incomplete realization of an idea or

model. However, as we will see, such notions fall into the trap of identity thinking insofar as the critique is one-sided; by looking only at how the object does not fulfill its concept, it misses how the concept does not fulfill its object. The latter requires translating experience—always mediated by social relations—back into the concept in order to think the object in its materiality. By doing so, critique can clarify immanent possibilities of emancipation which would otherwise be obscured. In short, Adorno's negative critique suggests that for liberal individualism to live up to its "promise," it must recognize the fundamental incapacity of the prevailing capitalist social relations to sustain a free individuality. This is turn requires a critique of liberalism's *concept* of individuality, which remains necessarily stunted in prevailing conditions. However, as we will see, an adequate critique of the concept cannot proceed purely immanently but must be done with what Adorno calls a "glance at society,"[7] i.e. taking account of the pre-theoretical socio-material conditions in which a concept is deployed within a given historical horizon.

To bring this promise of liberal individualism to light as an emancipatory tendency—that is, to rescue it— it is necessary to do so via the critique of ideology. What is needed is not simply a denunciation of liberal individualism *as* ideology but its critique, which is simultaneously the rescue of its truth content which is nothing other than its tacit denunciation of existing social conditions. However, in its liberal form, this denunciation cannot adequately understand these conditions and therefore cannot adequately criticize them. To confound matters even more, I contend that much of contemporary liberal theory that embraces individualism falls behind the insights of its already compromised 19th-century predecessors. As I hope to show below, this regression is bound up with the transformation of ideology from justification to the exuberant proclamation of what is.

[7] Adorno, *Prisms*, 33.

In the end, the positive contribution that I hope to show through Adorno's approach is to make manifest the distinction between a critique of existing conditions whose standpoint is the actualization of ideals and a critique of existing conditions which point beyond them with an emancipatory intent. This approach attempts to bring into relief the conditions under which the object can redeem what is promised to it by its concept—not by hypostasizing the concept but rather by thinking *the non-identity* of concept and matter, which is precisely how to locate theoretically where emancipatory possibilities dwell. In other words, this approach seeks a rescue of liberal individualism's emancipatory normative dimensions in a way which permits social criticism to remain immanent to its own context while pointing beyond existing conditions. We will see below, such a task can only be done negatively.

In the first section (I) of this chapter, I will lay the groundwork for the rest of the analysis by reviewing the development of Adorno's critical theory in light of the criticisms made by the so-called normative turn in critical theory that have overshadowed the reception of his work since the 1980s. Indeed, my recourse to Adorno may seem perplexing for some contemporary readers as it is widely held, following Jürgen Habermas, that Adorno not only undermines his own commitment to immanent social critique but does so precisely because his theory of ideology is totalizing[8] and his normative grounds dubious.[9] To the contrary, I hope to show later in the chapter that it is precisely Adorno's radicalization of the critique of ideology that brings into focus the potential within liberal individualism to denounce existing conditions and to demand that the world be otherwise—a critical content which stands in need of being rescued.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

[9] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985): 374. The later generations of the Frankfurt School, including Habermas but especially Axel Honneth, not only powerfully levy this critique against Adorno but also represent a sophisticated attempt to reconstruct an immanent critical theory by means of normative foundations.

Nevertheless, the first section below will proceed by reviewing and responding to the criticisms over normative grounds. This discussion will not only address the contemporary literature on Adorno but also, more importantly, it will explicate the difference between a critique based on "what is" as opposed to "what could be" through a discussion of Adorno's analysis of the limits of a purely immanent critique.

In the second section (II), I will detail how Adorno proceeds to transcend the limits of immanent critique by developing a social-materialism that he calls "negative dialectics." It will be necessary to delve into some unavoidable detail for a clear exposition of this difficult and frequently misunderstood aspect of Adorno's thought. However, a clear understanding of Adorno's critique of what he calls "identity thinking" will be crucial to understand how a negative dialectics can illuminate paradoxes of liberal individualism and, by doing so, tease out their critical potential. Therefore, in the third section (III) I will review two forms of ideology which correspond to the development of liberal thought. Through an analysis of J.S. Mill and more contemporary writers such as John Rawls, I hope to show what it would mean to rescue a critical content from liberal individualism in an age where it is no longer adequate for critical theory to proceed merely by immanently confronting theories of liberal individualism by its own norms.

I. Immanent Critique and its Normative Dimensions

As was discussed at the opening of this work,[10] immanent critique departs from the notion that human consciousness, including our reflections on it through political and social

[10] See Introduction.

theory is to its innermost core socially and historically formed.[11] By calling into question the transcendental standpoint, critical theory cannot claim to be "outside" of its own context, which includes appealing to transcendentally valid norms—that is to say, standards of judgement not only of rational description but of rational prescription.[12] However, as is well known, deep disagreement over the status of normative claims inherent within immanent critique has constituted a major point of contestation within discussion of the critical theory since the early 1980s.[13] The predominance of the normative question in critical theory grew out of impressions that the first generation of critical theory—especially Adorno—fell short of adequately grounding or justifying the superior validity and legitimacy of immanent critique vis-a-vis competing social analyses.[14] The undermining of an immanent standpoint, it is alleged, ultimately led Adorno and Horkheimer into intractable theoretical and political pessimism.[15]

[11] "The human subjects, whom psychology pledges itself to examine, are not merely as it were, influenced by society but are in their innermost core formed by it. The substratum of a human being in himself who might resist environment—and this has been resuscitated by existentialism—would remain an empty abstraction" Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 119.

[12] Hence, norms are not only moral or ethical demands but cover a wider field of justification. Freyhagen describes "normative" to "denote the considerations that provide us with reasons—not just reasons to act…but also reasons to believe…or reasons to admire." In other words, to "make normative claims is to invoke standards of judgement, and that these standards are (part of) the account we give of the reasons we have." Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*: 7.

[13] While first raised by Habermas, the idea of the critical theory's "normative deficit" has become commonplace; in addition to Habermas, the other classic examples of this critique include: Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986): esp. Ch. 5-6; Honneth, *Critique of Power*. For recent overviews of the state of this debate, see Fotini Vaki, "Adorno Contra Habermas and the Claims of Critical Theory as Immanent Critique," *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 4 (2005); Craig Browne, "The End of Immanent Critique"; Dan Sabia, "Defending Immanent Critique." *Political Theory* 38, no. 5 (2010): 684–711.

[14] In many ways, the need for reconstructing critical theory which began with Habermas seems to have been prompted by the perceived "pessimism" of the postwar Frankfurt School, especially Adorno. The once ubiquitous assessment of gloomy despair—which originated in Habermas and Honneth's early critiques—has been slowly chipped away in more recent assessments such as Mariotti, Shannon 2014. "Adorno on the Radio: Democratic Leadership as Democratic Pedagogy." *Political Theory* 42, no. 4: 415–42.

[15] Adorno's alleged pessimism is common to otherwise diverse and mutually opposed interpretations. For example, Habermas, Honenth, Benhabib, Postone, Held, and others.

Neither an exhaustive overview of the critiques mounted by the normative turn, nor the articulation of possible rebuttals with reference to Adorno's own writings are necessary for the present chapter (fortunately, however, much of this terrain is well travelled). Nevertheless, the issue of normativity is important not only because of its centrality in contemporary critical social theory, but also it raises some of the inherent problems of immanent critique, above all, the possibility of "transcending" given conditions from a theory which denies the possibility of a transcendental perspective.

Therefore, to continue our argument, we need to briefly review the supposed normative problem in Adorno's thought, which has largely taken the form of a debate over "normative foundations" in the sense of fundamental philosophical justifications of the normative content of critical theory. For the most part, the specific concern has been over the moral and ethical justification of the intrinsic demands for social and political transformation within critical analyses. However, if we distinguish the concern of normative "foundations"—which turns out to be alien to Adorno's entire concept of critical social theory—from the issue of Adorno's "normative claims," we can bypass an increasingly arcane and rarefied debate over justification and validity in moral and ethical philosophy. Making this distinction will lay the groundwork for us to pose the question of the role of norms in immanent critique and how the status of norms constitutes one of the limitations of a "purely immanent" critique of the ideology of liberal individualism.

Impossibility of non-normative theory

It is important from the outset to note that any political or social theory that purports to free of normative claims—including ethical and moral judgements[16]—is highly dubious, not only

[16] The distinctions between these terms are discussed below.

for its supposition of a transcendental standpoint as criticized above, but also for issuing essentially subjective accounts under the guise of "objective description" which often serves to tacitly legitimize existing conditions.[17] The attempt to explain some phenomenon at the level of pure description is a conceit of traditional theory insofar as it assumes that "the facts" in themselves are unconditioned and need to simply be recorded by an observing consciousness without an account of the mediation between consciousness and what the fact purports to express. According to Karl Popper, the philosopher of science and critic of the Frankfurt School, a "proposition is 'true' if it corresponds to the facts, or if things are as described by the proposition."[18] Yet, even when traditional theory admits that the object of knowledge is mediated through the subject, as Popper indeed does,[19] such a position often does not consider the opposite: that the subject, in Adorno's words, "forms a moment of the objectivity which he must recognize; that is, forms a moment of the societal process."[20] One cannot grasp reality as an object of social knowledge outside of society; that is, without taking into account one's own relation to society. "Reality, the object of societal knowledge, can no more be imperative free [*Sollensfreies*] or merely existent [*Daseiendes*]—it only becomes the latter through direction of abstraction—than can the values be nailed into a firmament of ideas."[21] If traditional theory does not take seriously these forms of mediation, any attempt at "objective description" remains trapped within appearances and neglects how "what is" has come to be; in short, history is

[17] Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 116ff.

[18] Karl Popper, "The Logic of the Social Sciences," in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology,* ed. Theodor W. Adorno, (London: Heinemann, 1976).

[19] Ibid.

[20] Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 16.

[21] Ibid., 117.

effaced.[22] Furthermore, in attempting to arrange these "objective descriptions" by hoisting abstract classificatory systems and schemas onto the object, traditional theory turns out to be exceedingly subjective in the sense that the theorist strays from the logic of the object by surreptitiously imposing "procedural rules of conceptual order" instead of following the logic of the object itself.[23]

With such an understanding of "the facts" and its idealist mode of inquiry, theory which purports to be purely descriptive does not grasp social reality but masks it,[24] not only at the level of impoverished explanation but also by tacitly legitimating existing conditions: "[in] the concept of facts to which one must adhere…knowledge is reduced to the mere reproduction of what is."[25] Even those forms of positivism (including Popper's) that rightly reject the possibility of "value-freedom"[26] tend to smuggle in tacit affirmation of existing conditions[27] since "theory" tends to be subordinated to "the facts," thereby restricting thought to the form of a hypothesis to be confirmed or denied by the facts thereby proscribing theory's "moment of anticipation which essentially belongs to it."[28] Trapped within existing conditions, this positivist account of theory

[22] Adorno, *Positivist Dispute,* 117. Marx, *Grundrisse*: 100ff.

[23] For example, consider classifications of types of "society" as simple to more complex. Classificatory thinking based on higher levels of logical abstraction can smuggle in historically specific phenomena or reify them; e.g. prestige and status vis-vis class disparity. See Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," 70; Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 7-8.

[24] Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy,* 13.

[25] Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 56. It is not accidental, for Adorno, that sociology ever since it was conceived historically—above all in Comte—has had a technocratic dimension akin to "a belief that if scientific experts, who make use of certain methodological techniques, are entrusted with the direct or indirect control of society, they will bring about the most balanced and stable possible state—that is to to say, a functioning state, a state in which, thorough being extended and improved, existing systems are preserved" Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 12.

[26] Popper, "The Logic of the Social Sciences," 96ff.

[27] Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 17-18.

[28] Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 112.

forbids the speculative moment of articulating immanent possibilities.[29] According to the positivists' conception of theory as hypothesis, theory must conform to "what is" by its own desiderata.

The "normative turn" and demand for foundations

The question of "normative foundations" was initially raised in Habermas' critique of the alleged failure of Adorno and Horkheimer, beginning with *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* to satisfy the requirements of an immanent critique.[30] This now familiar critique holds that Adorno and Horkheimer undermine critical theory's ability to make truth claims by radically calling into question enlightenment reason itself.[31] To salvage the possibility of critique, Habermas argues, Horkheimer and Adorno attempt a radical solution: "what enlightenment perpetrated on myth, they apply to the enlightenment as a whole."[32] Yet insofar as they do so, critique "turns against reason as the foundation of its own validity."[33] Habermas argues Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to overcome this problem of "groundless" critique by "eschewing theory" and by holding opening "a practiced spirit of contradiction,"[34] however, the result is an "uninhibited skepticism regarding reason."[35]

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[29] Speculative in "the sense of the critical self-reflection of the intellect, of self-reflection's boundedness and self-correction…intended to signify the thought that renounces its own narrowness and in doing so gains objectivity" Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 4-5.

[30] Habermas first raised the question of "normative foundations" as "difficulty" of the earlier generation of the Frankfurt School in Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985): 374. Although, in this work, Habermas was focused his critique on other aspects of their thought, most importantly the critique of ideology, which I will return to below.

[31] Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*: 170-171.

[32] Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity:* 118.

[33] Ibid., 128.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Similarly, in a revised, more sympathetic assessment, Axel Honneth argues that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would not be judged so harshly if it is considered a "world-disclosing critique of society" that employs certain rhetorical devices—narrative, chiasmus, and exaggeration—intended to "evoke a new way of seeing the social world" thereby allowing its readers to transcend their value horizons (Honneth, "Social Dynamics of Disrespect," in *Disrespect: The*

According to this view, critical theory could no longer proceed immanently by confronting social reality with its own norms, not only because of the dubious status of reason to make truth claims about reality but also because the historical socio-economic foundations of the prevailing bourgeois *norms* had been eroded in the early 20th century. Economic and political transformation in post-liberal capitalism—the institutionalization of organized labor, the concentration of capital in immense conglomerates, and increasingly active state regulation of capital tended to call into question the validity of 19th-century liberalism as a theory of society, a source of legitimation, and as an object of ideology critique. If liberal notions of freedom, equality, private property, and the sanctity of the individual had already been increasingly invalidated by the social experience of the destitution of the working-class in the latter part of the 19th-century, their validity, and certainly their supremacy, declined even further in the first half of the 20th century in Continental Europe.[36] As Benhabib points out, if free exchange on the market disappeared, which had "once actualized the normative ideals of liberal bourgeois society—individualism, freedom, and equality," it was assumed that these ideals would also disappear.[37] If such ideals were losing their social-economic bases, the classical critique of ideology would also collapse. In fact, Habermas argues it is precisely through the attempt to overcome the limitations of Marx's critique of ideology, that Horkheimer and Adorno develop their untenable "totalizing" critique.[38]

Normative Foundations of Critical Theory Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007): 51; 59-60). On the one hand, Honneth uses this argument to read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* against the prevailing interpretations that consider it either as conservative cultural criticism (i.e. Adorno as Spengler), or as world-disclosing art (i.e. Adorno as Beckett) (Ibid., 51). On the other hand, Honneth casts doubt on the book's ability to make truth claims: "For it only evokes a new and unfamiliar perspective on our social world without at the same time providing social-theoretical evidence that things actually are that way" (Ibid., 60-1).

[36] Examples include the rise of mass parties, the proliferation of non-liberal party platforms, among others.

[37] Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*: 159.

[38] Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*: 105; 118-9.

Habermas explains ideology critique—understood as the immanent and self-reflexive critique of a theory's untruthfulness—follows from the Enlightenment tradition. However, insofar as ideology critique itself (including the tools of the social sciences) loses its ability to reveal truthfulness, doubt falls over the whole project of Enlightenment. Like Nietzsche, who denounced science and morality as ideological expressions of a will to power, Habermas argues that Adorno and Horkheimer excoriate enlightenment as totally subsumed under instrumental reason. With such a radical move, critical theory appears to abandon the ideology critique as founded on enlightenment principles. Likewise, it is claimed that by abandoning the critique of political economy, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason tended to collapse fascism, Stalinism, and state capitalism into a one-dimensional "totalized domination" as the product of "one historical process."[39]

The various threads of these criticisms have been taken up and expanded by the Frankfurt School's third generation, most notably in the work of Axel Honneth, who has made normativity the centerpiece of contemporary critical theory and whose assessment of the original Frankfurt School remains highly influential. While Honneth has modified his reading of the first generation over the years,[40] his primary criticism for the normative deficiencies of the first generation has

[39] Honneth, *Critique of Power*: 35-37.

The centrality of domination in the present provides Adorno, according to Honneth with "a structural paradigm from the development of which the hidden logic of the whole process of civilization is to be read," which reveals the entirety of the "progress of civilization…as the concealed process of regression." Honneth goes on to say that the "title that Adorno gives to this process is "retrogressive anthropogenesis" and forms the centerpiece of his philosophy of history. As far a I know, Adorno never described his philosophy of history in this title. Tellingly, Honneth cites not Adorno here but rather Friedemann Grenz, *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen* (Frankfurt, 1974) and Josef F. Schmucker, *Adorno—Loqik des Zerfalls* (Stuttgart, 1977). Honneth, *Critique of Power*, 37 and 311n.

[40] For instance, compared to the denunciation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in *Critique of Power* [1988], Honneth has come to understand the work as "world-disclosing critique of society" that employs certain rhetorical devices—narrative, chiasmus, and exaggeration—intended to "evoke a new way of seeing the social world" thereby allowing its readers to transcend their value horizons (Honneth "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today," 51 and 59-60).

remained. For Honneth, the tradition of social philosophy—from Rousseau, Hegel, Marx up until the Frankfurt School—has at its core an *ethical justification*, despite repeated attempts to hide it.[41] But unlike political philosophy, social philosophy is not so much concerned with "the conditions of a correct and just social order" as it is concerned with ascertaining the *limits* that the historical situation of modernity "imposed on humans' self-realization."[42] In other words, as Honneth points out, social philosophy tends to eschew positive theory and instead amounts to "a critique of social circumstances felt to be alienated or meaningless, reified or even demented."[43] While social philosophy's criteria for evaluation has always been "of an ethical nature," the development of critical theory differs from moral and political philosophy in that it provides an "instance of reflection [*Reflexionsinstanz*] within which criteria for successful forms of social life are discussed."[44] Hence, for Honneth, critical theory must "ground its claims on the results of empirical research"[45] which can reveal the "pre-theoretical resources [*vorwissenschaftliche Instanz*] in which its own critical viewpoint is anchored extratheoretically as an empirical interest or moral experience."[46] In other words, Honneth argues that critical theory needs to demonstrate a "quasi-sociological specification of an emancipatory interest in social reality itself" such as can be garnered from experiences and attitudes of social actors for adequate foundations of validity. Therefore, the problem for a critical theory of society, according to Honneth, is how to link

[41] Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007): 34-35.

[42] Ibid., 5. Hence, Honneth's insistence on the category of "pathology" which is obviously derived from a medical conception of health, which is often simply taken to mean the body's ability to function. Honneth explains while *pathology* usually denotes illness, he takes it to mean an "abnormal state of affairs" whereas *diagnosis* is its uncovering, detection, and definition. Hence, pathology "represents precisely that organic aberration that is disclosed or defined in diagnosis" (Ibid., 34).

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 4.

[46] Honneth, "Social Dynamics of Disrespect" 63–4.

"normative theoretical intention" with "historically situated morality."[47] If such theory is not to rely on merely appealing to moral intuition, Honneth argues, it must demonstrate "the existence of empirically effective forms of morality" upon which it can build.[48]

According to Honneth's paradigmatic conception of immanent critique as the establishment of normative foundations, Adorno along with the rest of the first generation fail to remain immanent because of a normative deficit.[49] As one commentator has recently explained, the problem is not the presence of normative aims and conclusions in critical social theory, but with the "inadequate support for these conclusions"—hence, it is claimed that Adorno's thought suffers from a "justification gap" between its normative content and "adequate moral grounds or reasons."[50] Indeed, many commentators have pointed out that Adorno's thought is normative in an explicitly ethical sense[51] in that he often issues demands for certain ways of acting[52] which appear to require adequate grounds.

However, as more astute commentators have pointed out, Adorno's mode of justifying these demands calls into question the very validity of "foundations" or "grounds" in ethical and moral philosophy.[53] In fact, not only is the demand for normative foundations in the sense of

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[47] Axel Honneth, "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination: Some Problems in the Analysis of Hidden Morality [1982]," in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, trans. Mitchell G. Ash (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 80.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Honneth, *Critique of Power*: esp Ch. 9.

[50] James Gordon Finlayson, "Morality and Critical Theory: On the Normative Problem of Frankfurt School Social Criticism," *Telos* 146, no. 7 (2009): 8.

[51] Ethics can mean both (1) as a "theory of morality arising from reflection" wherein ethics is synonymous with moral philosophy, and (2) ethics as that which refers to the rightness or wrongness of actions in one's life. For a discussion of these meanings of ethics, its relation to morality, and how Adorno radically problematizes them, see Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn, (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 331ff.

[52] cf. Jakob Norberg, "Adorno's Advice: *Minima Moralia* and the Critique of Liberalism," *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (2011).

[53] For an illuminating overview, see: Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy.*, especially Ch. 7. For similar analyses, see Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Ethik Nach Auschwitz: Adornos Negative Moralphilosophie* Argument-

moral grounds anathema to Adorno's whole conception of critical theory, but so too is the demand for foundations or independent grounds for any theory of society.

Against normative foundations

Demanding normative foundations often amounts to the demand to *ground* norms on something independent such as a universal account of reason, a fundamental anthropology, or some other seemingly indubitable or invariant measure.[54] Such grounds, it is alleged, would underlie both the "right of criticism" and "the right to make ethical demands."[55] For example, while Habermas attempts to provide grounds for his theory in the "original form of human speech practices as a necessary precondition for social reproduction," Honneth proceeds to ground critique on a weak or minimal anthropology. Such an anthropology attempts to discover elementary conditions of human life with a sensitivity to historical context,[56] which for Honneth takes the form of a theory of the "social dynamics of disrespect" that attempts to ground critique in the so-called "pre-theoretical praxis" as identified above.[57]

Verlag, 1993); Ulrich Kohlmann, *Dialektik Der Moral: Untersuchungen Zur Moralphilosophie Adornos* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1997).

[54] Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*: 201.

[55] Habermas, *Twelve Lectures*, 106, cited by Ibid., 203.

[56] Therefore, as we have seen above, Honneth seeks to link "normative theoretical intention" with "historically situated morality by demonstrating "the existence of empirically effective forms of morality" from which theory can issue critique. See Axel Honneth, "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination."

[57] However, the normative grounds which somehow lay between a weak anthropology and empirical existing morality turn out to be not so foundational. By attempting to supplement his foundationalist weak anthropology with historical details, Honneth implicitly restricts history to mere contingency or supplements to some deeper ground effectively blunting or even rejecting that human consciousness is through and through historical. According to Honneth, only by indicating the existence of a pre-theoretical and "empirically effective form of morality" in the "struggle for recognition," critical theory can fulfill its requirements for justification. In short, the normative turn in critical theory seeks for resources in the normative gaps between legitimate demands for recognition an illegitimate denial. Nikolas Kompridis, "From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the 'Ethical Turn' in Critical Theory," 5, no. 1 (2010): 326.

To the contrary, Adorno's approach to critical theory allows him to make morally-laden demands while at the same time critiquing moral philosophy.[58] Consider Adorno's well-known pronouncement that "a new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon human beings in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen."[59] Adorno provides no discursive grounds for this demand *not* because there are no rational grounds of a moral imperative, but rather because he rejects the presumptions built into discursive justification which attempts to ground the validity of a moral imperative on *logically incontestable grounds*.[60] For Adorno, it would be an "outrage" to require that the demand that suffering be abolished be subject to logical verification in light of atrocious and manifest human suffering.[61] Indeed, to do so would already participate in the logic that makes what he calls Auschwitz possible.[62] Discursive grounding would reject the idea that a particular situation of suffering (for instance, torture) does not itself have normativity but instead derives from "some deeper level of theorizing or some higher principle."[63] In Adorno's words, to demand that one "justify" the demand that Auschwitz not happen again "would be monstrous in the face of the monstrosity that took place"[64]

Morality cannot be discussed with abstract principles or ideas but only in reference to the organization of the social world we inhabit; furthermore, this organization, crucially, does not

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[58] Schweppenhäuser, Gerhard. *Ethik nach Auschwitz: Adornos Negative Moralphilosophie* (Frankfurt: Argument-Verlag, 1993).

[59] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

[60] Schweppenhäuser, "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy," 345.

[61] Ibid.

[62] For discussions of Adorno's critique of grounding morality discursively, see Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*: Ch. 8. Schweppenhäuser, *Ethik Nach Auschwitz*: 210-211. Kohlmann, *Dialektik Der Moral*: 152ff.

[63] Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*: 203.

[64] Adorno, *Critical Models*: 191.

offer the conditions of possibility for "moral agency."[65] Following Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, we can say that Adorno has a "negative moral philosophy." Hence, Adorno's demands for the new categorial imperative are minimalist and negatively expressed: this imperative, according to Schweppenhäuser, "says what must never happen, what must not be. It does not say, in a positive way, how we are to prevent 'what must not be.' The imperative draws its evidence from historical experience…of the experience of suffering as it spontaneously reflects upon itself."[66] Therefore, contra Honneth, Adorno does not rely on non-discursive moral intuitions akin to irrationalist moral arguments. His moral philosophy is minimalist, justifying a "minimal morality of respect for unaffected life."[67]

Aside from discursive justification of morality, Adorno also critiques the concept of "foundations" for it entails we erroneously and futility search for some indubitable standpoint to erect a philosophical system. As was indicated earlier, the idea of grounding theoretical insights on something independent is extremely problematic for a theory of society which attempts to take seriously the socio-historical conditions of its own activity. Certainly, Adorno cannot by fiat appeal to the priority of the social or material for this would presuppose a transcendental method of critique.[68] Rather, Adorno argues for the priority of socio-historical conditions by immanently critiquing the demand for foundations and grounds as idealist.[69] The demand for grounds, normative or otherwise, already betrays an idealistic conceit. For instance, for a theory to be free

[65] Freyehagen 197. Also see Adorno, *Positivist Dispute*, 62.

[66] Schweppenhäuser, "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy," 346.

[67] Schmidd Noerr, cited by Ibid., 347.

[68] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Polity Press, 1998): 148.

[69] While *Negative Dialectics* is the fullest account of this social-materialist approach, it is evident through his work where he shows by means of immanence, the social content of thought. We will return to the approach called negative dialectics below.

of assumptions or presuppositions, it would simply be "nothing but pure thought itself" and thereby prejudice the philosophical inquiry into the relation between the knowledge and the object in an idealist manner: "that everything that exists is the subject, that is, consciousness or spirit."[70] Only if this were true—namely, only if the mind "could itself generate all the preconditions of knowledge without reference to anything alien to itself"—would it possible for knowledge to be free of assumptions. Hence what Adorno calls the "mania for foundations" is an idealist notion within which dwells the "belief that everything which exists must be derived from something else something older or more primordial."[71]

Limits to immanence

Despite the criticisms reviewed above, Adorno's own conception of immanent critique is far more sophisticated than confronting ideals with reality. What distinguishes critical theory of the first generation Frankfurt School from other forms of criticism is the radicalization of immanent critique. Critical theory does not stop at articulating the gap between ideals and reality but rather, in the spirit of Marx's critique of political economy, aims to articulate emancipatory tendencies which are immanently possible and historically viable that point beyond the existing totality. In other words, an adequate critique must show the immanent possibility of *transcending* existing conditions as a dimension of its own context.[72] Transcendence as used here is conceived along essentially historical lines, so that, as Marcuse puts it: "the terms 'transcend' and 'transcendence' are used throughout in the empirical, critical sense: they designate tendencies in theory and practice which, in a given society, 'overshoot' the established universe of discourse

[70] Adorno, *Kant's* Critique of Pure Reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001): 15-16.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 87ff.

and action toward its historical alternatives (real possibilities)."[73] For critical theory to fulfill such a task, both immanence and transcendence need to be reconceived beyond a strict polarity or as methodological maxims.

What passes for immanent critique today has become mainstream in contemporary political and social theory insofar as few would defend the validity of a transcendental standpoint.[74] However, traditional theory has adopted immanent critique by stripping it of its aim to articulate how existing historical conditions can be radically transcended. Immanence has been reduced to a thin notion of historical-social context. According to one recent assessment, immanent critique includes any "critical evaluation of practical norms and social practices internal to some society or culture, together with the conviction that this requires assessing the rationality or worth of those" drawn from within those contexts.[75] Such a capacious understanding of immanent critique would include a large swath of disparate approaches in contemporary theory. However, the most significant problem with this thin notion of immanence is not that it simply counterfeits one of critical theory's most powerful theoretical tools but rather that it is a notion of immanence that springs from a transcendental assumption—namely, that the theorist's acknowledgment of social and historical conditions "internal to some culture or society" is somehow not itself socially and historically mediated. The lip service to socio-historical specificity also attests to what one recent commentator calls the "domestication of critical theory"—namely, the preponderance of theories of discourse, recognition, and justification within contemporary critical theory that "speak more to the concerns of mainstream political philosophy than to a

[73] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, xliii-xliv.

[74] Craig Browne, "The End of Immanent Critique," 5. Even Rawls denounces the presumption of a transcendental standpoint while at the same time endeavors to develop an "Archimedean standpoint"

[75] Dan Sabia, "Defending Immanent Critique," 685.

radical change to its systemic imperatives and structures of power and domination."[76] By playing "more into the very rhythms of the predominant social reality than seek[ing] any kind of social transformation," such theory increasingly becomes rumination and reflection on itself as if it was somehow not fundamentally structured by the enormity of the pre-theoretical social structures and practices constituting capitalist modernity. Indeed, in what considers itself to be critical theory today, the central motif of historical transformation has changed from one of emancipation to one of "democracy"[77] in the highly restricted sense of participation in government.

Nevertheless, the popularization and domestication of the immanent approach within contemporary theory highlight a crucial weakness of all critical theory: that is, the susceptibility of immanent critique to remain trapped within the sway of existing conditions. For if immanent critique is restricted to criticizing "what is on the basis of what also is," critique accedes to affirmation.[78] In other words, the danger that critical theory can succumb to "critical criticism" resides in how we understand the role of immanence in critical theory; how we understand immanence can determine the difference between a theory which is critical with an emancipatory intent, and one which purports to be, but really is affirmative or even apologetic.

II. Negative Dialectics as Critical Social Theory

In the previous section, we reviewed the some of the fundamental problems of immanent critique, especially in the case of a theory which criticizes society primarily on the basis of

[76] Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016): 2.

[77] Craig Browne, "The End of Immanent Critique," 19.

[78] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 89-90.

unrealized ideals. A necessary moment of transcendence comes into play when theory articulates the possibility of historical transcendence beyond the given.

Transcending immanence: Adorno's dialectical approach

Concerns over the limits to immanence are at the heart of Adorno's critical theory, which explain these pitfalls while constantly pushing immanent critique to the absolute limit of its validity in the attempt to make evident the socio-historical conditions and limits of thought in light of praxis.[79] In order to grasp tendencies that point beyond the horizon of the totality of existing conditions, the critique of society must not only reject the presumptions of a transcendental standpoint but also recognize and avoid the affirmative tendencies of an immanent standpoint. Indeed, due to these limits, Adorno suggests that a critical theory of society can only be developed as a "negative critique."

Adorno certainly advocates the classical mode of immanent critique of confronting society with its own notions about itself—including its prevailing ideals, values, and norms—in order to prompt discord and critical reflection. Narrowing the gap between norms and their actualization can often improve the quality of many lives even if these realizations would not radically transform society. Indeed, Adorno suggests that "in many cases critique can proceed by way of confronting realities with the norms to which those realities appeal: following the norms would already be better."[80]

[79] Although Adorno is well known for his extricating critiques of the demand for immediate praxis, he nonetheless respected the distinction between it and thought, trying to give a sophisticated account of their fundamental interrelatedness. For instance, see Adorno, *Critical Models*, 259-278.

[80] Adorno, *Critical Models*: 287.

However, bourgeois norms do not exhaust the possibilities of a "right life."[81] If critique proceeds only to examine the gap between ideals and their actualization, it hardly distinguishes itself from traditional theory's account of immanence as described above. Furthermore, by measuring the object of critique by its own ideals, critique can neither grasp immanent tendencies that transcend the given historical situation, nor adequately grasp its object in its socio-material dimensions (below, we will see how these two errors are related in "identity thinking"). This type of normative standard of measure has definite limits and does not exhaust critique's procedures.[82]

A strictly immanent critique of society succumbs to reification. For instance, if we understand culture as the collected achievements and practices of artistic expression and the mind,[83] a purely immanent critique of culture in the form of "cultural criticism" amounts to a "fetishization of the sphere of Spirit"[84] because by measuring "culture against culture's own ideal,"[85] cultural criticism participates in and tacitly re-affirms the delusion that culture is absolute— the product, expression, and trove of the mind as such.[86] "Culture as such," Adorno point out, is the "greatest fetish of cultural criticism" since "no authentic work of art and no true philosophy…has ever exhausted itself in itself alone, in its being-in-itself."[87] Rather, cultural

[81] Rahel Jaeggi, "'No Individual Can Resist': *Minima Moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life," *Constellations* 12, no. 1 (2005).

[82] Jürgen Ritsert, "Der Mythos der Nicht-Normativen Kritik. Oder: Wie misst man die Herrschenden Verhältnisse an ihrem Begriff?," in *Probleme der Dialektik Heute*, ed. Stefan Müller, Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft, 2009).

[83] David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Stanford: University of California Press, 1980): 80.

[84] Adorno, *Prisms*, 31.

[85] Ibid., 27.

[86] Ibid., 26.

[87] Ibid., 23.

products "always stand in relation to the actual life process of society" in that they are inextricably linked to the conditions of their production. [88] By remaining completely immanent, cultural criticism is unable to grasp that culture and the delusion of its autarky are in fact products of the "radical separation of mental and manual work"[89] thereby helping to weave the veil of the ideology of culture's absoluteness.

So, if a critique claiming to be transcendent falsely presumes to be exempt from socio-historical mediation, and an overly immanent critique can become affirmative and blind towards its object, how is a critical theory of society supposed to operate? Adorno argues that neither approach is sufficient since the strict separation of immanence and transcendence is an approach poorly posed. The demand to choose between transcendence and immanence is a conceit of "traditional logic" that Hegel chastises Kant for falling into: "As Hegel argued, every method which sets limits and restricts itself to the limits of its object [*Gegenstand*] thereby goes beyond them."[90] Therefore, Adorno rejects a strict dichotomy between immanence and transcendence:[91] "The alternatives—either calling culture as a whole into question from outside under the general notion of ideology, or confronting it with the norms which it itself has crystallized—cannot be accepted by critical theory."[92] While Adorno points out the problems inherent in an overly immanent theory, he nonetheless still argues one of the defining features of critical theory is immanent critique, albeit modified. Although it appears paradoxical, critical theory needs to be both immanent and transcendent at once since it must attempt to not only explain existing

[88] Ibid. (trans. amended)

[89] Ibid., 26-27.

[90] Ibid., 31. Hegel's transition to "Spirit" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the necessary movement of the concept from the consciousness of I to the that of *we*, which is to say society in its historical development.

[91] Adorno, *Prisms*, 31ff.

[92] Ibid., 31.

conditions, but also radically criticize them by pointing to possibilities of emancipatory transformation. The transcendent moment in critical theory is also necessary to avoid the idealist tendencies in purely immanent criticism as we saw in the case of cultural criticism.

If critical theory is "to shed light on an object in itself hermetic**,**" it must overcome the rigidity of strict immanence "by casting a glance at society, to present society with the bill which the object does not redeem"[93] The move to what Adorno calls the "priority of the object" [*Vorrang des Objekts*] is precisely the moment of transcendence in immanent critique because casting a glance at society must proceed immanently through the object. The object—for instance a work of art, a philosophical text, or even a concept—cannot be related to "society" without mediation: "Social concepts should not be applied to works from without but rather drawn from an exacting examination of the works themselves."[94] To return to the example of cultural criticism, Adorno attempts to explain the rational basis for the belief in the autonomy of culture as if the products of the mind could float—by virtue of their very ethereality, as it were—over the humdrum affairs of the everyday.[95] The belief that cultural artifacts are independent of existing conditions, where life blindly and callously reproduces itself, suggests the demand for "a condition in which freedom would be realized." Hence, even in the idealistic pretensions of

[93] Ibid., 33.

[94] Theodor W. Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes on Literature* Vol. I, (Columbia University Press, 1991): 39.

[95] This motif runs throughout his musicological writings. For instance, in the "Fetish Character of Listening," he argues that music as a cultural good appears to be "exempted" from the "power of exchange" in its immediacy (279). But cultural goods are wholly commodified in that they are "produced for the market, and are aimed at the market." All that is "ethereal and sublime" in music is subsumed under its commodity character to be mobilized as crass "advertisements for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music." Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," 278.

cultural criticism, there "remains the equivocal promise [*Versprechen*] of culture as long as its existence depends on a bewitched reality, and ultimately, on the disposal of alienated labor."[96]

For a critical theory to fulfill such demanding requirements—staying immanent to its object yet preserving the possibility of detecting tendencies that point beyond the given socio-historical conditions—a theory of society must be dialectical.[97] Fully aware that the notion of dialectics has been deployed as an "elective weltanschauung" within traditional Marxism,[98] Adorno warns that dialectics succumbs to dogmatism when it is defined as a formula which can be "slapped on to" any object.[99] To the contrary, the method of dialectics can only be articulated through the content to which it is adequate. Critical theory that proceeds dialectically can be an immanent critique that seeks practical transcendence because its object—capitalist society—is constituted by such a paradoxical logic in that society reveals tendencies that transcend its own systematicity. Hence, "dialectics is not a method independent of its object" but adequate to its object—the "objective system-in-itself" that is society.[100] Nevertheless, a dialectical theory proceeds immanently via the "confrontation of concept and reality" in order to express the truth content that "concepts, judgements, and theorems themselves desire to name," however, dialectics "does not exhaust itself in the hermetic consistency of formation of thought."[101]

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[96] Ibid.(trans amended). Adorno's assessment of cultural is another example of the dialectics of critique and rescue.

[97] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 4. Also see: Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993): 75-76.

[98] Ossified into an official philosophy of the Soviet Union, dialectics became dogmatic, its nadir something little more than a theoretical panacea with almost talismanic properties. See Heinrich's discussion of dialectics as traditional Marxism's *Wunderwaffe* in Heinrich, *Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*: 34ff.

[99] Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*: 75ff.; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 16-18; Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 120; Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 9-10.

[100] Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 9.

[101] Ibid., 23.

If criticism—even dialectical critical theory—can only operate by means of thought, how is thought supposed to move beyond this "hermetic consistency"? The means to think the object, society, in its socio-material reality whose logic belies that of formal logic[102] and whose systematic character belies systematization as an organizational schema of subjective reason (where the schema is a product of classification)[103], is what Adorno calls "negative dialectics."

Negative dialectics and identity thinking

Adorno's approach, what he calls "negative dialectics" is initially formulated in the thesis that claims "nothing more than that objects do not rise into their concept, that these end up in contradiction with the received norm of the *adaequatio*"[104]—the norm that truth is nothing other than the *adequation*—literally, to be brought toward equality —of thought and the thing thought. Such a norm seems to be inherent in the use of concepts insofar as concepts attempt to grasp what is and thereby convey meaning by means of classifying, ordering, and abstracting the essential elements constituting a thing's thinkability.[105]

Nevertheless, what Adorno calls "identity thinking" is problematic not because it identifies in trying to grasp a something conceptually but rather because identity thinking *identifies* that something with its thinkability. Identity thinking confuses the thought of the object with the object itself thereby preventing thought from referring to anything other than itself.[106] Adorno's criticism is that identity thinking errs by conflating what is thinkable as that which is

[102] Ibid. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 139-140

[103] Adorno, *Lectures on* Negative Dialectics: *Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008): 36.

[104] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 16.

[105] Richard A. Lee, *The Thought of Matter: Materialism, Conceptuality and the Transcendece of Immanence* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

[106] Ibid., 74.

whereby thought "hypostasizes its own creations."[107] Hence, identity thinking covers a large swath of philosophical traditions including broadly idealist forms—that thought is identical to the real—as well as empiricist—that thought merely records and reflects the sensuous.[108] By insisting that the concept is the reality of what is, identity thinking does not make good on thought's attempt to think *something.*[109] As Adorno puts it, concepts *necessarily* "refer to non-conceptualities."[110]

Identity thinking has become the predominant form of thought in the modern capitalist world not because of some inherent tendency of thinking towards increasing identification, but rather that identity has become the prevailing logic in the social world by virtue of the centrality of the exchange of commodities, which proceeds by making things identical that are otherwise non-commensurable in terms of their sensuous properties.[111] When things take on the form of the commodity, they are qualitatively commensurable, not because of their sensuous properties, but because commodities are made up by an identical *social* substance which is abstractly commensurable: namely, in Adorno's words: "the reduction of human labor to an abstract universal concept of average labor-time."[112] In the same manner, identity philosophy identifies concept and reality by means of taking "what belongs to thought as the being, the essence, the

[107] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 44.

[108] Ibid., 45.

[109] Ibid., 53.Also see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 16-18: "Thought is driven, out of its unavoidable insufficiency, its guilt for what it thinks, towards it." See also, *Positivist Dispute*, 114-115: "For, knowledge lives in relation to that which it is not."

[110] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 12

[111] So far "no chemist has ever found exchange value in a pearl or diamond" Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 177.

[112] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 149/146). See also Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 29. and Theodor W. Adorno, "Society [1965]," 148 (trans. corrected). "The all-powerful identity-principle, the abstract commensurability of their social labor, drives them towards the obliteration (*Auslöschung*) of their personal identity."

'higher level of essentiality' of that which is other than thought."[113] The condition of possibility for universal exchange and the condition of possibility for identity thinking are the same: the commodity character of capitalist production.

In other words, what renders identitarian thinking so pervasive is the real abstraction that social relations of capitalism actually produce. The problem is, however, that though these abstractions are objectively true, identity thinking overlooks that they are socially and historically generated and in principle able to be overcome. Instead of making this critical insight, identity thinking surreptitiously installs the social logic of capitalist social relations into the workings of the mind and the order of the cosmos.

Socio-material basis of identity thinking

Therefore, identity thinking has a social basis because the identity of what is and what is not has achieved a reality in capitalist society despite being logically impossible according to the principle of non-contradiction. The supra-sensible objectivity of value expressed by commodities calls into question traditional norms of truth and validity in philosophy because the objectivity of that which is supra-sensible "ontologically invalidates the principle of non-contradiction."[114] In explaining how Marx's analysis of the fetishism of commodities is not a subjective misperception but "objectively deduced out of a social *a priori*, the process of exchange," Adorno adds: "Exchange has, as something which occurs, real objectivity and is nevertheless objectively untrue, violates its own principle, that of equality; that is why it necessarily creates false consciousness, the idol of the market."[115]

[113] Lee, *Thought of Matter*: 120.

[114] Ibid., 119.

[115] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 190-3

Marx illustrates the existence of such an objective contradiction in his analysis of the commodity and the form of value. If we take the equation 20 yards of linen = x grams of gold or x grams of gold = 20 yards of linen, we are not *only* saying these two distinct quantities represent the same magnitude of value, but that they are qualitatively identical.[116] But as a use-value, linen is linen and not gold; as an expression of value, linen *is* gold. The commodity is the totality of its sensuous properties (a use-value) and at the same time something else (exchange-value expressed through money).[117] In its logical form, A is A, and A is not A, which is a logical impossibility that is nonetheless real.[118] Insofar as the identity of commodities is made possible by the value-form of wealth, an identity which is false yet nonetheless real extends to human beings. As we saw in the last chapter, insofar as individuals' capacity for labor is potentially value-positing, every individual is absolutely fungible.[119]

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[116] Hans-Georg Backhaus, "On the Dialectics of the Value-Form," 109.

[117] As Marx writes, commodity exchange "produces a *doubling* [*Verdopplung*] *of the commodity into commodity and money*, an external opposition in which they represent their immanent opposition of use-value and value" (*Kapital* I, 109, cited by Ibid.

[118] The example of the volume of water and weight as *natural properties* (as opposed to a social property) can clarify the peculiar relationship between use-value and value within the commodity; that is, between its thingly form as use-value and its social form as value. We can say that a liter of water and a kilogram have an equal mass; that is to say, a specific quantity of water can also be defined as a measure of weight. Backhaus points out that while water can be an objectification of weight, water and its expression as weight do not stand in a dialectical relationship to each other "so that the thing as weight is identical with the water as an extensional appearance and at the same time as something qualitatively definite which is different from it." The thing does not "split" or "doubles" itself as "a 'bearer' of weight and water—it is not simultaneously itself and the other" like the commodity, whose value can *only* be distinguished from its use-value "in the shape of another use-value." Or as Marx writes in *Capital,* the weight "represents a natural property common to both bodies, their weight; but in the expression of value of the linen the coat represents a *supra-natural property: their value, which is something social"* (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 149., my emphasis). This tendency—that value *must be* expressed as a use-value in its equivalent form—dupes the bourgeois economist into focusing on the mystical aura of gold and silver, and all other commodities that figure as equivalents in one setting or another, without realizing that the money form in germane in the simple "expression of value, such as 20 yards of linen = 1 coat" (Ibid., 149-150).

[119] See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the implications of the fungibility of individuals. Lee helpfully points out that this fungibility is inseparable from the identity of commodities and the identity between concept and reality. 58n; Lee, *Thought of Matter*: 52.

In making the thing equal to what is thought — *adaequatio rei atque cogitationis* — identity thinking hypostasizes the thought-form of the object as if it was the object itself.[120] In his comments on the "method of political economy," Marx points out that the "concrete" of social reality is not a determination of thought because the concrete can itself be shown to have principles and a logic of its own that is different from those of thought.[121] The hypostasized concept in identity thinking risks mistaking an immediacy as "a false concrete" because it confuses the logic of concepts with real socio-historical processes as is the case when classical political economy takes population as an immediate concrete for it appears to be "the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production."[122] However, if we take it as an immediate, then population is a complete abstraction since what is constitutive of a population presupposes the form of its class structure, which in turn presupposes the form of social relations such as waged-labor, capital, and so on.[123] In this case, classical political economy follows Hegel's idealism ss a form of identity thinking for it confuses the concrete with the "concrete in the mind," or the logic of the social world and historical processes with the logic of thinking. The "scientifically correct method," as Marx points out, is to begin with the appearance of what is concrete, and then by the analysis of a number of "determinate, abstract, general relations," to rise from the abstract to the concrete, which for Marx is "the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the *concrete in the mind*."[124] If we wrongly assume this process is also how "the concrete *itself* comes into being," then we wrongly substitute the conditions of

[120] Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," 74. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365

[121] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 100-101. For an illuminating discussion of the type of social materialism (or a materialism of social form) explicated in Marx's "Introduction to Political Economy," see Lee, *Thought of Matter*: Ch. 2, esp. 40-51.

[122] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 100.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid., 101. My emphasis

thinking for the conditions which govern the world, just as, Marx adds, "Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its depths, and unfolding itself out of itself."[125]

By presuming the logic of the social world conforms to the logic of thinking, identity philosophy not only distorts our conception of reality but tacitly legitimates it as necessary, immutable, and rational. One of the most significant illustrations of this problem can be seen in how identity thinking handles contradictions. If the law of non-contradiction governs thought, according to traditional formal logic, identity philosophy would deny that contradictions can constitute the social world. For instance, identity thinking cannot accept that commodities obtain a "spectral objectivity" as the unity of use-value and exchange-value, nor could it accept that value that valorizes itself constitutes one of the laws of motion governing the modern world. For identity thinking, the production of value that governs the entirety of capitalist production could not be anything but the product of thought—value could then only be purely subjective and indistinguishable from price (where the latter is assumed to be determined by how much the totality of given buyers at a given moment are willing to pay for something). In a similar manner, Adorno argues that identity thinking "will make crucial differences vanish" by means of "wretched cover-concepts" that subsume manifold particularities.[126] Identity thinking carelessly deploys these distorting concepts by giving priority to the logical ordering of conceptual abstractions as if the "scientific ideal of a continuous and hierarchical ordering of categories" is already present in the object of knowledge itself.[127]

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[125] Ibid. My emphasis.

[126] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 152

[127] Adorno, "Society," 144. Also see Adorno, "Introduction" in *Positivist Dispute*, 14.

For example, the categories of "society" and "social mediation" appear to be merely classificatory concepts that appear to occupy the highest level of abstraction by virtue of their abstract character. As classificatory abstractions, they are presumed to neatly compartmentalize all particularities of the most heterogeneous social forms. However, when the abstractness of "society" and "social mediation" are assumed to be simply classificatory-logical features of a concept, the socio-historical specificity and the specific real *abstractness* of capitalist society and the peculiar nature of its objectified social relations are covered over or reified. In other words, the abstractness of the concept of society as it emerges historically as *bourgeois* society is lost in its historical specificity—bourgeois features of society appear common to all societies including the functional relationships between members of bourgeois society insofar as these relations entwine all of its members and take on a certain autonomy in relation to them.[128] The abstract, objective, and alienated relations of capitalism are then seen to be a feature of society as such, or as the unavoidable feature of any society with advanced technology and a high degree of division of labor.[129]

The inability to grasp structural contradictions in society itself and the consequences of this shortcoming can also be seen in the concept of liberal society.[130] According to Adorno, if social science holds that the concept of liberal society entails freedom and equality while simultaneously "disputes, in principle, [*prinzipiell bestreitet*] the truth-content of these categories under liberalism" in light of the "inequality of the social power which determines the relations

[128] Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*: 28ff.

[129] As we have noted in Ch. 1, Nancy Rosenblum comes to this conclusion. We now can see that her blindness to the peculiar social dimension of capitalist society is a result of an identitarian logic in much of political theory.

[130] Adorno uses this example in Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 115ff.

between people," then it is not a matter of logical contradiction.[131] For identity thinking, however, such a contradictory statement would indicate that the concept of liberal society seems to be so befuddled by contradictions, its meaning becomes unintelligible. In an attempt to get a clearer understanding of "liberal society," identity thinking would proceed in one of two similar ways. On the one hand, it might attempt to reconcile the concept of liberal society with the concepts of freedom and equality which it seems to both promise and deny by posing the problem as a logical contradiction of one or more of the concepts, which could be resolved by means of more refined definitions. Or, on the other hand, these contradictions might be seen as the result of "subsequently emerging empirical restrictions or differentiations of a provisional definition" for which the solution would again be to adjust the concepts. In both cases we can see that when identity thinking runs up against a contradiction, it proceeds by critiquing the thing as a thought-determination instead of critiquing the thing which the concept attempts to grasp in its social-historical materiality. If, as Popper points out, "the main instrument of logical criticism [is] the logical contradiction,"[132] then the presence of a persistent contradiction is taken to be a problem of knowledge and not of the world.

Instead of thinking through the contradictions as something which illuminates the object, identity thinking tries to remove them. To the contrary, Adorno argues we must inquire whether contradictions in scientific statements about reality indicate something about that to which the statements refer. As Adorno suggests, the "aporetic concepts of philosophy are marks of what is objectively unresolved, not merely in thinking."[133] To recall the example above, the fact the

[131] Ibid., 115.

[132] Popper, "The Logic of the Social Sciences," 90.

[133] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 154-156

concepts of freedom and equality promised by the concept of liberal society remain unactualized indicates not merely the presence of logical contradictions in the concepts, but that contradictions comprise "the structural constitution of society itself."[134] As we have seen, the most obvious instance of the contradictory structural constitution of bourgeois society can be seen in the exchange of commodities. That "exchange is something equal and at the same time not equal"[135] and, therefore, violates the logic of non-contradiction demonstrates that the logic of capitalist society does not obey the conditions of thought but has its own logic, one that Marx theorized as non-human and irrational. Since the exchange of commodities "violates its own principle, that of equality," exchange "has, as something which occurs, real objectivity and is nevertheless objectively untrue."[136] Hence, Adorno often characterizes (bourgeois) society as false or untrue[137] while insisting that this preponderance of the false over human beings is all too real.

Grasping for the non-identical

Theory must recognize that society is constitutively contradictory to avoid mystifications. Nevertheless, society "does not elude rational knowledge" insofar "as its contradictions and their preconditions are intelligible."[138] However, unlike identity thinking, critical theory must recognize that these contradictions "cannot be conjured away by means of intellectual postulates abstracted from a material which is, as it were, indifferent with regard to knowledge."[139] If social

[134] Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 115.

[135] Theodor W. Adorno, "Theodor W. Adorno über Marx Und die Grundbegriffe der Soziologischen Theorie. aus einer Seminarmitschrift im Sommersemester 1962," in *Dialektik der Wertform: Untersuchungen zur Marxschen Ökonomiekritik,* ed. HG Backhaus, (1997): 506.

[136] Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 190-3

[137] Most famously in *Minima Moralia* as *"Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen,"* which Jephcott artfully translates as "The wronged life cannot be lived rightly." Adorno, *Minima Moralia*: §18, 43.

[138] Adorno, "On the Logic of the Social Sciences," 106.

[139] Ibid.

contradictions that manifest themselves in scientific analyses cannot be resolved by further or more adept analysis, but only through "a change in reality itself," critical analysis can nonetheless attempt to link theoretically "logical inconsistencies to structural moments of society."[140] In other words, while we neither can nor should eliminate objective contradictions by rearranging our concepts or even through the "most radical reflection of the mind on its own failure."[141] We can, however, attempt to comprehend them in their social-historical necessity by means of a theory of society.[142]

Of course, any theory necessarily operates by means of concepts, which necessarily accord to the logic of identity. But to avoid succumbing to identity thinking, critical theory can only do so by means of identity, as paradoxical as that might seem.[143] As alluded to above, Adorno does not reject identification for some other principle[144] because identification is inherent to concepts, which are the primary rational means by which thought can attempt to grasp reality.[145] In other words, the "principle of identity" comprises one of the fundamental operations of thought in that thinking attempts to think "what is" by means of concepts.[146] Hence, if identity is inseparable from thinking, then identity cannot and should not be rejected.

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[140] Adorno, "Introduction to the Positivism Dispute," 24. For an extended discussion of the importance of a "theory of society," see Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 1-36 and Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente*,. 9-54.

[141] "Even the most radical reflection of the mind on its own failure is limited by the fact that it remains only reflection, without altering the existence to which its failure bears witness. Hence immanent criticism cannot take comfort in its own concept" (Adorno, *Prisms*, 32-3).

[142] Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 154-6. This also suggests that theory and praxis are not inherently opposed since the critique of identity thinking suggests that a theory of society is integral to the practical transformation of society. Adorno, *Critical Models*, 276ff.

[143] "Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation nor submit itself to it. What is incumbent on it, is the effort to go beyond the concept, by means of the concept" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 26).

[144] Even the much-cited analogy of 'constellation' still operates by means of concepts.

[145] As opposed to, for instance, intuition.

[146] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 16

All that concepts can do is to attempt think the essence—that which is thinkable in matter; that is to say, thought can only think matter in its (thought)form as opposed to matter in its materiality, which is ultimately other than thought.[147]

If we had to sum up the task for a materialist critical social theory, we could say it would be to grasp the *non-identical.* If we are to try to think what is — the something that is other than thought— we can only do so by means of thought but by thinking "what is" *in its otherness to thought*, or "in the nonidentity of concept and thing."[148] By critically interrogating the "principle of identity," negative dialectics seeks to be a dialectics of *non-identity, "*which does not presuppose the identity of being and thought, nor does it culminate in that identity."[149] Rather, Adorno argues that negative dialectics "will attempt to articulate the very opposite, namely the divergence of concept and thing, subject and object, and their unreconciled state."[150] This approach does not fall behind Kant's Copernican turn for it too holds that it is not only impossible, but also "hubris, that identity would be that the thing-in-itself would correspond to its concept."[151] However, unlike Kant, negative dialectics insists on the centrality of the mediation of society. To express his relation to Kant, Adorno describes negative dialectics as an "axial revolution of the Copernican turn" of metaphysical questions "by means of critical self-reflection."[152]

[147] Lee, *Thought of Matter*: 53; 32-34 and Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 23-39.

[148] Lee, *Thought of Matter*: 54.

[149] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx.

[150] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*: 6.

[151] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 152-4

[152] Ibid., prologue.

So, while thinking the non-identical can be reached only by means of identification (for to think is to identify), to do so critically would mean identifying in a way that is self-reflexive, that knows its own limits.[153] In other words, negative dialectics is a materialism which tries to think what is other than thought but which does not conflate thought-determinations of reality with reality itself.[154] So while any procedure of thought, including Adorno's approach of negative dialectics, cannot help but identify by use of concepts,[155] the non-identity between object and concept must not be assumed or wished for, but rather critically reflected on: "The cognition of the non-identical is dialectical too, in the sense that it identifies more, and identifies differently, than identity thinking. It wishes to say what something would be."[156]

III. Liberal individualism as Ideology?

In light of the previous discussion of negative dialectics and its critique of identity thinking, we can now critically reexamine what is expressed by "liberal individualism." As was discussed above, critique cannot proceed by simply demonstrating the gap between regulative ideals and their realization. Aiming for the identity between the concept (liberal individualism) and the object to which it refers (the experience of freely chosen and self-directed development

[153] Adorno, "Sociology and Empirical Research," 74. Also see "rational identity, Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 147 as well as *Prisms:* "Even the most radical reflection of the mind on its own failure is limited by the fact that it remains only reflection, without altering the existence to which its failure bears witness. Hence immanent criticism cannot take comfort in its own concept" Adorno, *Prisms*: 32-33.

[154] As Richard Lee convincingly argues, Adorno is developing the type of social materialism sketched by Marx in the Introduction to *Grundrisse. T*he core of Marx's materialism is expressed by "the real is determined by the which does not present itself immediately (Lee, *Thought of Matter*, 42 and 49) "The concrete is not a result of the determinations of thought" because the concrete can be shown to have itself principles and a logic of its own, different from those of thought. "Marx's contention is that if something like population is the result of a real process, then *how* it comes to be what it is becomes central to even its immediate presentation to intuition" (Ibid., 42). This "how" is nothing other than accounting for its mediation.

[155] Contra a vulgar materialism which assumes it can directly access materiality, even though any appeal to the material basis of thought must necessarily be conducted through thought itself; that is to say, by accounting for the mediation between consciousness and the world, which is always historically and socially situated.

[156] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 152-4.

by actually living individuals) would fall into the trap of identity thinking. As we have seen, by positing the conditions of thinking as the conditions of what is, identity thinking hypostasizes thought-determinations and reifies socio-historical relations thereby foreclosing the possibility of a critique able to articulate tendencies that transcend existing historical conditions.

The critique of identity thinking strongly suggests that in radically transformed conditions adequate to social emancipation, not only would the object realize what the concept promised, but the object would in turn transform the concept.[157] As Adorno points out, traditional leftwing criticism had too often summarily dismissed liberal ideology as "false promise" or "apologetic concealments" in a one-sided manner in that liberalism's catalogue of ideals—humanity, liberty, justice, or individuality—were deemed ideological because existing society did not amount to their realization. Rarely, however, did this line of criticism challenge the specific shape of the ideas themselves, unlike rightwing critics, being less sympathetic to the promise of liberal ideals, who pointed to the misalignment of ideals and reality as evidence of the falsity of the ideals. In short, while reactionaries proceeded by "shifting from the insight into a bad reality to an insight into bad ideas, the latter supposedly proved because those ideas have not become reality," the leftwing critics "failed to notice that the 'ideas' themselves, in their abstract form, are not merely images of the truth that will later materialize, but that they are ailing themselves, afflicted with the same injustice under which they are conceived and bound up with the world against which they are set."[158] The ideals espoused by liberal ideology are neither false promises nor inherently

[157] Commentators on Adorno's method of negative dialectics often focus one-sidedly on the former, a trend identified by Cook, "Adorno, Ideology and Ideology Critique."

[158] Theodor W. Adorno, "Spengler Today," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 2 (1941): 318-319.

false, but rather testify to the dream of a better world conceived within an awareness (albeit limited) of a wrong one.[159]

> The right organization [*richtige Einrichtung*] of society follows from the emphatic concept of truth without being filled out as an image of the future [*Zukunftsbild*]. The *reductio ad hominem,* which inspires all critical enlightenment is substantiated in the human being, who would first have to be produced in a society that was in control of itself. In contemporary society, however, its sole indicator is the socially untrue.[160]

As we will see in the final section of this chapter and in the general conclusion, this type of critique is essentially negative in that "the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better."[161] Likewise, we will finally understand why "rescue" [*Rettung*]—the name Adorno gives to the work of excavating the promise contained in concepts — can only be done adequately from the standpoint of redemption [*Erlösung*] or reconciliation [*Versohnung*].

Returning to the matter immediately at hand, a critique of liberal individualism that wishes to do justice to the "promise" of the concept as well as the experience of the object in their non-identity must critique both object and concept. Actually-living individuals cannot live the form of life promised by the concept of individuality under existing conditions; however, we cannot simply think of the problem as the concept not being actualized. Indeed, the concept promises more than the object yet the object (living individuals of a specific historical type) shows us that the concepts "individuality" and "*the* individual" are not adequate to the alleged

[159] One of the insights Adorno suggests with his oft-quoted "the wronged life cannot be lived rightly" [*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben in dem Falsch*] is the impossibility of fully conceiving what would constitute a right society while being rooted in a fundamentally wrong one.

[160] Adorno, *Positivist Dispute*, 122 (trans amended).

[161] Adorno, *Critical Models*: 288.

multiplicity and supposed irreducibility of actually-existing individuals.[162] The irreducible and qualitative non-identity of actually-living human beings persists in their experience, however misshapen.[163] Yet, this same incompatibility of concept and object makes it extremely difficult to answer the "question of how the existent can possibly be changed by those who are its very victims, psychologically mutilated by its impact".[164]

In the following section, we will first examine the extent to which J.S. Mill's theory of individual liberty articulates a promise of emancipation but falls woefully short of an adequate grasp of the problem. Above all, Mill's limitations are rooted in his identity thinking, a form of thought which, as we will see, has become all the more pervasive in several strands of contemporary liberal assessments of individuality. By examining how this theoretical shift tracks a larger transformation in the function and structure of ideology, we will be able to begin to explain this shift and prepare our transition to the concluding chapter to examine how critical theory can critique and rescue what appears to be beyond hope.

Liberal ideology in its classical form: identity thinking in J.S. Mill

As mentioned at the opening of this chapter, ideals have traditionally provided a variety of liberal thought the means to critically appraise existing social conditions. Above all, this type of critique proceeds by measuring the gap between actually existing institutions and ideals as an

[162] Cook points out that many commentators "focus exclusively on the inadequacy of concepts with respect to particular objects" thereby neglecting "whether the particular fulfills its concept" Deborah Cook, "Adorno, Ideology and Ideology Critique," 6.

[163] Norberg, "Adorno's Advice: *Minima Moralia* and the Critique of Liberalism", 402. In fact, the attention to experience also helps explain Adorno's sometimes bewildering announcements of the liquidation of the individual while insisting the individual has managed to persist. While Adorno seeks to disabuse the assumption of the independent individual by discussing the play of social forces and development which constitute the individual and its consciousness, he does not reject the idea that we can learn a great deal about society as a whole from examining individual experience

[164] Theodor W. Adorno, "Spengler Today," 318.

incomplete realization which is assumed can be narrowed over time. More generous readers of J.S. Mill have interpreted his defense of individuality in such a way by suggesting that Mill's dubious remarks about the inability of those who are not members of a "civilized community" to achieve individuality (including the poor and colonial subjects)[165] never precludes, in principle, the possibility that those not yet ready could in fact embark on a development of their individuality given the right conditions and training to do so.[166] For our purposes, however, the extent of Mill's egalitarianism is irrelevant as long as the mode of critique is based on simply judging social reality by its own ideals, or, in other words, by attempting to identify concept with that to which it refers.

On the one hand, Mill's thought offers a trenchant critique of capitalism insofar as the concept of liberal individualism can be shown to be non-identical with what it purports to subsume. As we explored above, by "[a]scribing to objects properties they could acquire only under qualitatively improved conditions" the concept of liberal individualism—even as an ideology—tacitly denounces existing conditions.[167] Indeed, Mill explicitly denounces those effects of "industrial progress" that are detrimental to the development of a free individuality including the relentless competition and egoism of the "existing type of social life,"[168] the

[165] Mill points out that "it is the *privilege* and *proper condition* of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way" (58). This maturation is a latent potential in all human beings but one needs to *earn* it for the privilege of wielding it. "It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also *what manner of men they are* that do it" J.S. Mill, *'On Liberty' and Other Writings* Cambridge University Press, 1989): 59. Much of the capacity for self-reflection necessary for individual freedom depends on "the degree in which they ["laboring people"] can be made rational beings." J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (Fairfield, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1987): 757.

[166] Less generous, include those who point out the elitism of Mill's thought insofar as individuality could only be obtained by certain privileged groups. Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis De Tocqueville* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2001); Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (New York: Verso, 2011).

[167] Deborah Cook, "Adorno, Ideology and Ideology Critique," 10.

[168] Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*: 748-749.

erosion of "a variety of situations" necessary for the development of a free individuality,[169] as well as the growing homogeneity of consumption, class aspirations, and education.[170]

On the other hand, however, Mill's critique reaches its limits by immanently falling under the sway of existing conditions with few resources to detect tendencies that point beyond (i.e. historically transcend) such conditions. Such limits are evidenced by his more or less tepid reformism such as calling for stronger workers' associations, limiting rights of inheritance, and high taxes on ground rent.[171] While undoubtedly these reforms improve the condition of the poor—and thereby helping to admit them into the "community of the civilized" necessary for the pursuit of free individuality—we will explore how Mill does not call into question the fundamental structure of capitalist society as the greatest obstacle to the development of free individuality. Furthermore, by hypostasizing the concept of *the* individual (despite all of his efforts to preserve the originality and non-conformity of individuals), Mill's positive conception of the individual is surreptitiously reduced to an exemplar of a kind. Fundamentally contradictory, his articulation of the liberty of the individual seems to be an impossibility on its own terms.

The source of both Mill's reformism and the self-undermining nature of his formal conception of free individuality is his identity thinking. By assuming the logical ordering of conceptual abstractions seamlessly tracks the *social* logic constitutive of the capitalist world, Mill's identity thinking obscures the phenomena in need of theorization by the very desiderata of theoretical neatness. Above, we had reviewed how this type of thinking takes as its model the

[169] Mill, *'On Liberty' and Other Writings*: 72-73.

[170] Ibid., 72-73.

[171] Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*: 808-810; 933-939

conceptual nature or "real abstraction" of a society based on the universal equivalence of labor time but instead of being able to pierce through the historical and hence mutable nature of this social logic, identity thinking tacitly legitimates it as necessary, immutable, and rational. Let us now examine how such identity thinking plays out in Mill's thought.

Mill's political economy and the reification of social conditions

Before considering Mill's theory of individuality, we should take note of the centrality of identitarian logic in his *Principles of Political Economy* [1848] for this work reveals the basic coordinates of Mill's theory of society implicit in his *On Liberty* [1859]. By delimiting the scope of political economy to the investigation of the "moral" and "psychological" causes of "the state of the production and distribution of wealth," Mill is compelled to assign the study of "the economic condition of nations" to the physical sciences and the mechanical arts.[172] In other words, the distinction in the domains of study reflects the fact that, for Mill, the *distribution* of wealth is solely dependent on "the laws and customs of society" while the conditions of "the extraction of the instruments of human subsistence and enjoyment from the materials of the globe" —the production and consumption of wealth— "partake of the character of physical truths."[173] After all, Mill argues, that as soon as wealth is produced "mankind, individually or collectively, can do with them as they like…[and] can place them at the disposal of whomsoever they please, and on whatever terms." Although dependent on the "opinions and feelings of the ruling portion of the community," such "arbitrary" interventions by human will are nonetheless not only "very different in different ages and countries" but also "might be still more different, if

[172] Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*: 21.

[173] Ibid.; 199-201

mankind so chose."[174] In short, distribution reflects the essentially historical character of human beings. Certainly, for Mill, production is also conditioned by history insofar as what is being produced depends on the level of knowledge possessed by science and the arts at a particular time and place. But while the knowledge of "the properties of matter" can be manipulated to great effect, the influence of this knowledge must always yield to "the limits set by the constitution of things." Unlike the plasticity of the relations of distribution, production cannot be fundamentally altered for "there are ultimate laws, which we did not make, which we cannot alter, and to which we can only conform."[175]

The error of Mill's distinction is that he wrenches distribution from production as if the organization of the former had no effect on that of the latter. By doing so, as Marx suggests, production is then presented "as encased in eternal natural laws independent of history, at which opportunity bourgeois relations are then quietly smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded."[176] Anticipating Adorno's critique of identity thinking, Marx suggests that the error present in Mill is to overlook that although production —understood as "the appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society"—can be established as a general characteristic common to all forms of society, such a characteristic, precisely as a "rational abstraction" *by the mind* without any further specification corresponds to "no real historical stage of production."[177] As we discussed the socio-material basis of identity thinking in a previous section, the problem with the abstractness of such characteristics is not simply that the vagueness of their generality prevents them from adequately

[174] Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*: 200.

[175] Ibid. The latter part of this quote was omitted in later editions of *Principles.* See footnote on 200.

[176] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 87 (Original emphasis).

[177] Ibid., 88

grasping their object in its specificity but that such theoretical abstractness conceals the particular social characteristics of capitalist society by assuming them to be common to all social forms. By overlooking capitalism's real abstractions, identity thinking robs these specific social characteristics of their very social character thereby rendering them natural and immutable.

The theoretical neatness operative in identity thinking allows for the abstraction of the concept of "production" to appear more substantial by virtue of its high level of abstraction but actually occludes capitalist production's specific social character, which then appears anything but social. By conceiving the economic laws of production as eternal and natural and those of distribution as "arbitrary" and humanly created, Mill's theory of society impinges his more radical political views. Hence, a number of contradictions persist throughout his political and economic writings. As the historian of economic thought I.I. Rubin summarizes:

> This fervent advocate of social reforms at the same time zealously defended the Malthusian law of population, which argues that any reform of the social order was futile. This friend of the trade unions supported (up to 1869) the theory of the wages fund, which argued it was fruitless and harmful for the workers to wage an economic struggle. This critic of capitalism failed to notice the basic contradictions of the capitalist economy and supported Say's doctrine on the impossibility of general crises.[178]

Mill's critique of capitalism could neither move beyond classical political economy (nor utopian socialism). Hence, the extent of his vision for the re-organization of society could only look backwards to an idyllic view of small holdings of independent property holders as the ideal form of social organization.

A specimen of free individuality

The limits of Mill's social criticism, rooted in his identity thinking, are even more striking in his defense of individuality. In his *On Liberty,* Mill begins to unfold how the processes

[178] Rubin, *History of Economic Thought*: 355-356.

undergirding the development of a free individuality also produces its opposite in the form of conformity. Mill's model of a free individuality as the solution to the detrimental effects of conformity, however, ultimately re-inscribes the logic of conformity in its very elaboration.

To understand how Mill undermines his own vision of free individuality, let us first briefly consider Mill's overall argument that begins with his famous enumeration of the three fundamental liberties essential to the "free development of individuality." Mill's aim is to assess the extent, circumstances, and boundaries that "power" can be exercised over an individual—"sovereign [in] mind and body"—who is "a member of a civilized community."[179] Following from the first inward "liberty of thought and feeling, absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects" is the second component: the "liberty of tastes and pursuits," which is the activity of developing and following a life plan "to suit our own character."[180] Consequently, the third form of liberty is that of association, invoking Mill's harm principle: the "combination among individuals; freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others."[181]

These three liberties have a crucial interconnection. Since, according to Mill, human knowledge is fallible and ideas need to be vigorously and consistently tested for the betterment of all human kind, the same liberty of thought and discussion needs to be extended to "different experiments of living" among "varieties of characters." For Mill, individuality is "one of the leading elements of well-being" in that it is a fundamental component and necessary condition of "all that is designated by the terms civilization, instruction, education, [and] culture."[182] In other words, it is not only nonsensical to conceive of such social institutions without living individuals

[179] Mill, *'On Liberty' and Other Writings*: 5; 13

[180] Ibid., 15.

[181] Ibid., 15-16.

[182] Ibid., 56–57.

but also that individual "development" and "spontaneity" are necessarily mediated through these institutions and ultimately shape and aid their development (this interconnection falls under the heading of "progress" for Mill). Hence, the processes of self-development and social progress are mutually reinforcing.[183] A multiplicity of modes of living expands the scope of collective human experience passed onto each generation, which is instructive in the process of discovering what modes of existence and conduct are preferable to others.[184] However, for this process to continue, the individual must be able to "use and interpret this experience in his own way" provided a certain maturation of "faculties."[185]

The most effective (or perhaps the only) method for mental and moral progress of all human kind is by means of the individual who "chooses his plan" since this involves reason, judgment, foresight, observation, discriminating between choices, and the self-control and resolve to uphold the decision.[186] Hence, one with "a character" is one whose "desires and impulses are *his own*" in that they express one's nature as developed and modified by his own culture in contradistinction to someone who passively and rotely adopts prevailing opinion and modes of living as if they were one's own.[187]

However, it is in Mill's treatment of "conformity" where we begin to detect the fundamental limitations of his model for free individuality under existing socio-economic conditions. For Mill, conformity spreads when the multitude of individuals do not exercise their faculties of reason and arbitration through forming a character; instead, they adopt prevailing

[183] Ibid., 63.

[184] Mill labels this the perfectibility of man, Ibid., 61; 63; 64; 67.

[185] Ibid., 58. Hence, Mill's exclusion of colonial subjects and the poor. See note above.

[186] Ibid., 59.

[187] Ibid., 60, my emphasis. Similar castigations were raised a century later by the existentialists including Sartre and de Beauvoir.

opinion and modes of living wholesale without reflection. Certainly "traditions and customs" on their own are simply forms of aggregated past human experience but when taken up as modes of thought and life without reflection they become wellsprings of conformity. Adopting them in such an unreflective manner neither develops character nor progresses society: "he who does anything because it is custom, makes no choice" and hence does not involve the exercise of the faculties of the "mental and moral," which, like all faculties, "are improved only by being used."[188]

Echoing Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Limits to State Action*, Mill suggests that a major source behind rising conformity is the decline in the "variety of situations" confronting individuals. The experiential distinctions among different ranks, professions, trades, and living arrangements in the past have ceded to increasing sameness in the context of standardized education, the improvement in the means of communication, and the "increase in commerce and industry."[189] For Mill, even though differences between classes continue to be vast, individuals regardless of social position are a great deal more similar than ever before: they "now read the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights and liberties, and the same means of asserting them."[190]

Mill's theory of how individual self-development is the precondition of and coextensive with the development of society reveals a deep contradiction in the formal structure of his defense of liberal individuality. Recall that the ability for free thought and discussion (which extends to the "liberty of tastes and pursuits" in modes of living) requires that individuals

[188] Ibid., 60.

[189] Ibid., 73.

[190] Ibid. Like Marx, Simmel, and Adorno, Mill is detecting how the forces allowing the pursuit of character by individuals (i.e. capitalist social relations) also tend to homogenize them.

exercise a certain degree of *disinterestedness* in order to correctly weigh the merits of competing opinions, thoughts, and modes of living and apply those that are most conducive to their particular interests. The necessity of this balance of interest and disinterest raises a potential problem as pointed out by Elaine Hadley:

> When Mill abstracts the subject from an overinvestment in particular interests, thereby attributing to it a necessary disinterestedness, he not only devises a form of individuality that by definition is replicable as form, he runs the risk of rendering each subject indistinguishable from other subjects, generic in his objectivity, not just like everyone else but interchangeable with everyone.[191]

While Hadley quickly dismisses this as a problem by pointing out that Mill's individuals are also subjects of "tastes and pursuits" which suggests "an embodied and agential" dimension to an otherwise abstract and ultimately exchangeable individual,[192] the cracks in the facade of free individuality evinced by her suspicion are far more significant than she admits.

On the one hand, the replicability of the individuality is not necessarily a problem if we regard the pursuit of self-development as simply a sort of egalitarian rationality insofar as it is, in principle, able to be attained by anyone given the correct training. For Hadley, it appears that this replicability is largely rooted in the formal character of this rationality insofar as "Mill's liberal individual…is defined primarily by his rationally disinterested relation to his opinions, tastes, and interests rather than by their particular content."[193] On the other hand, however, this replicability so easily succumbs to a pernicious indistinguishability that appears to render individual *subjects* into interchangeable *objects* in Hadley's own formulation. It appears, then,

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[191] Hadley. *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 72.

[192] It may be said that Hadley mistakes embodied and agentive for concrete and free, when in reality the individual is concrete as long socially valid abstractly and free insofar as they are personally independent. See discussion in Chapter 2 above.

[193] Ibid., 71-72.

that Mill's model for the pursuit of free individuality necessitates that human individuals are related to other individuals not primarily as subjects (i.e. intersubjectively) but as objects in which the identity of their objectivity renders them indistinguishable, replicable, exchangeable and fungible.

The concern raised by Hadley queues us in to a suspicion that Mill's model necessarily implies an abstract individuality because it assumes but does not critically examine the social bases of the fungibility of individuals in capitalist society. In Chapter Two we reviewed this basis in the commodity character of labor-power as both the essential means for reproducing the life of human beings and as the basis of a restricted, self-negating, and superfluous individuality, or, as I suggested, the existence of human individuality in the mode of being denied. In other words, as examined in Chapter Two, the social conditions in which Mill assumes are necessary for the liberty of the individual allow for the pursuit of a restricted concrete individuality only insofar as each individual is validated abstractly—that is to say, successfully sells their labor power. In Chapter Three, we explored how this requirement also becomes a source of not only conformity but also generative of a social logic of human superfluousness.

Transformation of Ideology: from liberal to positivist

Nevertheless, there is something redeemable in Mill's thought, especially when we contrast it to more contemporary accounts of the individual in various strands of liberal thought, which fall behind Mill's analysis by devolving into what Adorno regards as the *sine qua non* of ideology in the late 20th century: "the emphatic and systematic proclamation of what is."[194] This latter function of ideology, what could be called its positivist form, marks a departure from the

[194] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 118.

classical form of ideology which emerged in the age of Enlightenment. Let us consider the latter first.

While ideology has a prehistory in the roots of identity thinking and the domination of human beings over other human beings and therefore is inseparable from hitherto human history,[195] the "nature of ideology itself is bourgeois."[196] In fact, the development of liberal ideology is historically coeval with the rise of a theory of society as a whole for ideology is the consciousness of what is socially generative as simultaneously true and false. Crucially, ideology in its classical, bourgeois, or, liberal forms (these terms are equivalent here) functions as "justification [*Rechtfertigung*]"[197] —as an attempt to provide a rational account, an explanation, or apologia because it "presupposes the *experience* of a societal condition which has already become problematic" and therefore stands in need of acknowledgment, either critically or affirmatively.[198]

As an amalgamation of truth and falsity, liberal ideology is objectively necessary in prevailing social conditions, thereby leaving critique the task of unmasking what "is *specifically false* and at the same time to grasp it in *its necessity.*"[199] This dimension of ideology is powerfully formulated by Marx in his critique of Feuerbach. While Marx writes that Feuerbach

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[195] Jürgen Ritsert offers a pithy explanation of the complicated status of ideology as "legitimation" for the latter "is a process which certainly appears and works in historically rather different forms, but its functions and consequences are not restricted to the epoch of civil society alone. There have been types of ideology long before the modern society of universalized commodity-exchange…The feudal concept of the 'honor' of the ruling nobility would be one single example" Ritsert. *Models and Concepts of Ideology*. Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities (Amsterdam: Rodopi Bv Editions, 1990): 184.

[196] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 189 and Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 151: "Identity is the Ur-form of ideology."

[197] *Rechtfertigung* can express all of these meanings. While Ritsert suggest it is "hardly translatable," Cook translates it as "legitimation" and John Viertel as "justification" in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 189.

[198] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 189-190 (my emphasis).

[199] Ibid., 39 (my emphasis).

correctly begins with "the fact of religious self-alienation, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one," his work falls short of an adequate critique because it "consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis." However, Marx adds, "that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis."[200] In other words, to explain illusions as illusions, one must explain their (social) necessity, or as Marx formulates it with characteristically brilliant pith: "the call for the end of illusion about conditions is the call for the end of a condition that requires illusions."[201]

The contradictory character of ideology understood in this manner can hardly be overstated. On the one hand, ideology has consistently been a tool for the ruling classes—or, as Encyclopedist and French Enlightenment thinker d'Holbach points out "Authority generally considers it in its interest to maintain received opinions: the prejudices and errors which it considers necessary for the secure maintenance of its power."[202] On the other hand, ideology cannot simply be explained as an instrument and product of the ruling classes. Rather, ideology in its classical liberal form is inseparable from the commitment to the progressive use of reason to benefit human beings insofar as ideology as justification takes the "form of discursive logic, of argumentation, which contains an egalitarian, anti-hierarchic element."[203]

Along with the rational use of reason (that is, in service to human needs), the deployment of ideology also presupposes some conception of social justice "without which such an

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[200] Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach,* in *MECW* Vol. 5: p. 7.

[201] Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution Hegel's Philosophy of Right* in *MECW* Vol.3: p. 176 (trans. amended).

[202] Cited by Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 185

[203] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 190. Hence, the "thinkers of the Restoration and those who praise feudal or absolutistic conditions are themselves already bourgeois…and therefore they always undermine that which they would glorify."

apologetic necessity would not exist."[204] Ideology as justification can indeed amount to apologia, but at least an account is given to *explain* the state of a problematic world, an attempt that constitutes ideology's rational kernel from which critique can proceed by confronting ideology with its own truth. Therefore, one of the results of ideology has been that "something spiritual [*geistlich*] emerges from the social process as something independent, substantial and with its own proper claims" which can be seen in the emphatic and contradictory concepts such as freedom, justice, and individuality.[205]

In the early 20th century, however, the structure and function of ideology—and therefore its concept—began to significantly change.[206] Exemplified in mutually reinforcing procedures of positivism and the products of the culture industry, the new form of ideology is not so much distinguished by the delusion that its claims correspond to reality, but rather by the absence of the independence—however thin—characteristic of the classical form of ideology. The latter—essentially liberal in character—still faintly grips an intellectual [*geistlich*] independence insofar as its emphatic concepts (e.g. freedom or individuality) reveal the vestiges of "a consciousness that is more than the mere imprint of that which exists" for its progressive-rational hallmark is that it "seeks to penetrate this existence."[207] Positivist ideology, to the contrary, seeks to "explain" the world by simply reduplicating it in thought.[208]

Either by positivism's attempts at the "precise reproduction of empirical reality," or by the interminable repetition of the same by the culture industry that incessantly bombards us, human

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[204] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 189-190 and 185.

[205] Ibid., 199

[206] Ibid., 189

[207] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 199. Hence, the importance of the transcendent moment in all immanent critique.

[208] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §134

beings are increasingly "persuaded that they are being confronted by themselves and their own world."[209] The products of the culture industry do so through their pseudo-realism: by presenting human beings with what already constitutes the conditions of their existence but in a way that proclaims "this present existence as its own norm" so that "the contraband of slogans, such as that all foreigners are suspect or that success and career offer the highest satisfaction in life are smuggled in as though they were evident and eternal truths."[210] Positivism takes over and transforms ideology's formerly rational character, for example, by scientific calculation of consumer preferences or by the attempt to measure 'public opinion' as if it were simply the aggregate of innumerable individuals' spontaneous judgement.[211]

Examples of this new ideology abound in mass culture but this trend in no way exempts political philosophy. For Adorno, this was certainly the case with thinkers of existentialism and the turn to ontology, "who attach themselves to the word 'existence,' as if the reduplication of mere present existence by means of the highest abstract determinations which can be derived from this, were equivalent with its meaning."[212] For us in the 21st century, I suggest we see positivist ideology in a number of otherwise disparate trends in the contemporary academic political theory espousing broadly liberal ideas.

Post-liberal ideology of contemporary liberalism?

The contemporary observer need not search long to find "the affirmation of what is" even among the most eminent of recent thinkers of various liberal persuasions writing on the status on the individual. For instance, Martha Nussbaum explains that the individual constitutes a

[209] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 201

[210] Ibid., 202; 201

[211] Ibid., 187.

[212] Ibid.

fundamental concern for liberal political thought because it reflects a basic and incontestable fact of human experience:

> [L]iberalism responds sharply to the basic fact that each person has a course from birth to death that is not precisely the same as that of any other person; that each person is one and not more than one, that each feels pain in his or her own body, that the food given to A does not arrive in the stomach of B. The separateness of persons is a basic fact of human life; in stressing it, liberalism stresses something experientially true and fundamentally important.[213]

To the contrary, the character of Mill's 19th-century liberal individualism still had the character of "justification" insofar as it "presupposes the experience of a societal condition which has already become problematic and therefore requires a defense."[214] The individual becomes the focus of his theory because it is seen as a problem and something that is threatened, not simply because, contra Nussbaum, it reflects some fundamental truth. Of course, as we have seen above, justification can indeed amount to apologia of existing conditions,[215] but at least Mill attempts to explain the state of the world (ideology's rational element), as opposed to simply tautologically "explaining" that whatever exists because it exists. The latter form of ideology still functions as justification but does so by proclaiming "that things are the way they are…the thin axiom that it could not be otherwise than it is."[216]

Another prominent example of the transformation of contemporary liberalism into positivist ideology can be seen in John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971/1999) which, according to one recent commentator, "unleashed an industry of criticism that shows no signs of abating"[217]

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[213] Nussbaum, Martha C. *Sex and Social Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[214] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 189

[215] In addition to "justification," *Rechtfertigung* also implies "explanation" and "apologia"

[216] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 202

[217] Weinstein, David. "English Political Theory in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." In *Handbook of Political Theory*, eds. Gerald Gaus & Chandran Kukathas, London: Sage, 2004: 410.

The extensive critical appraisals of the Rawls' model are well-known and I cannot hope to review them here with any thoroughness.[218] I only wish to point out how his identity thinking both shares and departs from Mill's serving to distinguish the latter's liberal ideology with Rawls' ideology of positivism. Let us consider three major similarities. First, just as Mill assumes the logical ordering of categories matches the ordering of reality in his erroneous distinction between production and distribution, Rawls relies on the dubious claim that we know "facts in general" about society regardless of form that likewise infuse specific features of capitalist society into society as such thereby bestowing them an immutable and necessary character. Secondly, Rawls also carelessly rends apart production and distribution. Taking the latter as "the basic structure of society," he anoints distribution as the subject matter of justice and, hence, the legitimate object of political contestation. Thirdly, just like Mill, the upshot of Rawls model suggests a series of reforms which would abide by a "difference principle" which stipulates that social or economic inequality can only be just if the result also compensates everyone, especially the least advantaged.[219] However, unlike Mill, who despite his theoretical shortcomings did detect some of the radical underlying inadequacies of his society, one of Rawls' major findings is that any rational person would agree to principles for choosing social arrangements which would be more or less identical to existing social conditions.

As is well known, Rawls' *Theory of Justice* attempts to develop the titular concept as "the chief virtue" to govern how a society goes about justly arranging its organization in a way that does not preclude or presuppose any particular conceptions of the good. Justice, then, is not taken to be a social ideal to be realized but rather the standard or "set of principles" governing

[218] In fact, in Ch. 1, we reviewed the criticism of Rawls' abstract individual.

[219] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Revised ed. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999): 65.

the distribution of benefits and duties of social cooperation and institutions. One of the major tenets of what later Rawls called "political liberalism" can be found in the this earlier approach to justice insofar as it is designed to accommodate a diversity of views adequate to broadest possible pluralism.[220] Such principles are not equivalent to social ideals but rather constitute and legitimate our conception of "social justice," or, "a standard where distributive aspects of society are assessed."[221] Hence, strength of Rawls' approach is said to be in its weak but broad claims relying on universal principles able to transcend specific contexts. Indeed, Rawls claims his reasoning relies on "a natural guide to intuition" since thought experiments are free of the exigencies of time and place.[222] His conclusions, then, are simply based on "common sense and existing scientific consensus."[223] Rawls tells us that this "Archimedean" perspective is derived neither from a "transcendental being" nor from a position "outside of the world" but simply from "a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world."[224]

Despite many similarities with Rawls, Mill's major distinguishing feature is not simply what Rawls considers to be Mill's perfectionist approach to liberalism—a characteristic, incidentally, which has been called into question[225]—but rather that Mill's work attempts to

[220] Other types of liberalism, such as Mill's, are deemed 'perfectionist' since they lack this capacity for pluralism by presupposing a concept of the good (in Mill's case, it is the liberty of the individual). Indeed, the comparison between Mill and Rawls may seem unfair due to this supposedly wide difference between perfectionism and deontological liberalisms. I will return to this issue below.

[221] Rawls, *Theory of Justice,* 8-9.

[222] Ibid., 120.

[223] Ibid., 480.

[224] Ibid., 230, 514.

[225] In fact, Rawls himself admits that a "thin theory of the good" undergirds his model insofar as he takes the individual to have a fundamental interest in forming and deciding their course of life. Ibid., 395-399. Zakaras, in responding to Rawls' claim that individuality cannot serve as an adequate ethical self-justification, argues that Mill's articulation of individuality avoids this critique if we understand it as the best form of citizenship and justification for democracy. In other words, while individuality is not the only or even the best justification for democracy, it is nonetheless the best form of citizenship to "allow democracy to succeed on its own terms" (Zakaras, *Individuality and Mass Democracy,* 33).

illuminate and challenge the severe shortcomings of existing society instead of trying to prove their necessity and legitimacy. Even Rubin, the Soviet economic historian, writes that while Mill's thought bears the traces of the vulgarization of classical political economy, he was, nonetheless, "absolutely free of the apologetic aims pursued by the epigones of Classical theory" (e.g. Senior's explanation of profit as the "reward for the 'abstinence' of the capitalist who accumulates capital by refraining from directly satisfying his own personal needs"[226]). Likewise, Marx himself begrudges a backhanded compliment for Mill's "shallow syncretism" for at least, according to Marx, Mill attempts "to harmonize the political economy of capital with the claims, no longer to be ignored, of the proletariat" and therefore best represents those thinkers "who still claimed some scientific standing and aspired to be something more than mere sophists and sycophants of the ruling classes."[227]

Conclusion: towards the nonidentical of individuality?

As I have tried to show above, the now classical form of liberal individualism articulated by Mill, though entwined with ideology, stands in need of being rescued. This task, however, seems to have been lost among certain ranks within contemporary liberal political theory.

We have seen that under existing social conditions, actually-living individuals cannot live the form of life promised by the concept of the individual espoused by liberal individualism. Certainly, the concept promises more than the object and liberal thought has been well aware of this. Yet we cannot simply think of the problem as the concept not being actualized. We also need to see that the concept also does not exhaust the object. On the one hand, the object (living

[226] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 356; 381-382.

[227] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 98.

individuals of a specific historical type) shows us that the concepts "individuality" and "*the* individual" are inadequate to the multiplicity and irreducibility of individuals. The irreducible, qualitative non-identity of actually living human beings persists in their experience, however misshapen.[228] On the other hand, the concept of individuality—even in its ideal form according to liberalism— is inadequate for what individuals *could be* in an emancipated society (as we will see in the concluding chapter, Marx hints at this possibility with the concept of the "social individual"). In other words, under transformed conditions, not only could the object realize what the concept promised, but the object could in turn transform the concept. Therefore, a critique of liberal individualism that wishes to do justice to the "promise" of the concept as well as the experience of the object in their non-identity must critique both object and concept, holding fast to their non-identity.

[228] In fact, the attention to experience also helps explain Adorno's sometimes bewildering announcements of the liquidation of the individual while insisting the individual has managed to persist. While Adorno seeks to disabuse the assumption of the independent individual by discussing the play of social forces and development which constitute the individual and its consciousness, he does not reject the idea that we can learn a great deal about society as a whole from examining individual experience

Conclusion - Individuality and the Freedom from Toil

Departing from a discussion of individualism in contemporary political theory in Chapter One, we first sketched out how the *concept* of individuality has been fraught with contradictions in the history of political thought since at least the 17th century. With the help of Marx's critique of political economy in Chapter Two, we were then able to account for these contradictions not simply as the result of theoretical unclarity, or the clash of incompatible political values, but rather as a product of social structuring practices of capitalist society that are in themselves contradictory. Specifically, Marx theorizes that the modern individual—as a historical anthropological type, as it were—is the product of, on the one hand, the dissolution of pre-capitalist social relations based on personal dependence and personal domination and, on the other, the historical emergence of objective, impersonal relations of "objective dependence" which are inseparable from a peculiar dynamic in capitalist society that acts as a form of abstract compulsion. The resulting form of individuality in the modern world, which for Marx is a form of "personal independence" masquerading as free individuality, was shown to express not only a contradictory *form* (individuality as simultaneously abstract and concrete), but also a contradictory *dynamic* (individualization as simultaneously de-individualization).

In Chapter Three, we explored the dynamic character of individualization as de-individualization through the insights of both Marx and Adorno. It was argued that while capitalist social relations produce the modern individual, these same relations tend to de-individualize human beings not only through strong pressures towards conformity and adjustment, but also in the sense that these relations erode, not only our individuality, but our very existence by increasingly rendering individuals absolutely fungible and superfluous. While we had seen that the grim apotheosis of this tendency underlies the objective conditions of

human superfluousness, this tendency constitutes only one side of the contradictory dynamic of capitalist society.

In the previous chapter (Chapter Four), we reviewed the extent to which the idea of individualism as a regulative ideal entails an analysis and criticism of actually existing individuality because its own demands are left unfulfilled. We reviewed the necessarily normative dimensions of a critical theory and that the problematic attempt by liberal modes of social criticism to close the gap between ideals and their actualization. We then argued that the inadequacy of the latter modes of social criticism can be traced back to their identitarian assumptions. Finally, we reviewed two different forms of ideology as an analytic to make sense of different forms of liberal thinking about the freedom of the individual. The discussion of ideology in light of identity thinking returns our inquiry back to the question of how critical theory can proceed in an age where ideology is no longer susceptible to superficial forms of immanent critique.

In what follows, I will address this problem by first returning to the other side of the contradictory tendency undergirding individualization in opposition to de-individualization. This side of the dynamic, as was suggested previously, is the creation of the material and social preconditions of a post-capitalist society which would be based on *human* relations of free individuals. Such a society would necessarily require the abolition of waged-work and the radical social reorganization of time.

Negative Critique as Rescue

However, before we can complete this sketch, we must return to the methodological problem animating the last chapter. Namely, the serious shortcomings endemic to, on the one hand, theories whose claims to immanence drag them under the crushing weight of existing

conditions thereby eclipsing the ability to detect historically possible social transformations; and, on the other hand, theories that assume a transcendental status and falsely claim the ability to think outside of the social conditions that structure the form and content of thought to its innermost core. As we explored via the analysis of Adorno in the previous chapter, critical theory must locate itself between immanence and transcendence by means of a social materialism because if critique cannot claim to derive its criteria from some transcendental or foundational truth by means of reference to existence or by decisive argumentation, it can only come from the object of critique itself.[1] Hence, an immanent critique of the object—here, society—can and must proceed negatively, for the contradictory constitution of society contains, as its own negative image, a determination of an immanently possible post-capitalist world whose actualization would radically transcend existing conditions.

In the previous chapter we also explored the initial determination of negative critique as the articulation of a specific analysis and precise expression of the false character of existing society. Likewise, we reviewed the limits of a mode of critique that aims to prompt self-conscious discord by demonstrating the gap between social reality and that reality's social ideals. We can now explore how negative critique can be developed through the idea of rescue.

"Rescue" [*Rettung*]—the name Adorno gives to the work of excavating the promise contained in concepts — also suggests "saving," "salvation," and "redemption."[2] In other contexts, the German root word for rescue can also mean helping or liberating; for instance, as a noun—the rescuer [*der Retter*]—can be either secular or theological as in a helper, rescuer (as it

[1] Richter, Gerhard. "Can Anything be Rescued By Defending it? Benjamin With Adorno." *differences* 21, no. 3 (2010): 37. Of course, to have an object of critique presupposes both the subject of thinking as well as their mediation with the object as an objective moment that also belongs to the object, Adorno's materialism, as we saw in the last chapter, insists on the "priority of the object."

[2] Ibid., 36.

appears in the words for ambulance [*Rettungswagen*] or lifeguard [*Rettungsschwimmer*]), or savior (as in Christ).[3] The theological resonance of rescue is by no means an accident and Adorno's well-known appropriation of Walter Benjamin's theological imagery from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is the subject of dispute and a considerable amount of interpretation.[4] However, for our purposes, the salience of the theological resonances of Adorno's vocabulary concerns the persistent problem that we have been reviewing over the relation of immanence and transcendence. Schweppenhäuser articulates this connection with remarkable pith: "Adorno borrows from the radical theological perspective that refuses to align itself to what actually exists, always seeking transcendence; yet he does not rely on the intervention of messianic transcendence to bring about a redemption not of this world."[5] The means by which Adorno can claim such a refusal is not merely by clinging to, as Rolf Tiedemann suggests, the "transcendental telos" of emphatic social ideals that have become "interwoven in the historical process."[6] The only guarantor of the continued existence of ideals are the social conditions that produce them, however distorted or contradictory they may be. Rather, Adorno's refusal to capitulate to existing society stems not only from social ideals that are both produced by the contradictory structure of society and at the same time inveigh against it, but also because these ideals are on the verge of disappearance without a trace.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] For an excellent overview of this accusation and a comprehensive rebuttal, see Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism of Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses on the Concept of History in Walter Benjamin. Philosophy, History and Aesthetics." *Philosophical Forum* 15, no. 1-2 (1983): 71-104.

[5] Richter, "Can Anything be Rescued by Defending it?" 35. cf. Adorno: "If progress is equated with redemption as transcendental intervention per se, then it forfeits, along with the temporal dimension, its intelligible meaning and evaporates into ahistorical theology." Adorno, *Critical Models,* 147.

[6] Rolf Tiedemann, "Begriff, Bild, Name" Cited by Richter, "Can Anything be Rescued by Defending it?" 35.

In other words, the reason why a rescue or saving is necessary in the first place is because that which is in need of rescue is threatened, not simply by its antithesis but due to its historical transitoriness. Therefore, what stands in need of rescue is a *promise* which can be preserved *as a promise* which amounts to its rescue by thought alone. If critical thought is not to delude itself, it can only expect to "save by means of concepts" that which is itself threatened by concepts.[7] To approach this idea, ee must minimally fill in the content whose form we have been assuming in the above discussion: the promise of a free individuality as is generated from conditions that constitute individuality in the form of being denied.

Social and technical bases for emancipation

Marx's analysis of capital as the social logic and dynamic of modernity explains how the social and technical prerequisites for an emancipated society are produced within an alienated form. Capital's tendency to reduce necessary labor time renders the form of wealth based on value increasingly anachronistic and opens the possibility of an individuality not rooted in the sale of labor-power or in the demands of capital accumulation.

The manner in which capital creates the conditions of non-subsistence labor is first developed through the generation of surplus labor. Of course, capital does not invent surplus labor but revolutionizes its productivity due to the peculiar form of the *surplus product* as a surplus *of value.*[8] In social formations where use-values (material wealth) constitute the aim of production, "surplus labor will be restricted by a more or less confined set of needs, and that no boundless thirst for surplus labor will arise from the character of production itself."[9] But in

[7] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 19.

[8] At bottom, it is the *form* in which surplus labor that distinguishes the various economic formations. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 325.

[9] Ibid., 345.

capitalism, wherein the production of surplus value constitutes the aim of production, every effort is made to boost productivity so as to reduce the amount of necessary labor time and maximize surplus labor time. In its ceaseless thirst for surplus value, capital contradictorily renders living labor increasingly superfluous while constantly needing it as a source of surplus value. As we explored in a previous chapter, Marx analyzes this trend with the notion of the changing organic composition of capital as a structural-historical tendency in the development of reproduction of capital on an expanded scale (i.e. the accumulation of capital).[10]

It is difficult to overestimate the implications of the manner in which capital revolutionizes the productivity of labor, for the application of science and technology to the productive process fundamentally transforms production. On the one hand, capital engenders a strong tendency to shorten necessary labor time by means of revolutionizing the production process through machinery: "a mechanism—after being set in motion—performs with its tools the same operations as the worker formerly did with similar tools."[11] On the other hand, science and technology supersedes specialized skill and even the knowledge of a particular production process possessed by any single worker: "The principle of developed capital is precisely to make special skill superfluous, and to make manual work, directly physical labor, generally superfluous both as skill and as muscular exertion; to transfer skill, rather into the dead forces of nature."[12]

Capital's enormous development of productivity—brought about by reducing the amount of necessary labor for the production of use-values—constitutes a fundamental technical

[10] Ibid., 762-3.

[11] Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 495.

[12] Ibid., 587.

prerequisite for an emancipated society. In a post-capitalist society, this capacity could be re-appropriated for the satisfaction of human needs instead of the needs of capital accumulation. Indeed, if human-beings were able to overcome value as a social form of wealth, the development of automation could dramatically reduce the amount of time human beings are required to work. The productive powers generated by this movement opens the possibility of an overcoming: "hence where labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased." Capital creates the material elements necessary for a "rich individuality" which is "all-sided" in production and consumption.[13] Furthermore, the dynamic involved in capitalism production leads to a situation where production of real wealth becomes less and less a product of direct human labor time but rather the application of science and technology.[14] The human being can become a "watchman and regulator" to the process of production because wealth would no longer be measured by direct human labor time and the capacities developed by the general state of knowledge would be sufficient to sustain a human society. In production, direct human involvement is no longer necessary:

> In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he performs, nor the time which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body—it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth.[15]

If there was a "general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum," where every individual would gain an unprecedented amount of free time, then the scientific and artistic

[13] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 325.

[14] Ibid., 704–705.

[15] Ibid., 705.

development would be available to each and all.[16] The development of each individual's full productive forces and that of society can occur in the tremendous increase in free time outside the "necessary labour time for society generally" which would be determined by the needs of the "social individual"—presumably through a political form unencumbered by the demands of capital. Labour now appears as something no longer like labour but rather "the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one."[17] Disposable time could grow along with the power of social production. The measure of wealth would no longer be labour time but rather disposable, free time.[18]

Likewise, the transformation of work from compulsory to freely chosen would fundamentally transform the meaning of work. In a post-capitalist society, work could amount to "the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one." While Marx calls it "attractive work," what is meant by "work" would be radically transformed.[19] In his critical remarks on Charles Fourier, Marx indicates that such attractive work would not simply be "play." Marx credits Fourier for correctly equating the abolition of work with emancipation but chides him for wrongly conceiving that work in an emancipated society would simply be transformed into play.[20] After all, Marx suggests, that "really free working" like musical

[16] Ibid., 706.

[17] Ibid., 325.

[18] Ibid., 708.

[19] Ibid., 611.

[20] Ibid., 712 cited and discussed in Fetscher, "Emancipated Individuals in an Emancipated Society," 108 and 111-112.

composition could be both serious and exhausting, thereby belying the notion that attractive work would be "mere amusement."[21]

Free individuality in an Emancipated Society

The transcendence of the capitalist social organization of time could abolish the class restrictions on types of working activity thereby allowing for the development of individual capacities and, as liberal thought often expresses it, to pursue one's life plans. A reduction in working time could potentially radically transform the organization of the production and distribution of wealth because its form would no longer be value—that is, wealth based on the coerced and unnecessary surplus labor time of workers. In an emancipated society, the reduction of labor time would no longer be driven by the need for increasing surplus labor time necessary for the creation of surplus value. Instead, the "general reduction of the necessary labor of society to a minimum…then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them."[22] With the possibility of providing every individual with the means to life independent of compulsory contributions to social labor time, the social form of wealth could be transformed from one of objectified labor time to one of free time, essential for the development of a free individuality.

[21] Another important distinction that Fetscher raises between Marx and Fourier concerns the social nature of working activity and the distinction between mental and manual labor. Fetscher argues that Fourier believed that overcoming labor would mean to "distribute tasks to different individuals and groups with different inclinations, in such a way that the work of each would correspond to his or her spontaneous need for activity" (Fetscher, "Emancipated Individuals in an Emancipated Society," 112). To the contrary, Marx explains his idea of free association on the premise "that every human being takes satisfaction in voluntary intellectual activity of the kind in which the division between mental and manual labour has been superseded" (Ibid., 113). The orchestra illustrates this point in that the individual musicians see themselves as part of the whole in terms of co-producing the music performed whereby the music "belongs, as it were" to them just as the scientific bases of automated production belong to "all educated producers" (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Fetscher adds that the paradigm of the orchestra should be "taken with a grain of salt" but that it is valuable to illustrate Marx's non-utopian inclinations.

[22] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 706.

The precise form of human relations cannot be known in advance but the eradication of superfluous toil and poverty would eliminate the preponderance of economic (i.e. capitalist) limits to the forms of political practice available to collective human life. Politics —considered as the conscious and efficacious participation, debate and control over how we ought to live and for what ends — would come into its own for the first time in history as the medium which human beings determine their collective lives. Aristotle glimpsed that such a general emancipation could only be possible if the material necessity for domination would not be needed:

> For if each of the instruments had the power to carry out its job when commanded or in anticipation of the command, the way people say those of Daedelus did, or Hephaestus's tripods, which the poet says 'came into the gods' assembly on their own,' so that shuttles would ply the loom and picks play the lyre, there would be no need of subordinates for master-craftsman or slaves for masters.[23]

It would be more precise to call a society no longer structured by social domination as "emancipated" instead of free as the former implies being liberated from something and not the more static connotation of a state of being that the latter suggests. An emancipated society would be one "in control of itself." While the alienated character of capitalism expresses itself in a series of historically specific compulsions that could be grouped together under the aegis of "production for production's sake," its coercive character echoes that of previous social forms. An emancipated individuality cannot exist without an emancipated society—neither of which have yet to become world-historical.

[23] Aristotle, *Politics*: 1253a.

Bilderverbot: Critical Praxis the Limits of Thought

In light of the above, it is clear that Marx's sketch of a post-capitalist society is a negative critique. It is only by demonstrating through critical analysis "the historical nonnecessity of value-constituting labor,"[24] can Marx indicate to us that the social form of wealth in a post-capitalist society could be based on free time. However, if theory is not to delude itself, it must not presume to issue detailed depictions of post-capitalist society; critical theory must abide by the suspiciously theological "ban on graven images" [*Bildverbot*] if it is to remain materialist.

If the form and content of thought are to their core formed by social conditions, then radically transformed social-material conditions would also radically transform thought in ways which cannot be anticipated. Participating in a radical social transformation would necessarily alter our consciousness of it along with society including our notions of past, present, and future. Therefore, it would be foolish to devise detailed descriptions of an emancipated individuality and the precise social institutions that correspond to it.[25]

To assume that thought alone could achieve radical transformation would be a delusion of identity thinking and fails to stay within the limits of what thought can achieve so long as it remains thought. For instance, Hegel succumbs to idealist hubris when he declares in *Philosophy of Right* that "Not until he is a citizen of a good state does the individual achieve his right." Citing this passage, Adorno writes: "But with that a threshold has been reached: that between scientific sociology, which for social reasons, seeks to avoid this conclusion, and the social

[24] Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*: 373.

[25] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §100.

thought which crosses over into praxis working for change."[26] This limit was one of the key discoveries by negative dialectics as a materialist critical theory.

In other words, to rescue something is to redeem its promise as a promise. The promise cannot be realized in thought. Rather, consciously self-aware thought—specifically critical theory—can only preserve the promise in thought so long as its social material basis remains. Likewise, since thought can only proceed by concepts, thought must identify but (as we explored in the last chapter) identify in a manner that yields to the object.

[26] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Aspects of Sociology*, 47.

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