

Adorno, (Non-)Dialectical Thought, (Post-)Autonomy, and the Question of *Bildung*

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In recent years, the very idea of the dialectic has been met with suspicion by a number of philosophers with an affinity for postmodern thought. For those operating within the tradition of autonomist and post-autonomist Marxism, this has been a persistent source of tension. Some of the key theorists, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, have been the most vociferous critics of the dialectic, claiming that it leads to closure rather than openness. The dialectical moment of synthesis, the argument goes, amounts to a reconciliation of opposites that flattens out dimensions of antagonism by rendering difference and multiplicity as a single contradiction — an abstraction to be enveloped. Social struggles, which entail a multiplicity of differences and singularities, are often mischaracterized in ways that are dialectically reductive, obscuring their political content. Moreover, Hardt and Negri embrace a positive affirmation of being in the notion of life-for, and thus find limitations in forms of opposition and negation that conceal or obscure its productive dimensions in a negative formulation of life-against.

Others in the autonomist Marxism tradition, such as John Holloway, have sharply criticized Hardt and Negri's renunciation of the dialectic. From Holloway's perspective, it makes little sense to abandon the dialectic as a whole simply due to the rejection of Hegelian forms of synthesis. While Holloway shares Hardt and Negri's skepticism of closure and premature synthesis, he is drawn to Adorno's negative dialectics primarily because it suspends two competing moments and signals a process of endless revolt. In addition to adamantly opposing the premature reconciliation of contradictions, Adorno was also mindful of "the duality of the moments," meaning that he resisted forms of abstraction and sought to rigorously stress non-identity, so as to avoid erasing particularities in the form of a generalization.¹ The emphasis on non-identity served as a constant reminder of the limitations of conceptual engagements that attempt to reduce the irreducible into a single and intelligible object. For Adorno, mediation was not a device to overcome contradiction and arrive at a new synthesis; it was alleged to exist primarily in the inner structure of a cultural artifact rather than in the space of contradiction between thesis and antithesis. This is evident in his observations about music. We are told that music contains social contradictions and is thus neither fully reflective (assimilatory) nor autonomous. Thus, while classical art reflects the constituted order, it is also "a force of protest."² Even the most reified artifacts contain critical elements; autonomous expressions, too, contain traces of the constituted order.

For these reasons, Holloway challenges the assertion that the dialectic erases differences. In his view, it is not the dialectic but capital that leads to abstract forms of struggle-against. The dialectic is merely "the escape plan, the thinking-against-the-prison, thinking-against-the-wrong-world, a thinking that would no longer make

sense if we were outside the prison of the wrong world — but we are not.”³ The dialectic only makes us aware of this contradiction, it does not create it. In addition, Holloway insists that, in the negative moment of contradiction, there is a positive moment — a yearning for a world without contradiction. Thus, in the flee from the dialectic, there is also a retreat from a notion of movement through negation.

Despite the arguments of Holloway, I want to suggest that Hardt and Negri’s critique of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* warrants some consideration, because it offers some valuable clues about the limitations of the dialectic. According to Hardt and Negri, there are two problems with their dialectical formulation: first, they tend to homogenize the forces of antimodernity, and, second, “by closing this relationship in a dialectic,” they “limit antimodernities to standing in opposition and even contradiction to modernity.”⁴ The first critique, levelled at Adorno in particular, may not be entirely fair. In fact, we could say that Adorno anticipated a number of the postmodern critiques that would later emerge. He was not insensitive to difference and particularities and, as indicated above, we can recognize his attempts to avoid homogeneity in his emphasis on non-identity — a move that highlights Adorno’s proximity to postmodernism.

The second critique, however, is more intriguing and pinpoints the crux of Hardt and Negri’s objection to the dialectic. Because the multiple forces of antimodernity are so dissimilar, “the most powerful of them ... do not stand in a specular, negative relation to modernity but rather adopt a diagonal stance, not simply opposing all that is modern and rational but inventing new rationalities and new forms of liberation.”⁵ Despite the attempt to create distance between the Hegelian dialectic and, later, turn it inside out with the concept of a negative dialectics, Adorno simply has no way to account for the affirmative, productive, and generative forms of altermodernity that are in diagonal relationship with modernity. While Adorno doesn’t necessarily close the dialectic, he doesn’t allow for any movement either. In contrast, Hardt and Negri’s conception of altermodernity “marks conflict with modernity’s hierarchies as much as does antimodernity but orients the forces of resistance more clearly toward an autonomous terrain.”⁶ Altermodernity is a decisive break from modernity, and while it learns from forms of antimodernity, it extends beyond negation, opposition, and resistance to valorize the forms of autonomous production that escape and exceed capitalist control.

With this in mind, a key question might well be: what is meant by autonomy? Moreover, what is the relationship between autonomy and *Bildung*? Douglas Yacek suggests that Adorno proposes that *Bildung* is “a dialectical force field sustaining two competing moments — the Enlightenment ideal of intellectual autonomy and the cultural necessity of social assimilation.” For Kant, the rational autonomous agent emerged only through education. This Enlightenment conception of autonomy seems inadequate. Not only is it individualistic but, as Gert Biesta points out, “Kant assumes that the rational powers of all individuals are basically the same.”⁷ It could be argued, however, that Adorno came to rely more consistently on another conception of autonomy. In rejecting a form of economic reductionism in which the superstructure is a mere reflection of the base, Adorno grants a relative autonomy

to the cultural realm: while cultural artifacts in the age of late capitalism are reflections of a distorted society, they also express a relative autonomy and thus contain critical elements. From my perspective, this, too, seems an inadequate conception of autonomy. Relative autonomy tends to connote forms of oppositional *response* that are reactionary, enclosed, and circumscribed. While the development of the idea of relative autonomy disrupts a facile understanding of a smooth process in which the base determines the superstructure, it still problematically “retains the position of the base as a *starting point*” to which a relatively autonomous force reacts.⁸ Such a conception of autonomy delimits understandings of its subversive potential, and is rather insensitive to those forms of altermodernity that Hardt and Negri describe — forms that not only challenge but create a new world.

Rather than creating a fissure between high (classical) and low culture, we might argue that Adorno’s litmus test was whether or not a cultural artifact was market-oriented. Today, we might reformulate this antagonism in terms of that which is constituted and all that is constituent. This might seem to be an unnecessary or cumbersome reformulation, but consider Adorno’s initial enthusiasm for Arnold Schoenberg’s unconventional twelve-tone technique and the waning of this enthusiasm over the years as it became more prevalent. This suggests that there is a dimension of temporality that must be considered with cultural artifacts. What is initially not market-oriented may not always remain so. With the antagonism between the constituent and that which is constituted, there is, to some degree, an expectation that elements of the constituent will likely be absorbed, dulled, or domesticated by the constituted order. Nonetheless, just as Adorno saw tendencies in which art, in general, became commodified and absorbed by the constituted order, forms of education, namely institutionalized learning, have also succumbed to the same fate. So, can a conception of *Bildung* be of any assistance and, if so, “to what extent can a future ideal of *Bildung*, a *Bildung* of the future still be related to or take inspiration from its modern articulation?”⁹

For Biesta, it seems that the question about *Bildung* must be how it responds to this particular moment. More specifically, how can something new — the constituent — make an appearance in the world? As Biesta puts it, a conception of *Bildung* today is not so much about students acquiring a particular content that is determined in advance, but about students having encounters in “a space of plurality and difference, a space where freedom can appear and where singular, unique individuals can come into the world.”¹⁰ Others, like Jan Masschelein and Norbert Ricken, have suggested that the concept of *Bildung* be abandoned in order to explore the question of being-together.¹¹ If autonomy plays a role here it must be a conception of autonomy radically different from those in the traditions of rational and relative autonomy. The understanding of autonomy that undergirds autonomist Marxism assumes the primacy of a powerful collective social ontology against which capital and constituted power are continuously reacting. Here, social ontology is recognized as the constitutive motor to which capital responds; it is both a threat to and source of capital. For this reason, its productive dimensions are expropriated and its subversive elements are preempted. But — and this is crucial — there is always a surplus dimension beyond

the grasp of constituted power. It is this surplus of constituent life that Adorno can't really account for in the dialectic.

As Stephen Shukaitis puts it, the key contribution of autonomist Marxism's *perspective of autonomy* is "the desire to not preclude in advance the emergence of new social subjects, even and especially from unexpected positions or social locations."¹² The difficult question of any future ideal of *Bildung* or education is whether it can appreciate and respond to — create a space for — the emergence of this type of autonomy or whether such constituent social ontologies will be regarded as a contaminating threat to be "dealt with." There is much to suggest that the tradition of *Bildung* is not particularly well-suited for this task and, worse, that it may consolidate power, preserve bourgeois privilege, and contribute to the subjugation of a constituent social ontology.

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1. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 33.
 2. Theodor Adorno, "Theses upon Art and Religion Today," *The Kenyon Review* 7, no. 4 (1945): 677-682, 678.
 3. John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros, and Sergio Tischler, *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 6.
 4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 96.
 5. *Ibid.*, 97.
 6. *Ibid.*, 102.
 7. Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 135-136.
 8. Gregory N. Bourassa, "An Autonomist Rethinking of Resistance Theory and Pedagogical Temporality," in *Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012), 357.
 9. Gert Biesta, "How General Can *Bildung* Be? Reflections on the Future of a Modern Educational Ideal," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 3 (2002): 377-390, 389.
 10. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 100.
 11. Jan Masschelein and Norbert Ricken, "Do We (Still) Need the Concept of *Bildung*?," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35, no. 2 (2003): 139-154.
 12. Stephen Shukaitis, *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor after the Avant-Garde* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 2.