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**“Highway to Hell” – Auschwitz as  
the Destination of Modernity?**

**Abstract**

*The first part of the paper, running counter to Hegel’s dialectic, presents the main features of Adorno’s negative dialectic and his thematization of Auschwitz as “absolute negativity”. The second part of the paper is dedicated to Lyotard’s adoption and radicalization of the negative dialectic to its suspension, and to his remarks regarding projects of (universal) emancipation that he was convinced characterize modernity – and led to Auschwitz. In the ensuing part, we take a look at some remarks addressed to Adorno about his “fascination” with Auschwitz and the alleged wrongdoing committed by Lyotard’s postmodernist rupture with the modernity on that basis. The final part of the paper is mostly dedicated to Claussen’s return to Adornian theoretical narrative regarding Auschwitz and the apology of its significance for the present day.*

**Keywords**

Auschwitz, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Detlev Claussen, dialectics, emancipation, modernity, postmodernity

“Hegel did not die in the death camps (on the contrary, tragical dialectics feeds only on cadavers), he did not die from Criticism (on the contrary, he lives through it), he died in abundance, he passed away from prosperity, he croaked from health.”<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Mistrust of emancipatory projects sprang up in contemporary social theory, as a form of disenchantment with modernism’s dashed hopes of infinite progress and general emancipation. Horkheimer and Adorno came to realize the “inconsolable emptiness of emancipation”,<sup>2</sup> and were followed by Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, who ultimately thought along the same lines, albeit placing emphasis on different points of resistance: along with the great legitimizing and “globalizing” discourses, they will savagely attack all pretensions toward totalizing knowledge. The most we can hope for instead are transient social practices, limited narratives, and local knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s and

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Adorno as the Devil”, *Telos* (1974), no. 19, pp. 127–137, here. p. 137, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3817/0374019127>.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Zwölf Vorlesungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 139; cf. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der*

*Aufklärung*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997, pp. 56–58.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Brighton 1980; Žan-Fransoa Liotar [Jean-François Lyotard], *Raskol*

Lyotard’s campaign against orthodox perspectives and grand narratives furthered and broadened one stream of critical theory’s critique of Enlightenment and ideology:<sup>4</sup> uncritical thought is not only dominated by the power of ruling class ideology; agonistic relations of power are everywhere and manifest themselves in the rival claims of truth of diverse groups and a plethora of practices.<sup>5</sup> That was roughly the trajectory of philosophical postmodernism’s break with modernity, a trajectory, Adorno and Lyotard were almost equally convinced, that characterized modernity – and led to Auschwitz.<sup>6</sup>

### The Legacy of Auschwitz

The name of one of the many extermination camps will, through Adorno above all,<sup>7</sup> become the secular variant of the religious “tremendum”,<sup>8</sup> while signaling the paralyzing experience that also compels theoretical observation: the name for the unnamable. In the famous phrase, “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbarity”,<sup>9</sup> the very statement is recognized as the self-awareness of interruption, itself undermined by the reason that makes it unseemly to write poetry. For Adorno, “Auschwitz” was the turning point for displaying the consequences of the exclusivist development of “culture” that must suffer various syndromes of (after) “Auschwitz”, and must demand the possibility and meaning of its own survival. Ultimately, it must accept the devastating answer of culture:

“Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed. That this could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them. There is untruth in those fields themselves, in the autarky that is emphatically claimed for them.”<sup>10</sup>

In a typically dialectical gesture, contradiction is placed at the very heart of the phenomenon, which can no longer be thought of as a subsequent result, a warping, or mere deviation. Represented by “poetry”, which it is (from) now (on) barbaric to write, the image of “the spirit” – which “Auschwitz” has brought into stark clarity to the point of transparency – is put forth as its irredeemable capitulation and hopelessness, and not only because the critique of terror, unification, and maiming properties of culture would thus be right. It turns out that any strategy operates for the enemy: insisting on cultural tradition, which reaches its zenith in “Auschwitz”, recreates the conditions of its production; meanwhile escapism and resentment of the notion of culture end in political relativism, thus leaving space for legitimizing precisely that cultural heritage that led to the rejection of culture.<sup>11</sup>

If the high road of culture leads to Auschwitz, turning away from it, even with the intention of avoiding that destination, is only a shortcut to the same endpoint:

“One who pleads for the maintenance of culture that has already shown its guilt and worthlessness, makes an accomplice of oneself; while one who rejects culture, indirectly supports culture’s true barbarous nature.”<sup>12</sup>

Halting the spirit’s cocky clap-trap, this cognitive-poetic paralysis, had it had sufficient courage and/or responsibility, would, standing before Auschwitz, also reveal itself as a defense against a reality that slips away from comprehension and articulation, from its own “object”, to which it is not equal and which it falsifies – even by remaining tacit.

“There is no escape from this circle, not even with silence, for even silence rationalizes its own subjective inability via a state of objective truth, thus derogating this truth into a lie.”<sup>13</sup>

Adorno never minimized this symbolic value of “Auschwitz”, the “Judgement Day” that also obligates any speculative thinking coming after it. He does, however, in *Negative Dialectics*, say that “it was perhaps wrong to say that after Auschwitz there can be no more poetry”, but the “mistake” consists only in “perennial suffering having equal right to expression as a martyr has to scream”.<sup>14</sup> The issue of (im)possibility of what comes “after Auschwitz” still stands, is stronger even, to which the tragic testimony of Primo Levi, Jean Améry, and many others stand as witnesses:

“It is not wrong to ask the less polite question whether life itself is possible after Auschwitz, in particular for someone who avoided execution they were in general due. What is necessary for such a life to continue is a coldness, fundamental principles of civic subjectivity, without which Auschwitz would not have been possible in the first place: comprehensive guilt of the spared.”<sup>15</sup>

The victim who accidentally survived knows now that “the legitimate gratitude of the one who was spared is contained in the uncompromising hatred of the terror perpetrated even on the last creature”.<sup>16</sup> Fully aware of the necessity

[*The differend: Phrases in Dispute*], transl. Svetlana Stojanović, Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, Sremski Karlovci 1991.

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The other stream of the first generation of critical theory, led by Marcuse, did not share such a pessimistic attitude regarding the possibility of emancipation. Cf. Maroje Višić, “Ivory Tower and Barricades: Marcuse and Adorno on the Separation of Theory and Praxis”, *Philosophy and Society* 31 (2020) 2, pp. 221–240, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2002220V>.

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Cf. Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences. Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992.

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This type of critique, in its connection to the Enlightenment and the Holocaust, in signaling the pathological phenomena that Western development has acquired, meets and overlaps, on the one hand, with those critics of modern society who, since Max Weber, through Hannah Arendt, up to Zygmunt Bauman, point to the disastrous effects of rationalization and bureaucratization of Modernity (H. H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber*, Routledge, London 1970; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken, New York 2004; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1996), and on the other, with philosophies of, for instance, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, who also associated the concepts of synthesis and totality with totalitarianism and terror (Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Evil”, in: Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God who Comes to Mind*, transl. Bettina Bergo, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998, pp. 122–134; Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics”, in: Claire Elise Katz, Lara

Trout (eds.), *Emmanuel Levinas*, Routledge, New York 2003, pp. 1–88).

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More precisely, it would appear that the “reduction” of the Holocaust to “Auschwitz” in the public consciousness occurred around the time of Eichmann’s trial in 1961, and in the academic sphere with Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* in 1966.

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Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum. A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*, Crossroad, New York 1981.

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 30.

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik / Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 359.

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T. W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, p. 30.

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 360.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., p. 356.

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Ibid.

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M. Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 248.

of the lives of those who continue to live in the shadow of those who did not survive, Adorno writes that “the fact that in the camps it was no longer the individual who died but the specimen, had to affect the deaths of those who escaped this measure”.<sup>17</sup> The vision of a universal course of history that would advance towards ever greater humanization is disappearing, while the one leading to the megaton bomb seemed certain.

“The modern, dialectical image of progress ended with an explosion in the horrors of regressive dictatorships.”<sup>18</sup>

In the face of that logical conclusion, and not the bursting obstruction of the historical movement, “Adorno’s Auschwitz” provokes the critical theorist to see in it not only an emblematic telos and final executor of the Occidental idea of emancipation, not only a history “marked by rupture rather than continuity”,<sup>19</sup> but also the point whereupon all conceptualization, as well as all relinquishing of conceptualization, is destined to retrace its own path endlessly, after which spirit remains immobile, and all theoretical reflection becomes fundamentally insufficient. The bloody trace of an unspeakable crime has become a widespread phrase, a catchword for a fatal civilizational movement of modernity, as well as the ghostly symbol of probing its theoretical operations. The Holocaust has become the reflective point of silence born of the fundamental insufficiency of theoretical strategies, a name that all rationality deploys, but regarding which there is neither judgment nor sentence, and in the face of which all discursive machinery grinds to a halt. A simultaneously impossible and necessary task was laid before thought itself: thinking the Holocaust and thinking after it, despite it being the epitome of the unthinkable, inexpressible horror, and despite any form of its representation being an unseemly and unseeing transformation and exploitation of unutterable terror. The Holocaust became “absolute negativity”<sup>20</sup> that both compels and precludes thinking, that is, thinking the “completely different”.<sup>21</sup> And/or completely different thinking. For Adorno, it was “negative dialectics”.

“The World Spirit could be defined as a permanent disaster. Under the principle of identity that subjugates everything, what does not enter into identity and escapes planning rationality, causes fear in the realm of means. History could hardly be interpreted in a different philosophical way without being enchanted into an idea.”<sup>22</sup>

The sharp edge of this remark by Adorno is directed, of course, at Hegel’s philosophy of history: its “worldly spirit” was realized only as a farce, as Hitler’s robot bombs, as blind technical perfection that, once launched and deprived of subjectivity, appears, “not on a horse, but on wings and without a head”.<sup>23</sup>

Whether it be a system of thought or the organization of the community, in the exemplary Whole represented by Hegel’s system, the movements of subject and object, concept and object, idea and society are harmonized, life is conciliated, without remainder and without work that such reconciliation deserves. Adorno is convinced that the falseness of such a system is the falseness of society, that substrate of Hegel’s philosophy.<sup>24</sup> The identity of subject and object that his notion of system implies developed into the Absolute, and it proved to be nothing but a voracious and exclusive confinement.

“The world as a system, as it is understood in Hegel’s system, has only today literally proven itself satanically – as a system of a radically socialized society.”<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, after Hegel’s criticism of formal logic, his dialectic logic should itself also be exposed to critique.

“The consequence of the self-critique of logic is the dialectic”,<sup>26</sup> but it does not have the last word either. Hegel characterizes Plato’s dialectic as negative: it “brings disorder into our representations or even into our concepts, shows their nothingness, so that its result is exclusively negative”, instead of, like a “true” dialectic, “showing the necessary movement of pure concepts, and not as if it were thereby destroying them, but in such a way that the result of this showing consists precisely in the fact that pure concepts are this movement and that what is universal consists precisely in the unity of such opposing concepts”.<sup>27</sup> Adorno does indeed invoke Plato’s dialectic,<sup>28</sup> intending to “turn Hegel’s judgments into their opposite”: to expose the unity of concepts as an idealization of real antagonisms, to transform the negativity of the result into openness to the non-identical and resistance to routine patterns of thought. It could be said that Adorno’s critique of dialectical logic is a “dialectic without identity”,<sup>29</sup> a dialectic that should be not only self-reflexive but, at the same time, also self-referential. In its intention to be a theory of critique, and not, as in Hegel, a critique of critique with a result that would nullify the critique’s criticality,<sup>30</sup> it is therefore often seen as a “structure” of a thinking deliberately thought against itself. Negative dialectics, indeed, appears to be a critique of logic by logical means, and, at the same time, a “logic” of every theoretical criticism that would keep the outcome open, without losing its societal goal.<sup>31</sup> Seen from the perspective of Adorno’s negative dialectic, Hegel cannot account for the dialectic of his own dialectical philosophy, and this is precisely

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 355.

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 271.

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Julia Schulze Wessel, Lars Rensmann, “The Paralysis of Judgment. Arendt and Adorno on Antisemitism and the Modern Condition”, in: Samir Gandesha, Lars Rensmann (eds.), *Arendt and Adorno. Political and Philosophical Investigations*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 2012, pp. 197–228, here p. 213, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804782579-011>.

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 354.

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Cf. Stefan Alexander Marx, *Ethik der Dissidenz. Kritische Theorie und öffentliche Kritik*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 97.

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, pp. 314–315.

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T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 61.

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie / Drei Studien zur Hegel*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*,

vol. 5, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 277.

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Ibid., p. 273.

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Ibid., p. 81.

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Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, in: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 19, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 6.

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 53.

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Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, Free Press, New York 1977, p. 43.

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Cf. Ž.-F. Liotar [J.-F. Lyotard], *Raskol*, p. 96.

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Herbert Schnädelbach, “Dialektik als Vernunftkritik. Zur Konstruktion des Rationalen bei Adorno”, in: Ludwig von Friedeburg, Jürgen Habermas (eds.), *Adorno-Konferenz*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1983, p. 81; cf. Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic. Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2005.

what undermines the promise of its omnipotence. In the form of an umbrella, within itself dialectical but in its entirety unproblematized, supreme, and closed system, Hegel betrays the subversive impulse of dialectic itself. His system is “implicitly in every single determination preconceived”: “thought always extracts from the object only that which is already thought in itself” and “is satisfied in itself, flows as if wound”.<sup>32</sup> In other words, instead of consistently performing “the passing of each concept into its other”,<sup>33</sup> Hegel relies on the system as the totality of this movement. Now, only a negative dialectic, which does not repeat Hegel’s “systemic” mistake, could responsibly approach its real topic: the “struggle between concepts”, the “mutual consumption of concepts”,<sup>34</sup> and realize its own principle: that concepts do not remain what they were, but, starting from the consistency stored in their understanding, become something else, and not just what they say at first.

That moment of the negative in the dialectic must finally be taken seriously. By underestimating the negation that his system undoubtedly involves, Hegel disempowered the dialectic, which ultimately becomes indifferent to its initial mandate. Passing the negation of the negation for the affirmative, Hegel’s dialectic restores the anti-dialectical “formal principle brought to its purest form” and traditional mathematical logic, which counts two minuses as a plus, a winning from within:

“The negated is the negative until it passes.”<sup>35</sup>

Adorno, for his part, expects a “seriousness of unwavering negation” from dialectical theory, which would respect the aporia of (in)consistency: if the dialectical contradiction, the expression of what is “irresolvably non-identical”, will not return to pure thought of consequence, to smoothing by means of identity and ignoring what the contradiction itself says, then the theory must give up the negation of the negation as an affirmation; moreover, it must oppose Hegel’s or any such abuse of the potential of negation, steadfastly resisting the view in which “the negation of the negation does not end the negation, but shows that the negation was not negative enough”.<sup>36</sup> Adorno notices that Hegel’s double negation always results in an affirmative, fetishizing it; Adorno therefore sets his sights not so much against the negation of the negative, but against the hypostatization of its result.<sup>37</sup>

Adorno is, after all, aware that it is difficult to draw a line of demarcation between his negative dialectic and Hegel’s dialectic by means of individual distinctions. The difference, however, becomes more noticeable if we call upon the help of “intention”: Hegel’s thought would nevertheless impose and strengthen absolute identity and stimulate a form of systemic closure. That very direction, according to Adorno, is upside down.<sup>38</sup> Adorno’s thought, by contrast, experiences identity as a universal (albeit necessary) apparatus of coercion, and the need in traditional philosophy for a closed system as a necessary evil, to which it submits for the purposes of its immanent negation. In this sense, negative dialectics is really “the re-establishment of the dialectic, namely: against the lies and coercion of the system”.<sup>39</sup> But Adorno admits that, out of necessity, negative dialectic is still “bound from the very beginning to the highest categories of the philosophy of identity” and remains “false, identity-logical, and itself that against which it is thought”, so that it must “correct itself in its critical progress”.<sup>40</sup> The translation of spiritual experience into the concepts by reflecting their (social) mediation is now the demand that is raised against a falsehood of Hegel’s philosophy, which presents

the indifference of spiritual experience and the thought medium as “realizable thanks to a satisfactory conceptual effort”.<sup>41</sup> Today, this is no longer enough. After the unfortunate practical applications of systemic projects of philosophy, Adorno believes that the time has come when thinking must confront itself with the ultimate, with what eludes the concept, and must think against itself without thereby ceasing to be thinking.<sup>42</sup>

## The Fatality of the Will for Emancipation

Following Adorno’s intention, these crucial dimensions of his thought will be interpreted and then idiosyncratically developed by Lyotard. He “follow[s] in Adorno’s footsteps”<sup>43</sup> by recognizing in “Auschwitz” another name for the insufficiency of any speculative theory and practical fatality of modern projects’ optimism of redemption, and then transcribing it into an anti-emancipatory vocabulary of philosophical Postmodernity.<sup>44</sup> After “Auschwitz” – a concept which is not a concept, an experience of a crime incompatible with progressive schemes, a name that stems the tide of thought, a destructive gesture to

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 38.

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Ibid., p. 35.

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie II*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 57.

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 162.

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Ibid.

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik (1965/66)*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2003; cf. Michael Theunissen, “Negativität bei Adorno”, in: Ludwig von Friedeburg, Jürgen Habermas (eds.), *Adorno-Konferenz*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1983, pp. 41–65, here p. 51.

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Mauro Bozzetti, “Hegel on Trial: Adorno’s Critique of Philosophical Systems”, in: Nigel Gibson, Andrew Rubin (eds.), *Adorno. A*

*Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 2002, pp. 292–311, here p. 302.

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Ulrich Sonnemann, “Jenseits von Ruhe und Unordnung. Zur Negativen Dialektik Adornos”, in: Kurt Oppens *et al.*, *Ueber Theodor W. Adorno*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1968, p. 127.

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 150.

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T. W. Adorno, *Drei Studien zur Hegel*, p. 368.

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T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 144, 358.

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Andreas Herberg-Rothe, “Dialectical Philosophy after “Auschwitz”: Remaining Silent, Speaking Out, Engaging with the Victims”, *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3 (2020) 2, pp. 189–199, here p. 193, doi: <https://doi.org/10.22618/TP.PJCV.20204.1.201011>; cf. Andreas Herberg-Rothe, “Lyotard und Hegel – im Widerstreit”, *Hegel-Jahrbuch* (2015), no. 1, pp. 346–347, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/hgjb-2015-0155>.

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Namely, postmodern (contra-)projects can be designated as “attempts to understand the relationship between Nazism and the Holocaust, and one of their principle goals is the prevention of another Holocaust”, while for philosophers of the Postmodernity, the Holocaust is indicative of Modernity in general: “In fact, if we understand the term postmodern as critical of the very foundations of the project of modernity while holding this project responsible for most recent philosophical, social, and political developments, the terms post-Holocaust and postmodern can be used synonymously. [...] We can thus say that the Holocaust holds a crucial place in postmodern thought and that it has been repeatedly claimed as the crucial event to bring postmodernity into being.” – Kristina Busse, *Imagining Auschwitz. Postmodern Representations of the Holocaust* (dissertation), Tulane University, Ann Arbor 2002, p. 67.

any narrative sovereignty – no global story can be credible any longer.<sup>45</sup> And there is every chance that it can – or even must – be disastrous. It is a train of postmodern thought that seeks to attack directly the last remnants of the idea of emancipation.

“What kind of thought is capable of ‘discovering’ Auschwitz, in the sense of the German *aufheben*, setting into a general, empirical, even speculative process directed at universal emancipation?”<sup>46</sup>

The “Postmodern Condition” appears as the result of a great modern process of “delegitimation”, and, in a phrasing Lyotard admits to having simplified, as the “incredulity toward metanarratives”.<sup>47</sup> It becomes mistrust of all “foundationalist”, totalizing narratives that promise “the end of separation”<sup>48</sup> and aim to effectively legitimize either science, art, or social practice. The coherence of “grand narratives”, sweeping in scope and clichéd heroes (the world, humanity, history), and of appropriate explanatory ambitions can be ensured in one of two ways, depending on whether they appear as “speculative narratives” or as “emancipatory narratives”. According to Lyotard, Hegel’s philosophy is a prototype of the latter: it “totalises all [...] narratives and, in this sense, is a distillation of speculative modernity”.<sup>49</sup> In Hegel’s speculative metanarrative, the spirit advances and expands its knowledge, with a myriad of language games gathered and deployed to represent its universal history: the philosophical system makes all knowledge cohere, while true “absolute” knowledge consists of reports of the various relations of incorporation into the “grand narrative” of the subject. Following only its own rules, the subject evaluates and guarantees the legitimacy of particular knowledge.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Hegel’s abstract meta-language undermines the immanence of the dialectical procedure through an imposed teleology that pre-assigns to terms their place in a panlogical system.<sup>51</sup>

In the other form of modern metanarrative, the grand story of emancipation, knowledge is not a goal in itself, but is valued according to freedom, with truth finding its grounding in morality: knowledge is the foundation of human liberation from oppression and suffering; it is no longer its own subject, it serves the subject. In Lyotard’s reconstruction, the idea of humanity’s emancipation begun in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, was put into practice by the French Revolution, and was deployed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the Enlightenment vision of education to liberate citizens of the shackles of unfreedom – and it controls thinking and action to this very day. Trust in the indubitable progress of science, technology, art, along with the expansion of political freedom will liberate all humanity from ignorance, poverty, cruelty, tyranny. Not only would people be happy, but thanks to education, they would become enlightened masters of their fate. This grand story of emancipation has assumed various shapes; yet, its aim has remained the same: emancipation of enlightened humanity from dogma, oppression, and suffering. Excepting traditionalist reactions, the single-mindedness of those with this emancipatory aim, notes Lyotard, has been at the root of all political movements in the last two centuries. Marxism, liberalism, socialism, radicalism – the promise of freedom through progress encapsulates them to the last: all wish to emancipate all of humanity from the “disastrous effects of the injury it had suffered”, all would lead towards “the rights of mankind to self-government”.<sup>52</sup>

The current political landscape is still dominated by the rhetoric of emancipation, admits Lyotard, but quickly adds that it can no longer even bandage, let alone heal, the scars the modern ideal has acquired over the course of its history. They are a testament to the preponderance, not the deficiency, of (self-)

harm through a course of therapy that was meant to bring convalescence. The very techno-scientific, artistic, economic, and political progress – and not its absence – is what has allowed totalizing new wars, totalitarian regimes, the widening gap between the wealthy North and destitute South, unemployment and new poverty, crisis in education, growing ignorance, isolation of artistic avant-gardes, etc.<sup>53</sup> All that is left for modernist legitimating narratives is to emancipate themselves from this universalist and progressivist emancipatory discourse, and what will emerge from such heterogeneity and dissent is a “politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown”.<sup>54</sup> “Justice”, because for Lyotard “it is not that speculative discourse is ‘wrong’ in the sense of being incorrect, but in the sense of being unjust”.<sup>55</sup> The primary responsibility of critical thinking and politics rooted in diversity is now to enable the kind of judgment that admits the heterogeneity of the discursive universe and incommensurability of myriad genres.

Lyotard’s break with grand narratives of emancipation and fundamentalism of ultimate legitimacy also breaks with complementary forms of totalizing thought. It is impossible (Lyotard repeats to exhaustion), not to mention undesirable, to provide common metaregulation for all languages; it is also impossible for any consensus, however much revisable, to encompass an ensemble of regulations that control statements circulating within the scientific community and try to legitimize other language games. Free of nostalgia, stripped of the illusion of potential reconciliation and relieved of any longing for completeness and unity, postmodern knowledge could now signal the retreat of universal metalanguage. It seeks to privilege the *petit récit* as much as fragmentation, discord, disagreement, the agonism of linguistic gestures,

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Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmoderna protumačena djeci. Pisma 1982-1985* [*The Postmodernity Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*], transl. Ksenija Jančin, August Cesarec, Zagreb 1990, p. 36.

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*Ibid.*, p. 106.

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Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoff Bennington – Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p. xxiv.

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Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, transl. Georges Van Den Abbeele, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 97.

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J.-F. Lyotard, *Postmoderna protumačena djeci*, p. 32.

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*Ibid.*, p. 40.

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Jean-François Lyotard, “Analysing Speculative Discourse as Language Game”, in: Andrew E. Benjamin (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, pp. 273–274.

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Jean-François Lyotard, “The Wall, the Gulf, and the Sun: A Fable”, in: Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, transl. Bill Readings – Kevin Paul Geiman, University College London, London 1993, p. 115.

53

See, e.g., Jean-François Lyotard, “A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question”, in: J.-F. Lyotard, *Political Writings*, pp. 27–28.

54

J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 67.

55

Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard. Writing the Event*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1988, p. 136; cf. Barry Smart, “The Politics of Difference and the Problem of Justice”, in: Chris Rojek, Bryan Turner (eds.), *The Politics of Jean-François Lyotard*, Routledge, London 2002, pp. 43–62; Anne Barron, “Lyotard and the Problem of Justice”, in: Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *Judging Lyotard*, Routledge, London 1992, pp. 26–42; Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard. Art and Politics*, Routledge, Florence 1991, pp. 86–115.

and a struggle in the sense of the irreducible plurality of language games, whose phrases are not translatable from one discourse to another. In that way, it also seeks to refine “our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable”: asking for no justification from the homology of the expert, it looks rather to legitimize with paralogy of the inventor, to return the narrative into such “discourses of legitimation” as “the study of open systems, local determinism, antimethod”.<sup>56</sup>

Consequently, it calls into question the very “idea of unified goal of history and singular subject”.<sup>57</sup> All unity has in the meantime become suspect:

“... we have paid dearly for our nostalgia for completeness and unity, for the reconciliation of a term and sensibility, for transparent and communicative experience.”<sup>58</sup>

Even under the demands for yielding and peace, therefore, one senses “the undercurrent of desire for the terror to begin anew, to fulfill the fantasy, clean up reality”.<sup>59</sup> Instead, Lyotard recommends “war on completeness”:

“... let us reveal the invisible, activate the differences, save the honor of the name.”<sup>60</sup>

His imperative suggestion is to abandon global projects and projections, starting with narratives that legitimize political practices born of ideas awaiting realization in a future we must accommodate in order for it to take place. Ideas of freedom, light, socialism may have such power because they are universal, because they “direct all human realities”. Yet, Lyotard is persuaded and persuades the reader that the Holocaust has completely shattered the visions promised by these images, revealing their fatal construction.

The story of Adam’s redemption through love, or liberation from ignorance and slavery through knowledge and equality, the speculative story about the manifestation of the universal idea through the dialectic of the real, the Marxist story of emancipation from exploitation and alienation by socializing labor, the capitalist story of emancipation from poverty through techno-industrial development – is ultimately one story, a history whose sail is filled with the same sweeping idea of universal freedom.<sup>61</sup> What issues from this vantage point of the *grand récit* and refractive variations of its production and/or transformation into totalitarian regimes, is the denunciation of any collective “will for emancipation”, invariably disposed, to put it mildly, towards eliminating all disagreement and reducing diversity.

But after Auschwitz, what is revealed in all law-giving claims to this or that emancipation, that “enables”, legitimates, and directs actions from the vantage point of some future, is one and the same “modern project (project of realizing universality)”.<sup>62</sup> It was not temporarily abandoned or forgotten, as Habermas would have it,<sup>63</sup> but destroyed, liquidated: “There are various forms of destruction, there are multiple names that are symbols of it. Auschwitz”, Lyotard concludes, “is the paradigmatic name of the tragic ‘incompleteness’ of modernity”.<sup>64</sup>

Lyotard takes Adorno strictly at his word: if Auschwitz does indeed “confirm the philosopheme of pure identity as death”,<sup>65</sup> then the ultimate point of retreat of metaphysics into what it was organized against was reached with it. After terrible experiences, Adorno declares, Hegel’s absolute knowledge has turned away from the initial promise made in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, lapsing into thinking about “manure and waste water”.<sup>66</sup> But even that metaphysics of pus and fecal matter would disappear in Lyotard, leaving behind only its excreta:

“Is the anonymity of ‘Auschwitz’ the model of a negative dialectic? In that case it would have to arouse the despair of nihilism, while thought ‘after Auschwitz’ would have to regurgitate its

designation, like a cow chewing cud or the tiger its prey, without benefit. All that will remain in the stable or the lair that the West will turn into, is what is left over after such a meal: trash and crap. Thus is spun the yarn of infinity, as the endless repetition of the *Nichtige*, as ‘bad infinity’. You wanted blood; you got shit.”<sup>67</sup>

And after the experience of Auschwitz, which can no longer be subsumed under categories and theoretical protocols, all totalizing dialectical strategies and all dialectical discourses must be considered bankrupt.<sup>68</sup> It is no longer just a matter of decency and piety, but the twilight of any credible story about the subject and continuity of history. “Auschwitz” signals and testifies to the impossibility of the assimilability of thinking “after” it, the impossibility of digesting it and translating it into its conceptual “phrases” and regimes. Discontinuity and dissensus are then imposed as a beneficial and honest antidote to the effort of every universal philosophical language to synoptically encompass and reflect totality.<sup>69</sup> Not only the discourse of speculative “neo-Hegelian dialectics” – that discusses the thought and life of the West after Auschwitz – became questionable, but also the possibility of any other discourse.<sup>70</sup> In Adorno’s dialectic, “Auschwitz” was meant to “conflate the terminological figures that result from affirmation”, to “mix names that set phases of the term in its movement”, and to designate the experience of confronting dialectics with “the negative that cannot be negated, remaining incapable of being drawn ‘to result’” – to designate “an experience of language that halts the speculative discourse”, thus representing the name “‘within’ which cannot be thought or not completely”.<sup>71</sup>

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J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 100; cf. Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1985, pp. 19–43.

57

J.-F. Lyotard, *Postmoderna protumačena djeci*, pp. 11–12.

58

*Ibid.*, p. 30.

59

*Ibid.*

60

*Ibid.*, p. 31.

61

*Ibid.*, p. 40.

62

*Ibid.*, p. 33.

63

Jürgen Habermas, “Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielheit ihrer Stimmen”, *Merkur* 42 (467) 1988, pp. 1–14.

64

J.-F. Lyotard, *Postmoderna protumačena djeci*, pp. 33.

65

T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 355; cf. Predrag Krstić, “Tri filozofema Holokausta” [“Three philosophemes of the Holocaust”],

*Nasleđe* 21 (2024) 58, pp. 215–227, doi: <https://doi.org/10.46793/NasKg2458.215K>.

66

T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 359.

67

Jean-François Lyotard, “Discussions, ou: phraser ‘après Auschwitz’”, in: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), *Les Fins de l’homme. À partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, Galilée, Paris 1981, pp. 283–310, here p. 290. Later, barely differently, Lyotard’s answering to the question what is the result of “Auschwitz” and what is the result in general, deploying a scatological image: “Will the West turn into a lair or a hovel? All we know is what will be left behind in any case: trash and shit. [...] We wanted the advancement of spirit, we got its excreta.” – Ž.-F. Liotar [J.-F. Lyotard], *Raskol*, p. 98.

68

J.-F. Lyotard, “Discussions, ou: phraser ‘après Auschwitz’”, p. 287.

69

*Ibid.*, pp. 288–289.

70

J.-F. Lyotard, “Discussions, ou: phraser ‘après Auschwitz’”, p. 284; J.-F. Lyotard, *Raskol*, pp. 40, 94–113.

71

J.-F. Lyotard, “Discussions, ou: phraser ‘après Auschwitz’”, p. 286.

“This would not be a name in the sense that Hegel takes it, it would not be a figure of remembrance that ensures permanence to what is left even when the spirit destroys its signs. It would be the name of the nameless. A name that designates what has no name in speculation, name of the anonymous. Which remains entirely anonymous to speculation.”<sup>72</sup>

In sum, “Auschwitz” – not accidentally written in quotation marks by Lyotard – is for him (also?) a symbol of the exclusion of an irreducible experience by totalizing discourse.<sup>73</sup> It “exposes the inadequacy of Hegel’s closing of the gaps between phrases and experiences”,<sup>74</sup> so that the task of philosophy, which now opposes Hegel and the whole of modernity, becomes precisely to testify to that “differend” that always eludes conception, to the sublime sense of the unrepresentability and unrepresentability of every phrase – like “Auschwitz” or what it may (not) mean – excluded from discourse.

### Postmodern Objects and Modern Objections

Adorno’s understanding of Auschwitz as, in Hegelian terms, the “truth” of modernity, due to its longer exposure and grounding argumentation, became a frequent target. The theoretical meaning Adorno assigns to Auschwitz is revealed as the reason for a lapse in reasoning, as a mistake in Adorno’s entire (anti-)system. Once such an anamnesis has been made possible, there is an anesthetic and not always honorable search for a justifying finding, for a (re)construction of that pseudo-cognitive moment by which, allegedly, Auschwitz was declared a self-evident prism and promoted to pan-illustrative support of philosophical elaboration. Commentators reveal that the shock of those undoubtedly shocking, for understandable reasons, contaminated the theory, which has become a testimony of suffering worthy of respect, but not what it aimed at: its explanation. Adorno thus becomes an object of pitiful sympathy, which is subject to paternalistic “understanding”, a justifying gesture and “caring correction” as soon as the pedantic delegates of the theory perceive him as an aspirant for the theoretical validity of his “confessions”. Faith in the rationality of history and the emancipatory potential of its theory are both defended by disempowering the challenge of “Auschwitz” and by denouncing Adorno’s sinister reflection on it as a (subsequent) forced fascination.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, a whole series of interpreters, even when they are not openly dealing with psychological doubts, note Adorno’s “obsession” with Auschwitz and its resultant promotion to the symbol of a world-historical turning point, elevated to the rank of a metaphysical fact. “In Auschwitz, Adorno did not see an incident of humanity on the path of progress towards freedom, but a progress turned into its own negation, which precisely as progress led to Auschwitz”,<sup>76</sup> notes Günter Rohrmoser and concludes that from this upside-down view of progress in history a renewed is the “fundamental gnostic belief that the existing reality is the devil’s and as such twisted”.<sup>77</sup> Arnold Kuenzli detects the same figure and explains that Adorno actually adopted Hegel’s notion of historical totality, only that he turned the plus into a minus. By projecting Auschwitz into the hub of history, he changes centuries of worship by demonizing historical movement: men and things assume satanic forms, while progress towards hell continues unceasingly. The final verdict on this celebration of radical evil as the resurrection of the *Weltgeist* reads:

“Adorno’s *Negative Dialectic* is a theodicy with a negative sign – Satanology.”<sup>78</sup>

The otherwise Adorno-friendly Martin Jay also confirms the same diabolical character of Adorno’s theoretical construction.

“For him, Auschwitz had the function of a historical nodal point of the kind usually reserved for messianic intervention in history. It was, of course, an inverted messianism, of the devil rather than of God, which allowed him to speak of ‘after Auschwitz’ with almost the same ominous pomposity as a Christian would speak of Hades.”<sup>79</sup>

Michael Theunissen also found that Adorno’s thought moved towards a “tragic theology” that implies an “apocalyptic eschatology”, the complete absence of anything “positive” in the world.<sup>80</sup> The Satanization of everything, of the “Whole”, is just the opposite of the absence of a whole God. When one cannot be God, let one be the devil. But, God or devil, the same theo-nostalgic story is being told. That is, in short, also Lyotard’s objection to the “devil Adorno” and his neo-Hegelian dialectic.

“Totality is missing = there is no god to reconcile = all reconciliation can only be represented in its impossibility, parodied = it is a satanic work. You wasted your time replacing God with the devil, the prefix super – with the old sub-terranean mole, you remain in the same theological deployment. You pass from shamefaced nihilism to flaunted nihilism. Adorno’s work, just as Mann’s and Schönberg’s, is marked by nostalgia. The devil is the nostalgia of God, impossible god, therefore possible precisely as a god.”<sup>81</sup>

Followers of critical theory will also find in Adorno’s “Auschwitz” a philosopheme that unjustifiably pretends to become a crematorium of philosophical thought and, precisely therefore, is perhaps the last relapse of those “modern”, metaphysical and/or theological speculative constructions of history.<sup>82</sup> No longer finding any inspiration in the “magic of extremes” that Adorno bequeathed to them, the generation of his students will persistently try to mollify his withdrawal from discursive rationality, induced by the fear of the imperialism of concepts, toward the “structure of life of non-violent communication”, in which they believe there is still room to tell the truth. According to these

72  
Ibid., p. 287.

73  
Ž.-F. Liotar [J.-F. Lyotard], *Raskol*, p. 14.

74  
Gary K. Browning, “Lyotard and Hegel: what is Wrong with Modernity and what is Right with the Philosophy of Right”, *History of European Ideas* 29 (2003) 2, pp. 222–239, here p. 235, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-6599\(02\)00094-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-6599(02)00094-3).

75  
Cf., e.g., Joseph F. Schmucker, *Adorno – Logik des Zerfalls*, Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart – Bad Conntstatt 1977, p. 146; Arnold Künzli, *Aufklärung und Dialektik. Politische Philosophie von Hobbes bis Adorno*, Rombach, Freiburg 1971, p. 146.

76  
Günter Rohrmoser, *Das Elend der Kritischen Theorie*, Rombach, Freiburg 1973, p. 20.

77  
Ibid., p. 23.

78  
A. Künzli, *Aufklärung und Dialektik*, p. 135.

79  
Martin Jay, *Adorno*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1984, pp. 107–108.

80  
M. Theunissen, “Negativität bei Adorno”, pp. 79, 60.

81  
J.-F. Lyotard, “Adorno as Devil”, pp. 132–133.

82  
Jürgen Habermas, “Urgeschichte der Subjektivität und verwilderte Selbstbehauptung”, in: Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophisch-politische Profile*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1971, p. 197; also: J. Habermas, “Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielheit ihrer Stimmen”, p. 13; Albrecht Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne. Vernunftkritik nach Adorno*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 160–161; M. Theunissen, “Negativität bei Adorno”, pp. 56–57.

authors, the truth related to “social reality” does not have to be moved to the utopian regions of that completely-different-from-the-present-crippled-life, but can only be realized precisely in that communication freed from coercion that takes place in the space of everyday reality.<sup>83</sup> This revision of Adorno, therefore, seeks to liberate him from the last remnant of “messianism”, which he allegedly brought to an end.<sup>84</sup>

Allegedly Adorno was overly harsh in denouncing instrumental reason: his hypersensitivity to any hint of the logic of mastery narrowing the optics to insensitivity to traces and existing forms of communicative rationality. For such a deeply placed critique of the totalitarianism of identifying thought, a critique according to which the Holocaust also appears as a scene of the lawful liquidation of everything different, any reason other than a bad one becomes unthinkable – “in that difficulty all the paradoxes and aporias of Adorno’s philosophy are closed”.<sup>85</sup> Given that in the general framework of blindness, the compulsion of instrumental reason towards unity is reduced to a mere condition of conceptual thinking, Adorno can think the opposition to its systemic creations – the other of omnipresent objective reality – messianically, that is, only from the “perspective of negative theology”, still in the “theological category of salvation”.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, critical theory after Adorno did not respond to his call for questioning of its own discourse: it too had to see the extension of the “Auschwitz” metaphor to all of history as an understandable but still irrational departure from the overly, and therefore wrongly, satanically rationalized world. It seems certain, however, that Adorno’s “utopia”, although woven with soteriological motives as limits of thought, was not religiously intoned. On the contrary:

“Not a single word spoken from on high, not even a theological one, can have its right unchanged after Auschwitz.”<sup>87</sup>

“Liturgy” can no longer be performed from outside, by the mandate of a consecrated missionary from above. Still, one should not completely give up each word, but rather change the position and tonality of this *vom Hohen getöntes Wort* in such a way that one never loses sight of the actual or intentional (un)truth of its utterance. This means that in a world that has not left a single *eschaton* uncompromised, after all the fatal philosophical tendencies of societal organization and amelioration, it willingly reduces itself to a “negative lesson”, that the “guarantee of redemption lies in rejection of all insinuated or implanted faith, and knowledge in denunciation of madness”.<sup>88</sup>

The uncomfortable hopelessness that interpreters find in Adorno’s “theology” articulated in this way is a deliberate product of the self-awareness of thinking that places responsibility in a particular moment of contemporaneity; thinking that must continue despite the obstruction that this moment prescribes for it. The very situation of contemporary thought is, according to Adorno, paradoxical: in order to think at all, it is necessary to think about changing the world that thinking sees as unchangeable. Namely, in a totally managed world, knowledge itself is situated between, on the one hand, the fundamental necessity of “perspectives in which the world is moved, alienated, reveals its cracks and fissures as it will once be stretched out as needy and offended in the light of the Messiah” and, on the other, the complete impossibility of “a point of view that escaped the violence of existence in the least”, lest it be “only prepared by the same resentment and neediness that it intends to get away from”.<sup>89</sup>

As for Lyotard, the first typical objection refers to the unfairness or not-quite-fairness of his emphasis on Hegel’s “philosophical absolutism” and the complementary advocacy for his less one-sided and elliptical, but more nuanced reading. Moreover, according to these readers, Lyotard’s critique of modernity, for which Hegel stands as an epitome and functions as a constitutive Other,<sup>90</sup> is itself subject to condemnation for the universalist pretension and unanimity against which it stands:

“Lyotard’s interpretation of Hegel is as absolutist as the rigid meta-physical system that he attributes to Hegel.”<sup>91</sup>

It could be put differently: Lyotard, although criticizing all “grand narratives”, is formulating a “grand narrative” of his own, a grand story about the end of stories.<sup>92</sup> “Lyotard’s critique of Hegelian theory is salutary insofar as it questions Hegelian claims to absoluteness”, but “frames an absolutist interpretation of Hegel that barely acknowledges alternative interpretative possibilities”, in a forced effort to shape the contrast between a postmodern culture of difference and the homogeneity of modernity.<sup>93</sup> In short,

“Lyotard in impugning the generality and systemic rationalism of Hegel’s philosophy addresses neither its actual analysis of social practices nor its comprehension of their historical development. [...] Hegel’s conception of modernity in its evocation of the dilemmas posed by the interplay between subjectivity and social contextual practices deals with issues that are insufficiently addressed by Lyotard. Hegel’s sense of the complex burden and promise of modernity is ignored in Lyotard’s highly generalized notion of modernity and its supersession.”<sup>94</sup>

Another remark, related to the previous and closer to the intermediate term with which we wanted to emphasize Lyotard’s break with dialectics and modernity, is that Lyotard, as well as Adorno, uses the term “Auschwitz” synecdochally as the representation of the Holocaust in general, often simply identifying the latter with gas chambers. The problem of representing the Holocaust with the emblem “Auschwitz” can be taken as the larger problem of an all-too-serious understanding of synecdoche – the part standing in for the whole – which leaves other, equally important questions such as social causes and consequences of mass extermination excluded from such study.<sup>95</sup>

83  
J. Habermas, “Urgeschichte der Subjektivität und verwilderte Selbstbehauptung”, p. 195.

84  
A. Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne*, p. 186.

85  
J. Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, p. 121; A. Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne*, p. 178.

86  
A. Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne*, p. 177.

87  
T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, pp. 361.

88  
M. Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 31.

89  
T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 283.

90  
G. K. Browning, “Lyotard and Hegel”, pp. 236–237.

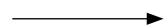
91  
*Ibid.*, p. 237.

92  
A. Herberg-Rothe, “Dialectical Philosophy after Auschwitz”, p. 194.

93  
G. K. Browning, “Lyotard and Hegel”, p. 224, 225.

94  
*Ibid.*, p. 226.

95  
David Seymour, “Lyotard. Emancipation, Antisemitism and ‘the Jews’”, in: Charles Turner, Robert Fine (eds.), *Social Theory After the*



The objection continues, pointing out that the absolutization of “Auschwitz” and similar concentration-camp figures prevents a comprehensive explanation, including the historical, legal, and political conditions that led to the camps.<sup>96</sup>

One could also say that Auschwitz is “still the greatest challenge for philosophy and reason, rather than representing their end, as Lyotard most prominently seems to imply”, and that it “signifies solely the end of a particular philosophical approach, that of the substitution of all content through a method, of discourse ethics and of concepts like post-modernity and constructivism”.<sup>97</sup> Such criticism, with a nod to the debt to the victims, advocates the survival of “the good old” Hegelian dialectics – but somehow with a “new method”.<sup>98</sup> Thus, when Herberg-Rothe rejects Adorno’s negative dialectics as adequate approach to the mind’s encounter with the suffering unspeakable, she says:

“There is no negative (Adorno) or positive dialectics, but only dialectics which mediates and posits the positive and the negative on a higher level. Only a real dialectical method is able to comprehend difference and unity, contrast and identity in dealing with speaking about the unspeakable.”<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, Herberg-Rothe seeks precisely to re-examine Adorno’s analysis with the help of the Hegelian paradigm, albeit presented in a unique and/or very peculiar way.<sup>100</sup> She sees Lyotard’s insistence on the Difference, consequently, as nothing other than Hegel’s “absolute difference”, an identity only different from itself.<sup>101</sup> For all that, she certainly observes and articulates the central problem of post-Holocaust theory perfectly: the seemingly unbridgeable gap between expressing the suffering in language and thinking, and thus every attempt to bridge it either failing to adequately represent the uniqueness of the suffering or remaining silent, refraining from sharing terrible experiences. Silence, however, can be “both an expression of sympathy but, above all, also a form of concealment by which we leave the victims alone with their suffering”.<sup>102</sup>

“Whereas Lyotard attempts, with a relative degree of success, to maintain his own interpretation floating somewhere between the unspeakable and the implicit discourse about the unspeakable, this performative contradiction comes to light in his assessment of Hegel’s position in an overt and stark way, especially in the complete negation of Hegel – expressed quite clearly as the assertion that ‘Auschwitz’ as a totalizing historical symbol represents the end of Hegel’s speculative philosophy. Lyotard employs the unspeakable of the Auschwitz model in order to use this unspeakable as a piece of evidence to substantiate his own discourse. There is a certain palpable tragic aspect, if not a full-on tragedy, when Lyotard discursively instrumentalizes the infinite suffering associated with Auschwitz as something unspeakable vis-à-vis Hegel, without even remotely realizing this obvious self-contradiction.”<sup>103</sup>

In responding to such typical objections, we would be remiss not to mention that a public reception of the Holocaust was in fact the initial and constant companion Lyotard’s deductions (if not only his). In his later writings,<sup>104</sup> his focus on antisemitism and the Holocaust continued to be a “critique of the entire tradition of ‘Western’ thought and in particular of its discourses of progress and emancipation”.<sup>105</sup> The futility of any political praxis of emancipation, derived from the historical fate of the Jews, is, of course, “politically troubling, if not dangerous”, but this does not automatically make it untrue. After all, such an objection rests on a certain prereflexive “decisionism”:

“It is, of course, true that after the Holocaust, the praxis of emancipation is in need of questioning but not in a way that discounts what has been achieved. We should attend, as Lyotard has done, to the traumas that the Holocaust has inflicted upon our understanding of the world, but also to a determination not to turn a philosophy of trauma into a traumatised philosophy.”<sup>106</sup>

## Back to the Question

Detlev Claussen takes a different tack that, although it leads to the opposite outcome from Lyotard’s, nevertheless remains at least equally faithful to Adorno’s intention: it seeks to neutralize both the postmodern treatment and the arguments of the Frankfurters on the “Auschwitz” challenge. He points to the necessity of returning to the immediate reaction of the first generation of critical theory and the timeless importance of precisely those socio-theoretical findings that were suppressed by its later “academic historicization” by Jürgen Habermas and associates. Hence, Claussen would rather continue the specific effort of enlightening the Enlightenment which in its dialectical movement crashed into the “experience of Auschwitz”, than admit and think anew the breakdown in the sovereign march of world history and speculative theory such experience signals so dramatically.<sup>107</sup>

According to Claussen, only a revived “Enlightenment, aware of its limits and not turning into cynicism” – Enlightenment that would have to “take to heart the universal fear Auschwitz wrought upon the world” and “make sense of the suffering”, and thus produce a “clear consciousness”, whose starting point must remain still the unutterable National Socialist crime, the sight of a “mountain of corpses” the Nazis were unable to remove – can provoke consciousness to take steps to transgress itself:

“Thinking the unthinkable, uttering the unutterable, must never be a call to reject reason and give in to feelings, which guilt only renders false, but to ultimately strenuously employ reason to sustain thinking about what however unreasonable has become real in the form of unthinkable horror.”<sup>108</sup>

Otherwise, the present becomes filled with suppression and substitution, while the unnamed to which Claussen gives new monikers – “repellent

*Holocaust*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2000, pp. 132–147, here p. 137.

96

Neil Levi, Michael Rothberg, “Auschwitz and the Remains of Theory. Toward an Ethics of the Borderland”, *Symplokē* 11 (2003) 1–2, p. 31.

97

A. Herberg-Rothe, “Dialectical Philosophy after Auschwitz”, pp. 189, 197.

98

*Ibid.*, p. 198.

99

*Ibid.*, p. 190.

100

See: Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Lyotard und Hegel. Dialektik von Philosophie und Politik*, Passagen, Vienna 2005.

101

A. Herberg-Rothe, “Dialectical Philosophy after Auschwitz”, p. 193.

102

*Ibid.*, p. 194.

103

*Ibid.*

104

See Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews”*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1990.

105

D. Seymour, “Lyotard”, p. 128.

106

*Ibid.*, 139.

107

Detlev Claussen, “Nach Auschwitz. Ein Essay über die Aktualität Adornos”, in: Dan Diner (ed.), *Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 1988, pp. 54–68; Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno. Ein letztes Genie*, Fisher, Frankfurt am Main 2003.

108

Detlef Klausen [Detlev Claussen], *Granice prosvetiteljstva. Društvena geneza modernog antisemitizma [Limits of Enlightenment. On the social history of modern antisemitism]*, transl. Drinka Gojković, Biblioteka XX vek, Belgrade 2003, p. 302.

non-term Auschwitz”, “completed incoherence”, “experience of impotence and senselessness” – will remain reified and appropriately ready-made “artifact Holocaust”, that the Holocaust itself “transforms, thanks to mass-media tricks, into a Success Story of survival”.<sup>109</sup>

Moreover, it is now up to “self-reflective enlightenment” to explore the genesis of the contemporary “falsification of memory and loss of experience”.<sup>110</sup> But it must take into account precisely the “consciousness experience” of Auschwitz, which for Adorno became the starting point for the socio-critical perception and the constitutive landmark of political action:

“Hitler imposed a new categorical imperative on people in their state of unfreedom: to arrange their thinking and actions so that Auschwitz does not happen again, so that nothing similar happens.”<sup>111</sup>

This new categorical imperative requires the acquisition of the historical consciousness which can only be the result of “intellectual and emotional effort”, an effort which, Claussen thinks, must fall into neither the heartless rationalization nor the psychologism of empathy. Adorno’s categorical imperative vividly opposes both the demand for emancipation – seemingly paradoxically – through the awareness of powerlessness in the face of disastrous event. For, only the eye sharpened to see the “history of failed liberation” is worthy of “remembering Auschwitz”.<sup>112</sup> Considering the horror that happened, the thought of liberation seems almost presumptuous; yet, on the contrary, it is kept awake by thinking of it. Thought, for the sake of both itself and its object, must now – or, now more than ever – not run away from the contradictions that constitute its approach.

“Only a thought that formulates a contradiction would be appropriate: emancipation from powerlessness, without acting in the service of power. Against the confrontation with the contradiction, however, is directed the stubborn need for an identity free from contradictions, which releases the waves of sentimentality. The need for an identity without reflection unconsciously mobilizes moments that establish identity; in Europe, anti-Semitism remains central.”<sup>113</sup>

With the problem of “affirmative postulate of identity”<sup>114</sup> we are inevitably in Adorno’s register: the Holocaust is the ultimate scene of the totalitarianism of the Same, of the always equal and identical to itself; Jews – as the most prominent representatives of the other(s), different, non-identical – are subject to liquidation, just like everything that does not fall under the dictates of identification.<sup>115</sup> Identity is potentially always a totality, a whole without anything outside itself, and genocide is then “the absolute integration”<sup>116</sup> – a result of the will for total unity, the category that, “like the homeland, requires total identity”.<sup>117</sup> Since it organizes itself into a complete system, whatever the logic of identity touches – or even approaches – it inevitably leaves in desolation:

“Throughout history, the idea of identity was deadly, it swallowed everything. That which does not suffer anything outside of itself was understood as a whole. Even the slightest trace of the other side of that identity was as unbearable as to the fascists some other existence in the last corner of the world.”<sup>118</sup>

Since the consequences of such an approach will exist as long as those conditions that have already made them possible,<sup>119</sup> it seems that the question that “traumatizes” the thematization of Auschwitz remains. Yet, it is not only about the possibility of its repetition and, consequently, its prevention; rather, whether past failures to understand or even name it do not imply halting all authority over what is not subject to reasonable explanation? Or, on the

contrary, would it not be “responsible” on the part of theory, and in particular philosophical theory, to have a different, even directly opposite determination: to consistently self-expose, to autophagically present the insufficiency and outright lie of speculative constructions, show also the conclusive ungraspability and unprovability of the “real”? The Holocaust would thus be one such “reality”, the overlooking or rejection of what, as subject, would represent the abnegation of this task. If, however, that task remains in force, it rather leads us again from Lyotard’s inspiring and seductive, if somewhat tendentious and perhaps insufficiently far-reaching indication of the incompatibility of Auschwitz in discursive schemes, back to Adorno’s effort, which he considered authentically philosophical: to bring the non-conceptual come to expression. Deliberately using the Holocaust as warning and Auschwitz as its image, he tasked thinking with the courage to not only “think clearly”, but think against itself:

“If thought does not confront with that which ultimately evades the concept, it is doomed to be no different to the musical accompaniment the SS used to drown out the cries of their victims.”<sup>120</sup>

### Predrag Krstić

#### »Autoput do pakla« – Auschwitz kao odredište moderne?

##### Sažetak

*Prvi dio rada, suprotno Hegelovoj dijalektici, prikazuje glavna obilježja Adornove negativne dijalektike i njegovu tematizaciju Auschwitza kao »apsolutne negativnosti«. Drugi dio rada posvećen je Lyotardovu preuzimanju i radikalizaciji negativne dijalektike sve do njezine suspenzije, kao i njegovim zapažanjima o projektima (univerzalne) emancipacije za koje je bio uvjeren da obilježavaju modernost – i koji su doveli do Auschwitza. U sljedećem dijelu osvrćemo se na neka zapažanja upućena Adornu u vezi s njegovom »fascinacijom« Auschwitzom i navodnom nepravdom koju je Lyotard počinio postmodernističkim raskidom s modernošću na*

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Ibid., 16. Claussen refers, primarily, to Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* and TV film *Holocaust*, both of which despite their ostensible intention to enlighten, are taken as the subtle work of the psychoanalytic mechanism deployed by mass media to resist the onerous insight that Auschwitz provides.

110

D. Klausen [D. Claussen], *Granice prosvjetiteljstva*, p. 35.

111

T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 263.

112

D. Klausen [D. Claussen], *Granice prosvjetiteljstva*, pp. 48–49.

113

Ibid., p. 108.

114

Ibid., p. 311.

115

M. Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 192.

116

T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 355.

117

Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 459.

118

T. W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, p. 506.

119

Theodor W. Adorno, “Erziehung nach Auschwitz”, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.2, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 674.

120

T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 358.

*toj osnovi. Završni dio rada uglavnom je posvećen Claussenovu povratku Adornovom teorijskom narativu o Auschwitzu i obrani njegove relevantnosti za današnje vrijeme.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

Auschwitz, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Detlev Claussen, dijalektika, emancipacija, moderna, postmoderna

### **Predrag Krstić**

#### **„Autobahn zur Hölle“ – Auschwitz als Zielort der Moderne**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Der erste Teil der Abhandlung, der im Widerspruch zu Hegels Dialektik steht, präsentiert die Hauptmerkmale von Adornos negativer Dialektik und seine Thematisierung von Auschwitz als „absoluter Negativität“. Der zweite Teil der Abhandlung behandelt Lyotards Übernahme und Radikalisierung der negativen Dialektik bis hin zu ihrer Aufhebung sowie seine Bemerkungen zu Projekten (universeller) Emanzipation, die seiner Überzeugung nach die Modernität charakterisieren – und zu Auschwitz führten. In dem darauffolgenden Teil werfen wir einen Blick auf einige an Adorno gerichtete Bemerkungen über seine „Faszination“ für Auschwitz sowie das angebliche Unrecht, das Lyotard auf dieser Grundlage durch seinen postmodernistischen Bruch mit der Modernität begangen habe. Der abschließende Teil der Abhandlung ist vorwiegend der Rückkehr Claussens zu adornoschem theoretischem Narrativ in Bezug auf Auschwitz sowie der Apologie seiner Signifikanz für die Gegenwart gewidmet.*

#### **Schlüsselwörter**

Auschwitz, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Detlev Claussen, Dialektik, Emanzipation, Moderne, Postmoderne

### **Predrag Krstić**

#### **« L’Autoroute de l’enfer » – Auschwitz comme destination de la modernité**

#### **Résumé**

*La première partie de cet article, à rebours de la dialectique hégélienne, présente les traits principaux de la dialectique négative d’Adorno ainsi que sa conceptualisation d’Auschwitz en tant que « négativité absolue ». La deuxième partie est consacrée à l’appropriation puis à la radicalisation de cette dialectique négative par Lyotard, jusqu’à sa mise en suspens, ainsi qu’à ses réflexions sur les projets d’émancipation universelle qu’il considérait comme emblématiques de la modernité – et qu’il tenait pour responsables d’avoir conduit à Auschwitz. La partie suivante examine certaines critiques adressées à Adorno, notamment sur sa supposée « fascination » pour Auschwitz, ainsi que les reproches formulés à l’égard de la rupture postmoderne de Lyotard avec la modernité, fondée sur cette lecture. La dernière partie de l’article est en grande partie dédiée au retour de Claussen à la lecture théorique adornienne d’Auschwitz, et à la défense de sa pertinence dans le monde contemporain.*

#### **Mots-clés**

Auschwitz, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Detlev Claussen, dialectique, émancipation, modernité, postmodernité

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