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There are few aphorisms in *Minima Moralia* that display a less sympathetic attitude towards their subject than “They, the people” (§ 7). Adorno denounces the “*amor intellectualis* for [the] kitchen personnel” in the subsequent aphorism, but “They, the people” already seems to confirm all suspicions about the alleged elitism of critical theory. The idea that intellectuals mostly encounter those less educated when “illiterates come to intellectuals wanting letters written for them” is laughable, even for the 1950s, and the claim that, among the “underdogs”, “envy and spite surpass anything seen among literati or musical directors” (ibid.) oozes with contempt, no matter how much Adorno insists that these alleged character deficits result from the social structures in which uneducated, working class people find themselves.

Yet the point of Adorno’s remarks is not to disprove a deferential form of a Lukácsian “standpoint theory”, according to which workers are epistemically and/or perhaps even morally superior to the intellectuals who take up their cause. Rather, he wishes to criticize those intellectuals who promote such theories because of the “justified guilt-feelings of those exempt from physical work”. While Horkheimer had already criticized those who were “satisfied to proclaim with reverent admiration [...] the creative strength of the proletariat” as evading intellectual effort in “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1975, 124), Adorno offers a social-psychological explanation of persistence of this form of deferential standpoint theory: It is a species of bad conscience arising from the fact “that intellectuals are [...] beneficiaries of a bad society” as he puts it later in *Minima Moralia* (§ 86).

This critique seems to have become obsolete, however. Not only is it a mistake to read Lukács’ original argument as entailing that working-class people have superior knowledge even before any theoretical effort—an insight of which feminists such as Hartsock (1983), who took up Lukács’s argument in the 1970s to formulate more well-known versions of “standpoint theory”, were well aware—no serious theory espouses anything close to such an uncritical deference to the working class, the existence of which is in any case up for debate.

What, then, remains of Adorno’s argument? What remains is the question of whether there is a distinctive standpoint characteristic of intellectuals, rooted in their social situation—one that induces a systematic “guilty conscience” that prevents a realistic assessment of their own situation.

Being exempt from hard physical labor is no longer a distinctive characteristic of intellectual professions. What makes intellectual—including academic—labor different from other forms is that it is impossible to control it by spelling out in advance the steps that intellectuals must perform and how to perform them. Those tasked with coming up with theories, narratives, or justifications must be accorded a certain amount of autonomy in their work if they are to perform it at all.

This has always made intellectuals suspect in the eyes of their managers, since there seems to be no completely reliable way to ensure the subordination of their activities to institutional imperatives. The desperate attempts to quantify “academic

output” and the equally desperate attempts of humanities departments to show that they produce some sort of predictable benefits for society (in the form of “critical thinking skills”) are evidence of a desire to dissolve these suspicions.

In the “Culture Industry” chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno speculates that the “remnant of autonomy” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 105) which intellectuals still enjoy, is on the brink of being replaced by their total subordination to the interests of the market or, more directly, economic-political rulers. His claim that ideology is being replaced by direct command has been proven false, however, and intellectual production has not disappeared as a functional requirement for social integration.

Yet intellectuals face suspicion not only from those who, more or less grudgingly, grant them the freedom to perform their function in the cultural and educational sphere, but also from those whose work is more directly subordinated to social imperatives. It is a cliché among academics that their relatives openly wonder how one can earn a living doing things that one cannot really explain. There is always a fine line between this skepticism and open resentment of the fact that intellectuals are not subject to those forms of subordination and control that others face in their daily working lives. Not a small part of the hatred directed towards “liberal elites” may derive from this resentment. The bad conscience of intellectuals that results from their internalization of this resentment, and their acceptance of the claim that they enjoy substantive privileges, can still be detected everywhere, even if it is no longer expressed by an attempt to subordinate themselves to the cause of “the workers”.

This bad conscience is not a feeling that leads to any form of progress, however. It leads those in intellectual professions to overstate the amount of freedom they enjoy, which is always conditioned in any case, and it causes them to come up with unconvincing justifications for why they, in particular, should be exempt from direct subordination under the profit motive. Such justifications tacitly agree with the idea that there is something special about intellectual labor that justifies granting it a degree of autonomy not afforded to other kinds of labor. The bad conscience of the intellectual thereby begins to legitimize the “real subsumption” of other forms of labor (Marx 1992, 1028).

As those who resent the fact that intellectuals are granted such autonomy correctly perceive, this idea is unconvincing—not because intellectual work could be equally well subordinated, but because *all* forms of work require autonomy, creativity, and knowledge on the part of those who perform it. More often than not, and in almost all jobs, managerial control keeps people from doing their job well. This is most obviously the case with care work, where attention to the particular needs of others systematically resists external control. But even those who perform work that is culturally seen as requiring less creative effort, such as cleaning, understand themselves as engaged in a creative task that often requires them to subvert the rules imposed by their managers if they are to do their job well (Tweedie and Holley 2016, 1889).

It is therefore neither a unique form of creativity nor a special need for autonomy that distinguishes intellectual work from other forms, but only a difference in the degree to which those in control are willing to grant such autonomy to different kinds of work. If intellectuals were less concerned with proving the usefulness of their specific

type of work to a society that serves neither their own interests nor those of others, and if they were more interested in challenging the prevailing standards of usefulness which justify denying that autonomy to others who deserve it to the same degree, then their bad conscience could make way for a form of solidarity that rejects a distinction in normative status between intellectual and non-intellectual work. Such solidarity is not envisioned by Adorno, however. In fact, he reserves his few positive remarks on solidarity in *Minima Moralia* for relations among intellectuals (§ 83). Attention to a wider form of solidarity that overcomes the isolation of intellectual work is needed, however, both to remove the sting of Adorno's remarks and to develop a politically reflective theory of the social standpoint of the intellectual.

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Biography

Titus Stahl is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Groningen where he does research on contemporary and historical issues in Critical Theory, theories of oppression, domination, ideology, the philosophy of hope and the ethics of privacy. His most recent publication is *Immanent Critique* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).