

Conciliation "Out of Sheer Egoism"

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In aphorism 97, Adorno states: "The individual owes his crystallization to the forms of political economy, particularly to those of the urban market. Even as the opponent of the pressure of socialization he remains the latter's most particular product and its likeness". Particularly resonant today, this observation does not simply declare the dialectical codetermination of the individual by the dynamic of the capitalistic economy – an awareness present not only in Marx, but even in Hegel before him – it also points at the contradictions within which even the different possible forms of resistance are entangled in the context of our society. In fact, even "what enables him", i.e. the individual, "to resist [...] springs from monadological individual interest and its precipitate, character" (§ 97). How does this observation affect Adorno's own political theory as well as our present struggles?

The first point to highlight is that Adorno clearly recognizes the social constitution of the individual: the mediated character of its essence makes its objective effectiveness on the political level illusory and misleading. But Adorno does not resort to a collective subject either. Although Adorno substantially accepts the dialectical materialist interpretation of liberal society as a class-based society, he also traces the concept of class back to bourgeois forms of individuation, stretched between a false totality and an illusory particularity. In this sense, the concept of class itself is unveiled as an ideological construct that merely "designates the unity in which particular bourgeois interests are made real" (2003, 99). Class is a product of the division of labour and of class society itself. This particularistic origin holds not only for the class of the exploiters, but also for those of the exploited. As a result, the oppressed "are unable to experience themselves as a class" and even those among them "who claim the name mean by it for the most part their own particular interest in the existing state of affairs" (2003, 97). Individuals and classes are thus equally predetermined by their social embeddedness, which makes them, at the same time, products *and* functions of the existing social order. In both cases, the possibility of resistance stems from individual interest, from the conditions of the political economy.

Despite the apparent equivalence of the concepts of class and of the individual, and despite the radical critique of the very presupposition of any form of individual self-determination ("not only is the self entwined in society; it owes society its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society, or at any rate from its relation to the object" (§ 97)), Adorno seems to assign an implicit primacy to the individual: not only because, as we have seen, he explains both the concept of class and the one of bourgeois, i.e. individualistic, subjectivation as results of modern political economy, but also because when it comes to challenging the falseness of the totality Adorno mostly resorts to individual resistance and *not* to collective organization. It is only the irreducible nonidentity of the particularity that contradicts and thus resists the false reconciliation of the totality. However, "individuality" is "not the ultimate either" (2004, 161) and nonidentity must not be understood as an ontological substance: both only emerge within the dialectical process, i.e. as moments of the social totality. That

is why “he who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses” (“Dedication”). Yet, not only do both the concept of nonidentity and that of the individual share a common (and indelible) moment of immediacy, but “the substance of the contradiction between universal and particular is that individuality is not yet – and that, therefore, it is bad wherever established” (2004, 151). Dominion is first and foremost described as the false identification with totality of the irreducible individual – i.e. the forced subsumption of the qualitative non-identical particularity under the dominion of the universal – and not as the class violence of the few exerted over the many. In this sense it is qualitative particularity, and not the collective subject, that can allow the possibility of a reconciled totality to emerge.

Adorno is well aware that both contradictions cannot be resolved on a purely theoretical level: only true praxis would be capable of resolving them. However, since the necessary *presupposition* of praxis – i.e. subjectivity – is in both cases unveiled as a *product* of the false totality, then praxis primarily means critical self-reflection: this alone can set free the nonidentity within the falseness of identity. Theory and praxis thus overturn into one another: the only possible praxis seems to be theoretical self-reflection, able to reveal nonidentity within the false identity.

To face this dialectical paradox, we might do well to address it dialectically: this *Sackgasse* can be considered as both true and false at the same time. True, insofar as it conceptually deduces the objective impossibility of “true praxis” from the contradictions within which all forms of individuation (both singular and collective) are entangled; false, insofar as from the untruth of praxis in the given conditions it deduces its impossibility *as praxis*. The recognition of its moment of untruth does not necessarily imply its integral falseness. Individual resistance can become true even if it is codetermined by the dynamic of political economy. Even more so, the collective struggles of the subaltern classes – such as those for better working conditions – are not reducible to a corporatist defense of particular interests. In fact, both would require overcoming our current mode of production to be truly fulfilled. Even in their untruthfulness, both individual distress and collective needs include a moment of truth that points beyond their particularity. Is it then that true universality can be envisioned by following dialectically the particular need – both individual and collective – to its most radical consequences? As Engels wrote to Marx with regard to Stirner, the “egoistic man is bound to become communist out of sheer egoism” (Engels 1982, 12), just as the working class can overcome class society only out of sheer self-interest.

References

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Biography

Rolando Vitali has studied philosophy at the Universities of Bologna and Berlin. Between 2017 and 2017 he has been fellow in residence at the Nietzsche-Kolleg in Weimar and in 2019 research fellow at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in Naples. At the Friedrich Schiller Universität in Jena, in partnership with the University of Bologna, he has discussed his doctoral thesis entitled *Macht und Form - Individualität und ästhetische Kategorien in der Philosophie Nietzsches*. He writes regularly on Italian newspapers such as *Alias*, the cultural supplement of *Il Manifesto*. His interests focus on German philosophy and culture, modern aesthetics and Frankfurt's critical theory.