

J'Accuse

Antonia Hofstätter

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“First and only principle of sexual ethics: the accuser is always in the wrong.” (§ 29) – What was once a daring line, written to challenge waning sexual mores and emerging erotic conventions, has today become dubious. To ears attuned in an age of moral outrage and viral tweets, the lines’ hubris is resounding: Seemingly oozing self-righteous masculinity, it takes its impulse not from the ubiquitous demand for “safety” that echoes across campuses from Berlin to Boston, but from a sexual utopia in which power relations are divested of their scarring force. In reserving its ire for the accuser, it appears to deny those who have been violated justice and restitution and to let the predator off the hook. In the political and intellectual climate of today, this line would not have been written.

But here it is, existing out of its time. Empowered singlehandedly to strip *Minima Moralia*, the ultimate highbrow coffee-table book, of its liberal credentials. Yet, this line is no mere provocation; what it provokes is regard for its enigmatic appeal. It calls upon our capacities for intellectual generosity and tenacity to tend to scars, and to pursue a thought until cultivated sensitivities and fortified values begin to shake and open themselves up to question. It is here that a truth might admit to the untruth that it also is, and an untruth to a truth. The dim light of ambiguity that nourishes Adorno’s outrageous line is inseparable from its promise: the promise of a wealth – however murky and repellent – that exists beyond the conscious life of the subject, a wealth in which it nevertheless partakes. And yet, this ambiguity, if it remains unacknowledged, fuels our outrage. It touches us where we refuse to be touched. Whoever has tried to teach *Death in Venice* to students in recent years, only to be met with a blanket rejection of the book, hardly needs to be convinced of this point.

The prickly remnant from the past has arrived just in time. Under the guise of the outdated and surpassed, it contains a scathing critique of the currency of today’s thought, politics, and its societal forces. Condemning the discipline of “sexual ethics” as futile, it takes wider aim at the drive of capitalist societies to incorporate and make palatable even that which draws its power from transgression: sex. Without the thrill of transgression, a sexual act degenerates into mere sport, or so Adorno would say. The thrill feeds on the allure of the forbidden, the violation of manifest social conventions; ultimately, it lives off the desecration of the most cherished of contemporary myths, that of the integrity of the “self”. Two decades after *Minima Moralia*, Adorno spelled out what is implicit in his earlier aphorism: “It is a piece of sexual utopia not to be yourself, and to love more in the beloved than only her: a negation of the ego-principle. It shakes that invariant of bourgeois society in the widest sense, which since time immemorial has always aimed at integration: the demand for identity. At first, it had to be produced. Ultimately it would be necessary to abolish [aufzuheben] it again. What is merely identical with itself is without happiness.” Pleasure lies in the gaze, the touch, the play that arouses what is repressed, in the tremble with which the remnants of the polymorphous escape integration. Latent in every sexual act is a reminder that subjecthood is a forcefield of becoming and dissolution, and that its closure, identity, comes

at a price. Every “I accuse you”, be it just or unjust, arrests a subject and an object in a relationship of static reciprocity. Every “I accuse you” drags into the sphere of sexuality the expectations and entitlements of conscientious consumers and those citizens who know their rights.

It is the privilege of an aphorism not even to raise a brow at the gun held to its head by inveterate literalists. Our line remains silent if pressed for solutions, indifferent if asked to take sides. (It is thus mistaken to impute to the line the joyful celebration of fluid identities. *Minima Moralia*, this much is certain, will never be “woke”). It is not much more than a reminder of that which falls prey to even the most progressive causes, of the hidden sacrifices we make not only in political praxis but every time we raise our voices and begin to speak. Yet, the line’s intention is not to silence but to provoke self-reflection. This splinter from the past hits a nerve: almost eerily, it accentuates our peculiar moment in time in which the anxious guarding of intimate borders unites otherwise antagonistic political forces, in which the fear of being pricked by a needle enters a curious alliance with the allergic backlash against divergent opinions. Once identity is the highest good – or rather, the last resort – the wound on the skin becomes intolerable. The fortification of the self is also an assault on what it seeks to protect – it eradicates, with the last pockets of somatic resistance, the hope that the dialectic of enlightenment may grind to a halt. This hope is inseparable from that for a subject which emerges in the remembrance of its other. Yet, whether we may hope at all hinges on the question of whether we are still capable of engaging with what hurts, of unfolding the ambiguities that lend a thought, a phenomenon, or a line their dubious and enigmatic air. This is not the first and only principle of critique; it might, however, be its last.

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Biography

Antonia Hofstätter is a teaching fellow in German studies at the University of Warwick. Her research focuses primarily on early critical theory and aesthetics, and she has published widely on the work of T.W. Adorno. Recent contributions appeared in *The ‘Aging’ of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: Fifty Years Later* (Mimesis International, 2021) and *Theodor W. Adorno: Ästhetische Theorie* (De Gruyter, 2021). Together with Daniel Steuer she is the editor of *Adorno’s Rhinoceros: Art, Nature, Critique* (Bloomsbury, 2022).