

Towards a sociological anthropology: On Theodor Adorno's *Contribution to the Theory of Ideology*

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Abstract

Adorno's argument in this recently translated essay is that sociology is necessary in order to unlock the 'epistemological power' of the concept of ideology. This paper reads Adorno's argument with an Althusserian guilt in order to isolate the theoretically anti-humanist character of this epistemological power. The paper demonstrates how sociology, for Adorno, unlocks this epistemological power by shifting the field of inquiry away from the psychology of the individual subject, towards the "objectively prescribed contexts of delusion" located at the meeting point of specific material social relations. In order to make sense of Adorno's theoretical work here, the paper employs the concept of 'anthropology' as developed by Étienne Balibar, in order to demonstrate how Adorno mobilises the concept of ideology in order to think about subjective interpellation in an anti-humanist way, breaking with the vulgar psychology of traditional theories of ideology.

Keywords

Adorno, Althusser, Anti-Humanism, anthropology, Balibar, Marxism

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This article engages in a reading of Theodor Adorno's *Contribution to the Theory of Ideology* ('*Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre*' (Cook, 2001: 11)), in order to argue that within this essay, Adorno begins to develop a theoretically anti-humanist critique of ideology. This reading of Adorno's essay is motivated by a problematic introduced into the social sciences by Louis Althusser, which says that the specificity and precision of the knowledge of social problems is dulled by their reduction to problems of human psychology, human subjectivity and human nature. The paper demonstrates that critical theory has had mixed success in combatting this reductionism, producing theories of ideology which turn on an analysis of the false consciousness of individual subjects. This paper therefore seeks to place Adorno in conversation with this Althusserian problem in the service of sociology, in order to develop a trajectory towards a theoretically anti-humanist critique of ideology that is complimentary to the discipline of sociology: one that emphasises the determinant role of material social relations in the production of ideology, rather than individual subjective experience.

The first aim of this paper is to reconcile Adorno with the tradition from which he emerged: that of Marxism and historical materialism. Emphasising the theoretical anti-humanism of Adorno's essay is one strategy towards this end. Theoretical anti-humanism is the condition *sine qua non* of historical materialism and of the Marxist science of the history of human societies. The discovery of this fact belongs in large part to Althusser and the school of thought that developed out of his work. A theoretically anti-humanist position argues that class struggle and the historically-associated modes of production (and the ideological and political domination that spring forth from it), are materially grounded in something more than human psychology, human consciousness or deliberate human endeavour. *Theoretical anti-humanism* is the movement, *in thought*, of displacing the human subject from the centre of enquiry in order to reveal this material grounding to knowledge. This, for Althusser (2015: 336), was the source of Marx's genius, to give "theoretical existence" to class struggle and relations of production, at a time when the vocabulary of political economy extended only as far as 'man' and his 'rationality'. The argument made in this paper is that, in Adorno's *Contribution*, a similar anti-humanist operation can be observed and, more than this, is essential to the theoretical intervention made.

The second aim of this paper is to attempt a more ambitious reconciliation: that is, the reconciliation of Adorno's critical theory with that of the school of French 'structuralism'. It is unusual to consider Adorno as belonging to this tradition and his fit within it is an uneasy one. In order to do this, the paper attempts to read Adorno's *Contribution* alongside the work of Étienne Balibar, and highlight the similarities in their use of the concept 'anthropology'. The paper argues that in following this reading, Balibar's anti-humanist concept of anthropology can be deployed to reveal the theoretical core of Adorno's sociological critique of ideology in the *Contribution*. In their use of this concept, both Balibar and Adorno want to highlight the 'anthropological function' of ideology, particularly the way in which material social relations 'individuate' or 'subjectify' individuals within a society. For Adorno, sociology is the only scientific discipline capable of studying this anthropological function of ideology.

Here, the paper follows the work of those like Alice Nilsson, who have sought to read Adorno and critical theory alongside the tradition of French anti-humanism in order to draw out their silent theoretical co-operation. Nilsson (2023: 3) argues that “the humanism which arises from the work of the Frankfurt School circumvents being characterised as a form of transcendental subjectivity or as the subject as sovereign author”. Nilsson explains that anti-humanism within the Frankfurt School was designed to express the lived condition of the human subject under capitalism. The separation of the subject and the object in philosophy “expresses a real existing condition of our human condition, but it has also been historically hypostatized into an invariant epistemological (and also ontological) position” (Nilsson, 2023: 6). In response to this, Nilsson (2023: 6) argues that the Frankfurt School does not resort to a simple humanism:

The correct response to the hypostatization of one concept is not the hypostatization of its conceptual opposite – subject/object, structure/agency, etc. – but rather, the acknowledgement of subject always already being object, and object already being subject through the requirement of mediation means that our cognitions cannot be understood as ‘only subjective’ as subjectivists would propose as it does away with this sharp epistemological distinction wherein objectivity is banished from cognition.

It is for this reason that Nilsson suggests that there is a closer affinity between the anti-humanism of the Frankfurt School and that of French thought. In this paper, Adorno’s *Contribution* is the subject of focus in tracing this affinity, in order to position Adorno within the broader project of developing and deploying the scientific concepts of historical materialism within sociology and the social sciences today. Before doing this, the paper will begin with an initial critique of critical theory itself, in order to establish the theoretical basis from which Adorno’s departure in the *Contribution* shall be observed.

Theoretical humanism and critical theory

This paper wishes to argue that Adorno’s *Contribution* provides the opportunity to approach critical theory from a theoretically anti-humanist perspective. An implicit assumption contained within this hypothesis is that this in some way breaks with the existing theoretical orientation of critical theory. In this first section, the paper sets out the argument that critical theory reproduces a problematic theoretical humanism that needs to be broken with, in order to better appreciate the intervention made by Adorno’s *Contribution* later in the paper.

Though it is correct to say that critical theory contains within it a critique of the subject and of the modern individual, this is not the same thing as to say that it develops its critique via a theoretical anti-humanism. The work of Peter Dews has been instructive on this point. Dews (2002: 34) argues that “the proximity of Adorno’s sentiment to the ‘anti-humanism’ of French thought...is intriguing”, but that “the motivation is different: namely, a *moral* concern that the rhetoric of humanism now ‘reifies and falsifies’ the very issues it was originally meant to address”. In other words, critical theory is not

about removing the subject from the centre of theory entirely: rather, critical theory's critique of the individual is a moral critique of the ways in which the individualist concepts of rationality, enlightenment and freedom have created an individual that is subject to the complete domination of the society of commodity exchange and all of its totalitarian imperatives. As Dews (2012: 55) explains elsewhere, citing Adorno, critical theory "does not culminate in a call for the abolition of the subjective principle. Rather, Adorno always insists that our only option is to 'use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity'". Critical theory culminates not in a rejection of the subject, but primarily in the negation of its negation: the deliberate and conscious overcoming by the subject of its socially alienated condition (see Feenberg, 2014).

This much is evident from Max Horkheimer's initial expounding of the concept of critical theory in his essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory'. For Horkheimer (1972), the initial intervention of critical theory demonstrates proximity to a theoretically anti-humanist position: he stresses the way in which critical theory, contrary to traditional theory, emphasises that the modern individual is a product of society. Horkheimer (1972: 197) writes, "the economic subject in bourgeois society...believe[s] they are acting according to personal determinations, whereas in fact even in their most complicated calculations they but exemplify the working of an incalculable social mechanism". However, Horkheimer (1972: 229) later re-emphasises the role of the individual in the negation of its modern condition, positioning critical theory as the catalyst to the historical movement of this individual:

A consciously critical attitude, however, is part of the development of society: the construing of the course of history as the necessary product of an economic mechanism simultaneously contains both a protest against this order of things, a protest generated by the order itself, and the idea of self-determination for the human race, that is the idea of a state of affairs in which man's actions no longer flow from a mechanism but from his own decision.

Traditional theory reproduces a "false consciousness" (Horkheimer, 1972: 198) in the modern individual, which makes them vulnerable to domination by the society of commodity exchange. Critical theory, on the other hand, is predicated on "the transition from the present form of society to a future one", in which "mankind will for the first time be a conscious subject and actively determine its own way of life" (Horkheimer, 1972: 233).

The question which must be dealt with is why this theoretical humanism of critical theory (albeit with a critique of modern individual contained within it) presents a problem. The paper follows Göran Therborn's (1970: 70) critique of the "metaphysical humanism" of critical theory. For Therborn (1970: 67), "critical theory is Horkheimer's conception of Marxism, and the phrase derives from the conventional description of Marxism as the critique of political economy". However, despite this fact, Therborn (1970) argues that the epistemological orientation of critical theory – in particular, its theoretical humanism – reduces the development of capitalism down to

an existentialist observation of its effects at the level of the human subject. As Therborn (1970: 77–78) argues, within critical theory,

Society is always reducible to its creator-subject, and history is the continuous unfolding of this subject. At every given point in time, society is a unique manifestation of Man. This means that the concept of a mode of production, which in any classical reading of Marx is the central concept of historical materialism, plays at most a quite subordinate role. Capitalism is thus seen not as one mode of production among others, but as a completely unique moment in the history...of Man.

Crucially, this also means that the concept of class struggle as the motor of historical development and change is missing from within critical theory. The consequence of this, for Therborn (1970: 85), is that critical theory essentially “is characterized by the conviction that the only place where anything is still possible in the totalitarian world is in the ‘individual sphere’, where the task is to resist the intruding cruelty of the ‘administered world’”.

Crucially, the consequences of this theoretical humanism within critical theory make themselves felt within the realm of ideology critique. Such was the topic of recent conversation between Asad Haider and Kyle Baasch on the pages of *Radical Philosophy*. Haider (2021: 121), following Althusser and Therborn’s critique, offers up a theoretically anti-humanist description of how ideology functions within society:

As spectators we are united with the actors in the authorless theatre; our consciousness is the play itself. We recognise ourselves in the theatre of ideology, and perform our roles every time the curtains are raised. But every play is incomplete, restaged again and again, and its contingency opens to the dislocation of ideology.

On the other hand, Baasch, representing the side of critical theory and of the Frankfurt School, rejects the idea of ideology as an ‘authorless theatre’ and seeks to retain a position for the concrete individual. Baasch (2021: 124) writes that “bourgeois society as an organic totality has a life of its own, as it were; it exercises explanatory priority over the individuals who paradoxically bring it into existence through their conscious practical activity”. It is the dialectical nature of this paradox that unlocks the moment of subjective activity, as “when freedom as a norm in bourgeois society is confronted with the illumination of its own structural impossibility, the attendant dissatisfaction becomes a potential ferment of social transformation” (Baasch, 2021: 125).

The theory of ideology that Baasch expounds here is the one found in typical readings of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is a theory of the domination of ideology, defined by Moishe Postone (2003: 30) as the total “domination of people by abstract social structures that people themselves constitute”. It is expressed in their telling of the story of Odysseus and the sirens, in which Odysseus, in order to avoid the temptation of the sirens calling him into the sea, ties himself to the mast of the ship while plugging the ears of his oarsmen so that they may take the ship to safety. In this explanation, ideological domination in the era of Enlightenment not only produces a separation

between thought and action, but ensures that the conditions of each cannot be enjoyed outside of these very conditions of ideological domination themselves:

Odysseus is represented in labor. Just as he cannot yield to the temptation of self-abandonment, so, as proprietor, he finally renounces even participation in labor, and ultimately even its management, whereas his men – despite their closeness to things – cannot enjoy their labor because it is performed under pressure, in desperation, with senses stopped by force (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2016: 35).

But just as Therborn argued earlier, what is presented here is an essentially humanist critique of ideology, where the function of ideological domination is located in the separation between thought and action at the level of the individual. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer (2016: 37) conclude that the similarities between the story of Odysseus and modern society find themselves in the way in which “men are once again made to be that against which the evolutionary law of society, the principle of self, had turned: mere species beings, exactly like one another through isolation in the forcibly united collectivity”. Ideological domination is conditioned by the alienation of the very relations between individuals and the reduction of the individual to an isolated organism. Moreover, it is individual consciousness and truth that is put forward as the antidote to this domination: “The enemy who is already defeated, the thinking individual, is the enemy fought” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2016: 149).

Though there is a critique of the modern individual within critical theory, it is not true to say that critical theory expounds a theoretical anti-humanism: that is, a thoroughgoing expulsion of the subject from the centre of its enquiry. The paper has so far explained how this might offer some problems in terms of its owed legacy to Marxism and its ability to emphasise the determinant role of the social relations of production in the development of history. However, in what follows, the paper discusses the extent to which Adorno’s *Contribution* offers an alternative critique of ideology and ideological domination that may be productive of a more theoretically anti-humanist potential.

Theoretical anti-humanism and Adorno’s *Contribution*

The argument made at this point is that the character of ideology critique in Adorno’s *Contribution* is of a different order and that Adorno here moves from a simple critique of the modern individual towards the beginnings of a *theoretical anti-humanism*. The object of Adorno’s critique shifts from one located in the conflict between traditional and critical theory to one located in the separation of philosophy and sociology. What this means is that the object of Adorno’s focus moves from critical theory as “humanity’s self-knowledge” (Therborn, 1970: 78) grounded in the concrete individual, towards a focus on developing a concept of ideology within sociology as an ‘anti-subjectivist’ science of society taken out of the hands of philosophy alone.

Adorno’s *Contribution* begins, not with a *positive distinction* between traditional and critical theory, but with a *problematic separation* between philosophy and sociology. It is not a distinction unique to this essay, with this separation serving as the guiding

discussion of Adorno's 1960 lecture series on *Philosophy and Sociology*. In his first lecture, Adorno (2022b: 3) argues that "sociology must actually call upon philosophy if it wishes to retain any genuinely scientific character for itself, if it really wishes to be anything more than a mere technique". As Deborah Cook (2001: 11) has argued in her own analysis of this essay, Adorno's *Contribution* sets itself much the same task, attempting to make a claim for the scientific character of sociology and a sociological concept of ideology, against a positivist version of it which does nothing more than 'report the facts', where "the critical distinction between what is and what ought to be has been eliminated in favour of a simple depiction of what is". Adorno locates this problem in the separation between philosophy and sociology. As Adorno (2022a: 19) writes, "sociology...stands in opposition to traditional philosophy", because "traditional philosophy still always makes the claim, even if not in precisely the same terms, that its work deals with enduring and unchangeable essences, as opposed to the transformation of appearances". Following traditional philosophy to its end point, Adorno finds the logic of positivism as the inevitable outcome of this persistence of unchangeable essences in traditional philosophical explanations of society. According to Adorno (2022a: 21), the concept of ideology within traditional philosophy "serves only to establish whatever 'is the case', and consequently the findings bear only on themselves". Adorno's (2022a: 28) task in his *Contribution* is therefore to bring to the fore a sociological concept of ideology and to place this in tension with philosophy, in order to unlock what he calls the "epistemological power" of the concept of ideology.

It is important to pause here to explore the significance of this shift. By moving from an analysis of traditional and critical theory, to one of philosophy and sociology, the field of concepts dramatically changes. This is demonstrated by Cook (2001: 7), who describes how the object of ideology critique within critical theory has always been what she calls "emphatic concepts". Emphatic concepts are subject-making concepts, or have what Adorno (2022a: 27) describes as an "anthropological function". These are concepts or categories around which human subjectivity is socially and politically constituted. These emphatic concepts are, for Adorno at least, concepts such as 'freedom' and 'enlightenment'. Crucially, by virtue of their character as such, their individuating function also means that they contain, at all times, the dialectical possibility for resistance against the very social or political condition they bring into existence (see, for example, C.L.R. James' (2022) analysis of the Haitian Revolution and the ways in which the concepts of 'enlightenment' and 'liberty' were used at once to individuate slaves into their social condition as such, but also provided the precise dialectical grounding through which these slaves overturned their social condition). Emphatic concepts contribute to the creation of individual subjectivity and, by virtue of this, contain the dialectical possibility of the active resistance of this subject against these concepts as well as their participation in their reproduction. As Cook (2001: 8) explains, focusing on the example of 'freedom', "the concept of freedom renders individual human beings themselves intelligible. It does so in part because human beings, in the course of their historical development, have been constituted, through self-reflection or self-consciousness, as relatively autonomous identities". For this reason, "liberal ideology cannot, therefore,

be simply rejected as the false consciousness of existing conditions because it also provides a basis or foundation for the critique of these conditions” (Cook, 2001: 10). The dialectical possibility of these emphatic concepts means that their object is still, fundamentally, *the individual* and thus explains the persistence of theoretical humanism within the critical theory dedicated to their study.

However, with the *Contribution*, the field of concepts changes from emphatic to non-emphatic concepts. ‘Positivism’, for example, is a non-emphatic concept, as it does not contain within itself the individuating effect and, consequently, the dialectical possibility that an emphatic concept does contain. As Cook (2001: 10) further explains, “whereas liberal ideology still has a truth-content that allows it to be used critically against existing conditions, positivist ideology consists in an uncritical and identitarian reflection – a distorted and pathetic one – of the way things are”. Going further, the argument made here is that this change in concepts pushes the terrain of Adorno’s critique away from the “pure immediacy and singularity” (Althusser, 1996: 184) of emphatic concepts that simply concern themselves with the condition of the individual, towards positivism as a generality within the field of knowledge production itself. The theoretical labour completed by Adorno, by virtue of this conceptual change, is the labour of materialist philosophy:

Labour *on* a pre-existing universal, a labour whose aim and achievement is to refuse this universal the abstractions or the temptations of ‘philosophy’ (ideology), and to bring it back to its condition by force; to the condition of a scientifically specified universality (Althusser, 1996: 183).

Adorno, in his *Contribution*, sets about starting this labour on the concept of ideology itself, refusing its abstraction in traditional philosophy as ‘positivism’ and instead using the materialism of sociology to unlock the epistemological power of the concept of ideology and make a claim, therefore, for the scientific character of sociology itself. Contrary to Therborn’s (1970: 70) initial denunciation of critical theory (“since it is philosophical and does not directly intervene in scientific discourse, it cannot create any new scientific concepts”), Adorno in the *Contribution* is in fact looking to make a scientific intervention by producing and putting to work a new concept: the very concept of *ideology* itself.

This shift helps to explain the theoretical anti-humanism of Adorno’s essay. Following Althusser’s (1996) theory of scientific production further, he demonstrates that theoretical anti-humanism is an outcome of this labour of theoretical production: a symptom of the evacuation from theory of all ideological particularities (the ‘individual’, the ‘human subject’ and so on), in favour of a generality or universal principle upon which the science sets to work. This operation is observable in Adorno’s initial critique of Francis Bacon. Bacon’s critique of ideology is first expressed in his theory of ‘idols’: “He characterized a typical idol of which the mind had to rid itself, the *idola fori*, which can be loosely translated as the idol of mass society” (Adorno, 2022a: 20). In short, Bacon’s critique was that ideology always strives for an understanding among the lowest common denominator within society, sacrificing meaning and understanding as it achieves comprehension among the masses. Adorno criticises this early formulation,

arguing that it sets in motion a fallacious theoretical humanism which understands ideology as a simple false consciousness or delusion of the individual, ignoring the social conditions that surround this individual. As Adorno (2022a: 20) writes, “the deception is blamed on ‘the’ people, as though they were invariable natural beings; it is not blamed on the conditions that make them this way, nor on those conditions that govern them as a mass”.

Bacon is positioned as an early representative of a positivist theory of ideology being deployed within the study of society. This positivism, which grounds its ‘reporting of the facts’ of ideology in the particularity of ‘the people’, is then set to work upon by Adorno. This individual, or their collection in ‘the people’, is evacuated from theory in favour of society and the social relations of production themselves. As Adorno (2022a: 20–21) continues:

The doctrine of innate delusion, a piece of secularized theology, still appears even today in the arsenal of vulgar theories of ideology: insofar as false consciousness is considered as people’s fundamental state, or insofar as it is generally ascribed to their socialization, then not only are the concrete conditions of false consciousness ignored, but even more than this, the delusion is justified as a law of nature, so to speak. The domination of the deluded is founded precisely on this.

For Adorno (2022a: 21) positivism is limited as whilst it initially “sought to aid the emancipation of bourgeois consciousness from the church’s condescension, and therefore was aligned with the progressive tendency of this entire philosophy”, it instead has fallen victim to an “intellectual eternalization of relations” and “abstract subjectivism, which fails to anticipate the moment of untruth in the isolated category of the subject itself”. ‘Subjectivism’ is shown here by Adorno to be a false generality, a particularism masquerading as a universalism and ‘eternalisation’ of relations. For Bacon and his contemporaries, “the question about the material life-processes of society had not yet arisen” and so “all of the enlightenment doctrines addressing ideology had a certain priority: they believed that putting consciousness in order would be sufficient to put society in order” (Adorno, 2022a: 24).

Adorno continues this critique in an analysis of Vilfredo Pareto’s political economy. Pareto is a figure mentioned by Adorno in his lectures on *Philosophy and Sociology*. In his eleventh lecture, Adorno (2022b: 118) argues that Pareto offers a “weakened conception of knowledge” in which he “specifically fail[s] to employ the concept of ideology in its really strict formulation”. Adorno (2022b: 118) argues that this is because Pareto relies on a “totalized concept of ideology”, producing an approach to ideology which “seems to intensify the concept of ideology, to the greatest possible degree...although it actually ends up weakening and eventually destroying the concept of ideology”. In his *Contribution*, Adorno observes the grounding of this totalisation, once more, in the false universalism of the individual subject. As Adorno (2022a: 27) argues, “by relating to humans-as-such instead of the concrete form of their socialization, Pareto falls back into the older, one might even say pre-sociological, standpoint of the doctrine of

ideology: that is, a psychological one". It is in articulating this critique that Adorno (2022a: 27) makes an interesting statement:

The fundamental subjectivism in Pareto, which can be traced back to his subjective economics, addresses the untruth of ideologies improperly: not as social relations and *objectively prescribed contexts of delusion*, but instead as the ways in which people give reasons for and justify their true motives after the fact (emphasis added).

With this continued subjectivism, the material social relations of ideology, the 'objectively prescribed contexts of delusion' that structure the relationship between subject and object are completely missing. They are removed from view and mystified, in favour of an individualistic theory of false consciousness. Adorno (2022a: 27) continues and puts this problem in another way: "He does not inquire about that tangible element of truth in ideologies, which is comprehensible only in connection with objective relations and not with psychology: in their *anthropological function* ideologies simply exhaust themselves" (emphasis added). For Adorno, the tendency of Pareto's critique to exhaust and destroy the epistemological power of the concept of ideology is located in its subjectivism, its reduction of the problem of ideology to the problem of individuals to the detriment of the analysis of objective social relations.

In these ways, the theoretical anti-humanism of Adorno's *Contribution* becomes evident. This is not a simple critique of the modern individual; rather, Adorno is here suggesting that the role of the individual, of the subject, *in theory*, has contributed to the maintenance of the gap between philosophy and sociology and the subsequent proliferation of a positivistic theory of ideology. By evacuating this subjectivism from theory, the gap between sociology and philosophy can be closed and the epistemological power of the concept of ideology comes forward, now grounded not in the false universalism of subjective particularity, but in the material and historical social relations of the capitalist mode of production.

For the remainder of the paper, the argument will focus on Adorno's mobilisation of the term *anthropology* in his essay. The paper explores the extent to which this concept of anthropology and its shared heritage within contemporary Althusserian thought signposts a route towards an anti-humanist theory of ideology that resists the temptation to revert back toward the dialectical theoretical humanism that persists in critical theory's ideology critique.

Anthropology and ideology critique

In the section that follows, the paper focuses on a few key passages from Adorno's *Contribution*, in which Adorno mobilises the concept of 'anthropology'. Continuing his theoretically anti-humanist critique of the concept of ideology, Adorno argues that the functioning of totalitarian ideology cannot be reduced down to the level of the individual subject. Rather, Adorno (2022a: 25) once more pushes the social relations of society to the forefront of this explanation, but does so in the following formulation: "The *anthropological transformations* for which the totalitarian ideologies are tailored

are consequences of the structural transformations of society” (emphasis added). In other places, Adorno (2022a: 27) discusses the “anthropological function” of ideology and the ways in which the culture industry succeeds in “[drawing] on anthropological tendencies awake in those consumers who it supplies”. The persistence of this concept throughout Adorno’s *Contribution* allows for following Jason Read and his placing of Adorno in conversation with French anti-humanism. As Read (2022: 45) has explained, Adorno’s ideology critique “suggests a new type of investigation that has interesting similarities with Étienne Balibar’s exploration of ‘philosophical anthropology’”.

Balibar derives the content of this concept from his reading of Spinoza, arguing that within Spinoza’s writings are the coordinates for a philosophical anthropology that breaks with the political theory of his contemporaries, which is based primarily on the problematic of the human state of nature. One of the core notions within this concept, relevant for this discussion, is that of ‘sociability’. Spinoza’s anthropology, according to Balibar, breaks with the idea that sociability is in some way an inherent or organic quality of the human subject, but equally rejects the idea that subjects are entirely the products of their environment. Rather, Spinoza articulates an anthropology in which society and its subjects are enmeshed in the production of an unstable multitude, in which meeting a subject that is not already socialised is impossible and in which individual passions are expressed within the parameters of this sociability, altering these parameters through their very expression. As Balibar (2008: 87) explains:

Our ‘fellow man’...does not exist as such naturally, in the sense of a being who is simply there, who is given. Rather, he is constituted by a process of imaginary identification, which Spinoza calls the ‘imitation of the affects’. This process is at work both in mutual recognition between individuals and in the formation of the ‘multitude’ as an unstable aggregate of individual passions.

For Balibar (2008: 88), human subjects are therefore not “sociable ‘in their origins’, but they *are* always already socialised”. The movement of social and political relations at one and the same time creates social and political subjects, who thus confront one another at all times as products of the very movement of these relations. The development of social relations and the development of social subjects are not separate moments, but rather are completely immanent to one another.

Balibar finds this political anthropology developed further by Marx in *The German Ideology* and the *Theses on Feuerbach*. For Balibar, Marx’s adoption of a problem of anthropology emanates from his sixth thesis on Feuerbach in particular: “The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” (Marx, 1976: 4). Balibar (2017: 148) draws links between the anthropological problematic contained within Marx’s sixth thesis and that of Spinoza, who observes the existence of individuals as indicative of the “*modes* of the social relationship which they actively produce; they enter into relations with all the others at the same time as with their natural conditions”. The consequence of both Marx’s and Spinoza’s anthropology is the realisation that “‘human beings’ (or ‘men’ in traditional usage) *only exist in the plural*” (Balibar, 2017: 150). The anti-humanism of this

realisation goes further, asserting also that the answer to this anthropological problematic is the focus not on the essential characteristics of the human individual, but on producing a view of this individual by emphasising how this individual is produced out of the relations that exist between human subjects in the multiple and in proximity to the historical conditions of their social existence. As Balibar (2017: 150) writes:

We once again find ourselves obliged to speak of ‘man’ or the ‘human’; at the very moment when we are trying to extricate our discourse from theoretical humanism – that is, from any possibility of defining the human *before* having described the multiplicity of *different ways* of relating human beings or relating to the human: a task which is, by definition, interminable.

Read (2022: 49) further emphasises the role that this political anthropology has played in the structure of Marxist ideology critique:

Just as the independent craftsperson has been engulfed by the vast network of machines and apparatuses that make him or her a functioning part, adjacent to rather than mastering these networks, the individual is no longer an origin for political right or obligation.

Faced with a similar situation to Adorno, with political economists whose analysis of ideology is contained in the false universalism of the human individual detached from history, Marx relied on a philosophical anthropology that was able to place this individual and its thought squarely in its historical context and position it against the backdrop of the social relations of production. As Read (2022: 49) continues, “networks, machines and process (not individuals) create an immense wealth of knowledge that is the precondition not just for the accumulation of wealth, but for social participation altogether”.

For Adorno, ideology is not simply the sum-total of the combined consciousnesses of the individuals in a society. Nor is it simply a doctrine preached from the mouths of powerful politicians and impressed upon the consciousness of individuals. Rather, Adorno (2022a: 25) argues that in order to understand totalitarian ideology, it is important to focus attention on what he calls “the anthropological transformations for which the totalitarian ideologies are tailored [which] are consequences of the structural transformations of society”. For Adorno, it is sociology that has the capacity to observe these transformations. These anthropological transformations have to be observed not in the human subjects themselves, but rather in the gap that exists between ideology and society itself. It is a complexity that Adorno (2022a: 31) attempts to grapple with in the following passage:

One can only sensibly speak about ideology as though it were an autonomous, substantial, intellectual entity which has emerged out of the social process and makes its own claims. Its untruth is always the price of this detachment, of the disavowal of the social basis. But its moment of truth clings to such autonomy, to a consciousness that is more than a mere reproduction of what exists, and it therefore strives to penetrate what exists.

Notice that the point of separation is not between ideology and the consciousness of the subject. On the contrary, the consciousness of the subject is conditioned by the ‘detachment’ of ideology from the ‘social process’: that is, the appearance of a gap between ideology and social relations which, contradictorily, at once secures its reproduction but at the same time leaves it open for overthrow. It is this contradiction that is summed up in Adorno’s (2022a: 32) assertion later in the essay that “while the people bow down to this untruth” (that is, the untruth that this social condition is natural, permanent and cannot be any other way), “they *secretly* see right through it at the same time” (emphasis added). Perhaps, rather than ‘secretly’, Adorno meant *unwittingly*. In this anthropological formulation, Adorno points to the ways in which the material relationship between society and ideology produces a failure of socialisation and an imperfect ideological domination.

For Balibar, it is the repeated failure of universalising anthropological difference that leaves open the space for insurrection, and makes it necessary. Adorno says the same: it is the failure of ideology to universalise itself, to posit itself as truth without gaps, that leaves open the space for insurrection. It is not the overcoming of false consciousness by the subject, but rather the failure of socialisation itself which is the motive force of insurrectionary potential. It is for this reason that Adorno (2022a: 24) says that contemporary ideology critique must be grounded in “the contradiction between the intellect’s objective truth and its mere being-for-another – a contradiction that traditional thinking cannot contend with”. It is a question of the “confrontation of ideology with its own truth, and is only possible insofar as ideology contains a rational element upon which the criticism can set to work” (Adorno, 2022a: 25). It is therefore, not about denying the existence of human subjectivity, but placing it within the context of the historical social relations that bring it into existence.

In focusing on the ‘anthropological function’ of ideology, Adorno, avoids the simple reduction of ideology to a psychological symptom, or its reduction to the symptom of a structure of social relations (as Nilsson (2023) says, not a hypostatisation of one or another extreme of the division between mental and manual labour). Rather, as Adorno (2022a: 31) writes:

If one were to define the legacy of ideology as the totality of all intellectual products, which today occupy the consciousness of people to a great extent, then one may understand by this less an autonomous mind deceived about its real social implications, than a totality of what is manufactured in order to capture the masses as consumers and, if possible, to model and fixate their state of consciousness. Today’s socially conditioned false consciousness is also no longer an objective spirit, in the sense that it in no way crystallizes blindly and anonymously out of social process, but instead is scientifically tailored to fit society.

The language used here, describing ideology as a totality of production, echoes the Spinozist idea of the “‘multitude’ as an unstable aggregate of individual passions” (Balibar, 2008: 87), integral to his anthropology. For Adorno, ideology is not an objective spirit that crystallises all; it is a product of subjectification, of the immanence of subject and object within the social formation, which gives the impression of its tailor-made

appearance for this social formation in which it finds itself. This tailor-made appearance is an outcome of the anthropological function of ideology, similarly summarised by Balibar (2017: 132) in the following way: “Common essence and ‘egotistical’ individuality are equally abstract when ‘separated’ from what confers *reality* on them: not simply ‘reality’ in the sense of factual existence, an observable ‘being-there’, but a process of realization or an *operation*”. In other words, what Adorno attempts to capture here is precisely this process of realisation, the ways in which ideology emerges as a realised consciousness, within the parameters of a particular social formation, giving the impression of its tailor-made fit. For Adorno, the culture industry is the modern form given to this process or realisation. Adorno (2022a: 32) continues:

In this way the culture industry is able to play the role of objective spirit to the extent that it is able to draw on anthropological tendencies awake in those consumers whom it supplies. It seizes these tendencies, strengthening and confirming them, while all that is insubordinate is left behind or expressly thrown out...In that the socially effective intellect limits itself to once again placing before people’s eyes only what already determines their existence, while at the same time proclaiming this existence as its own norm, it fixates people through their faithless faith in pure existence.

The culture industry does not in any way provide a lie to the consciousness of the individual, it does not cover the truth: rather, it ‘draws on anthropological tendencies’, tendencies which, following Spinoza and Balibar, are not natural but are co-constituted between the members of a society in their interaction with each other and the objects of society and nature.

The culture industry is therefore an anthropological phenomenon, in the sense that it is the product of an ensemble of relations, including individual subjects but also historical social relations, which come together in the production of a prescribed context of delusion. As Balibar (2017: 141–142) has said, this anthropological view of ideology is based upon,

Conceptualizing a system or totality whose institutions, which are subject to incessant historical transformation, allocate individuals roles and are sustained by their feelings and ideas but are not reducible to individual intentions or even their aggregate, because they proceed from objective laws or tendencies and the conflicts they provoke.

The theoretical anti-humanism of Adorno’s argument forces him into this anthropological vision. Though the culture industry produces visible ideological effects in the behaviours and actions of individuals, it cannot be said to be reducible to these behaviours or actions.

It is in these ways that we can rely on Balibar’s notion of ‘anthropology’ to interpret the critique of ideology in Adorno’s *Contribution*. Through Spinoza, Balibar constructs an anthropological critique of ideology that avoids a humanistic dialectic, relying on a separation between subject and object and on the observation of a false or alienated consciousness in order to explain the relationship between the structure of social relations

and the action of the subject. What has been demonstrated here is that, in his *Contribution*, Adorno begins to do the same. By virtue of the theoretically anti-humanist swerve demonstrated to have been made by Adorno in the first part of this paper, Adorno is able to avoid the humanistic dialectic of critical theory in its typical critique of ideology and instead construct a more anti-humanist form of ideology critique which, though still leaving space for the analysis of subjective action, prioritises and emphasises the determining role of the 'objectively prescribed contexts of delusion' that are reflected in the social relations of production.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the extent to which Adorno, in his *Contribution to the Theory of Ideology*, develops a theoretically anti-humanist critique of ideology. Unlike the critique of the individual in critical theory, Adorno here begins to evacuate his theory of ideology of the subjective principle, bringing to the foreground the social relations of production responsible for the individuation of the subject and the production of ideology itself, in contrast to the political economists and philosophers who instead produced a 'subjectivist' or 'psychological' theory of ideology. Moving away from the dialectical approach of critical theory, Adorno instead focuses on the 'anthropological function' of ideology in the same tenor as Spinoza, emphasising ideology as a phenomenon located at the point of interchange between the individual and the social relations that they produce, and by which they are simultaneously produced themselves. Reading this alongside the work of Balibar, this paper has demonstrated the importance of theoretical anti-humanism in allowing Adorno to arrive at this critique of ideology.

There are a number of lessons for sociology contained in this essay by Adorno which it is imperative for the discipline to heed. First, the scientificity of sociology as a discipline is guaranteed by its materialism. Philosophy is only a method: it is not a science in and of itself. It is for this reason that Adorno emphasises the need for sociology and philosophy to be taken together. Sociology, in implementing a materialist philosophical method, can reveal the truth of particular social phenomena. In this case, the chosen phenomenon is that of ideology. Ideology and ideological domination as related social problems are shown by Adorno here to stem from historical, material social relations. More than this, Adorno demonstrates how a materialist sociological analysis of ideology can reveal the hidden intricacies of these social relations and produce knowledge of them.

The second lesson is the importance of theoretical anti-humanism for the development of a Marxism in sociology. Adorno demonstrates how the forwarding of this materialist sociology – which must be the foundation of any Marxism within sociology – depends upon the evacuation of the subjective principle from the centre of theory. Political economy has relied on a theory of ideology that emphasises the role and responsibility of the individual subject, as a theoretical tactic for displacing the social relations of production responsible for ideological domination in the first place. This tactic is convenient for political economy, as in doing so it keeps concealed that secret which would undo its entire field of knowledge: the reality of class struggle. Adorno shows how materialism and the scientificity of sociology depend on its ability to maintain a theoretically anti-

humanist orientation. It is a lesson which Marxists in sociology must remember more than most, for it is the only epistemological foundation upon which such a Marxism can develop and intervene at all.

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