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Some Reflections on Theodor W. Adorno's Account of Progress

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It should not be taken as an exaggeration to claim that the very future survival of humanity is at present imperiled. Whereas the prospect of humanity's collective suicide by means of annihilation through nuclear war seemed a plausible threat during much of the twentieth century,¹ today this decidedly horrifying role seems to have been taken up by the specter of catastrophic climate change. The dangerous anthropogenic interference with Earth's climate systems that has been driven by developments that have arisen since the onset of the capitalist mode of production in human history stands to render impossible the continuation of much of life over much of the planet in the near future; in this sense, Félix Guattari seems correct to claim that "there will be no more human history unless humanity undertakes a radical

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¹ A threat that should not be limited to the past century, if recent belligerent moves by the U.S. and Israel against Iran are to be taken as credible.

reconsideration of itself.”² It is with these decidedly bleak considerations in mind that, in the view of the present author, attention should be focused on German philosopher and social critic Theodor W. Adorno’s 1962 lecture “Progress,”³ an intervention that Adorno sees as having its basis in the question of “whether humankind is able to prevent catastrophe.”

Adorno situates his reflections on progress within an epoch he sees as potentially giving birth to “both utopian and absolutely destructive possibilities.” He observes that the prospect of both such possibilities finds itself within a present in which “the forms of humanity’s own global societal constitution threaten its existence”; no less than the prospect of “averting utmost, total disaster” constitutes then for Adorno “the possibility of progress.” In Adorno’s view, progress is indelibly linked to “the survival of the species”—there can be no progress without the realization of the “happiness of unborn generations,” a “notion” that Adorno takes from the work of his comrade Walter Benjamin as constituting the very “notion of redemption.” Indeed, the prospect of progress pre-supposes the as-yet unfulfilled historical possibility for the “establishment of humankind,” an eventuality that Adorno sees as opening “in the face of extinction.” Insofar as “humankind remains entrapped by the totality which it itself fashions,” claims Adorno, “progress has not yet taken place at all.”

The existent for Adorno thus proffers the prospect of total regression; the chance for the realization of the determinate negation of such regression is in Adorno’s view however “still not without all hope.” Echoing some of Hannah Arendt’s commentary on the experience of Nazi and Soviet totalitar-

² *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Continuum, 2000 [1989]), p. 45

³ In *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Eric Krakauer (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989) and *Critical Models*, ed. and trans. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005). Both translations are employed at various points in the following text.

ianisms,⁴ Adorno asserts in Hegelian terms that “part of the dialectic of progress is that historical setbacks [...] provide the condition needed for humanity to find the means to avert them in the future.” The “warding off [of] catastrophe” is in this sense a possibility Adorno sees as promised in the prospect of “a rational establishment of overall society as humankind.” Like Benjamin, who sees in “every second” of the future “the door through which the Messiah could enter,”⁵ Adorno suggests that progress can begin “at any instant.” Dialectically, Adorno asserts that present injustice “is simultaneously the condition for possible justice”: seemingly aligning himself, whether consciously or otherwise, with claims made by fellow German critical theorist Herbert Marcuse⁶ and North-American social-ecologist Murray Bookchin,⁷ Adorno argues that the already-existing ‘material base’ provided by the historical trajectory taken by the capitalist mode of production—and in particular, its technologies—could be redirected and re-organized so as to provide a reasonable life for all existing humans: “no one on earth needs to suffer poverty,” claims Adorno; “for the first time,” even “violence might vanish altogether.” Such world-historical accomplishments could only be achieved, of course, if ‘the existent’ were somehow to be wrested away from its embeddedness within capitalism.

Central to the prospect of the realization of the “utopian possibilities” Adorno envisages is the “philosophy of reflection,” the emergence of thought critical of the instrumentalizing, life-negating realities propagated by capitalist social relations and inhumanity generally considered. Adorno sees

⁴ *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, California: Harcourt, 1968 [1948])

⁵ “On the Concept of History” (1940), Thesis XVIII.B

⁶ *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966)

⁷ *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2004)

such critical thought by itself, though, as insufficient, for “[r]eason’s helpful self-reflection [...] would be its transition to praxis.” Such praxis is desperately needed in the present, in Adorno’s view: if, as he says, a “self-conscious global subject does not develop and intervene,” human survival itself is in jeopardy; hence, the very “possibility of progress [...] has devolved to this subject alone.” In this sense, the “awakening” of humanity is “the sole potential for a coming of age”; progress is to be attained through a “coming out of the spell,” for it is only when “humanity becomes aware of its own indigeneness to nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts over nature through which domination by nature continues” that progress can exist, according to Adorno. Thus, “it could be said,” Adorno tells us, that “progress occurs only where it ends.”

This critique of the domination of nature was originally formulated in the 1944 text Adorno wrote in exile together with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: there, Adorno and Horkheimer posit that the “collective madness that rages today”—that of a world “radiant with triumphant calamity”—finds its origin in “primitive objectivization, in the first man’s calculating contemplation of the world as a prey.”⁸ The entirety of the subsequent development of human history after this point—and in particular, the historical creations of human self-domination, together with that visited on other humans and other beings—follows, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s view, from this primal sort of dominative constellation. In this sense, then, the bringing of the domination of nature to a halt might perhaps allow humanity to liberate itself altogether from domination. Progress, says Adorno, “wants to disrupt

⁸ Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2002 [1947]), p. 1, 176

present task is in sum thoroughly radical: “Debarbarization of humanity is the immediate prerequisite for survival.”³³

the triumph of radical evil”: it constitutes “resistance against the perpetual danger of relapse [...] at all stages.”

As exhilarating as Adorno’s account of the prospect of humanity’s awakening may be to those taken by it, Adorno himself seems to have long been rather pessimistic regarding the possibility of its actual realization. In “Progress,” he quite plainly observes that “[t]he idea of a progress which leads out and away is presently blocked”—this, “because the subjective moments of spontaneity are beginning to wither in the historical process.” Such a view is without a doubt informed by his exploration, with Horkheimer, of what the two refer to in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the ‘culture industry’: the socialization processes of existing society which work to “ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind”⁹—formal education, the mass media, television, and ‘culture’ generally. In these theorists’ disturbing account, such processes come to reign in existing society, creating a “totally administered world” and hence fettering humanity in large part to the “gigantic apparatus.”¹⁰ As serious as they consider the threat of the culture industry to human freedom and historical progress, however, neither Adorno nor Horkheimer seems to have believed that the colonization of mind propagated by existing social relations implies the absolute victory of the existent: as Horkheimer writes, “Mutilated as men [sic] are, in the duration of a brief moment they can become aware that in the world which has been thoroughly rationalized they can dispense with the interests of self-preservation which still set them one against the other.”¹¹ “Reason,” Horkheimer continues, “could recognize and denounce the forms of injustice and thus

³³ *Critical Models* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), p. 190

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194

¹¹ “The End of Reason,” from *The Essential Frankfurt School*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 48

emancipate itself from them.”¹² Hence, the importance Adorno places in “Progress” on the “philosophy of reflection”—for in his view, “[o]nly reason [...] would be capable of abolishing this domination [i.e., that of nature]”—and hence also his theoretical assertion that “finally progress can begin, at any instant.”

Given Adorno’s account of progress, then, what can be made of it today? Much, in the view of the present author. As arresting as many of Adorno’s observations on progress are, it is undoubtedly the case that his comments are entirely relevant to consideration of the currently prevailing state of affairs.

The status quo, like the time on which Adorno was reflecting on in 1962, is marked by the potential for “universal regression” and “absolutely destructive possibilities.” It is surely the case that “humanity’s own global societal constitution” is at present in jeopardy—human survival is itself in question. For confirmation of this claim, one need only peruse the many climatological reports that have been released in recent months¹³ which predict that, due to dangerous anthropogenic interference with the Earth’s climate, average global temperatures will likely rise between 4° and 6° C before 2100. Climate change on such a scale would truly be catastrophic: the British environmental journalist Mark Lynas tells us in *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter World*, his devastating synthesis of an enormous breadth of recent climatological findings, that a world with an increased average global temperature of 4° C above that

¹² *Ibid.*, p.47

¹³ David Adam, “Met Office warns of catastrophic global warming in our lifetimes,” *The Guardian*, 28 September 2009; Steve O’Connor and Michael McCarthy, “World on course for catastrophic 6°C rise, reveal scientists,” *The Observer*, 18 November 2009; Alok Jha, “Global temperatures could rise 6C by end of century, say scientists,” *The Guardian*, 17 November 2009

impending disaster.”²⁸ Surely a rational, radical re-orientation of existing technologies could help to avert impending climate catastrophe as well as introduce at least a modicum of justice and freedom for the dispossessed billions residing on Earth today; it is to be imagined that the resources presently employed to maintain nuclear weapons, militarism, and the arms trade—to name only a handful of present barbarous irrationalities—could be re-arranged so as to promote humane ends. Such a solution naturally cannot be had as long as exist growth economies and class societies; Adorno’s concept of progress, like any other reasonable analysis of the present situation, demands their abolition.

In the end, then, Hannah Arendt seems right to assert that “the miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality.”²⁹ Only such a “beginning”³⁰ would allow for the realization of a state in which “people [have] no cause to fear,” wherein “there [is] no impending catastrophe on the horizon.”³¹ Unfortunately, however, it rather seems to be the case that the culture industry and associated repressive phenomena reign today—the “philosophy of reflection” hardly seems to be ascendant, and Adorno’s “global self-conscious subject” is largely absent in the present. Bleakly, then, we can conclude with Adorno that “[w]hat would be different has not begun as yet,” that “[t]oo little that is good has power in the world for the world to be said to have achieved progress.”³² However it is imagined that it could be achieved, humanity’s

²⁸ *The Dialectics of Disaster: A Preface to Hope* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 289

²⁹ *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 247

³⁰ Arendt, *op. cit.* (1968 [1948]), p. 473

³¹ Adorno, *op. cit.* (2006 [1965]), p. 143

³² *Op. cit.* (1973), p. 145; *op. cit.* (2006 [1965]), p. 149

no progress.” For Adorno, progress can in no way constitute “capitulation to the mainstream.”

If humanity truly is today faced “with its [own] extinction,” it is to be hoped that such a prospect in fact “opens,” in Adorno’s words, the possibility for “the very establishment of humankind,” among other “utopian possibilities.” Other than a descent into total catastrophe, no alternative can be gleaned from the present: “there is nothing left,” Horkheimer seems to correctly state, “but barbarism or freedom.”²⁴ If matters as presently constituted “just go on,” in Benjamin’s formulation, then “all is lost.”²⁵ Without a radical irruption of the prevailing world-course, humanity will fail totally to observe the new categorical imperative that Adorno sees Hitler as having imposed “upon unfree [humanity]”: that humans “arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”²⁶ If the recurrence of such absolute catastrophe is to be avoided, humanity must somehow come to be established, to be born—only thus can there be the possibility of progress beyond the sets of social relations that justify nothing other than “hopeless sorrow.”²⁷

The enormity of possible future negations notwithstanding, it could perhaps ultimately be true that the realization of Adorno’s account of progress is a project that is at present still possible. It is within the realm of theoretical possibility that Adorno’s “subject” could come to employ reason and so, in the words of Ronald Aronson, “awaken from [its] delusion [...] to attack the social structures responsible for the

²⁴ Horkheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 48

²⁵ *Selected Writings. Volume 4: 1938–1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), p. 184; *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 80

²⁶ *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 365

²⁷ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1975), p. 69

which prevailed in pre-industrial human history would likely see the break-up of the Ross and Ronne ice shelves of Antarctica, an eventuality that would in turn precipitate the collapse of the entire West Antarctic ice-sheet and hence raise sea levels dramatically; both Australia and the South Asian subcontinent are expected not to be able to support agricultural production under the environmental conditions that would likely exist in such a world.¹⁴ Lynas further relates that an Earth warmer on average by 5° C would see the downstream flows of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers—which at present provide life for billions of currently-existing humans—reduced by half their present volume; indeed, climatological conditions in such a world would simply render large swathes of the Earth’s surface uninhabitable for human life, with isolated ‘belts of habitability’ reportedly receding to parts of northern Europe, Britain and Ireland, Scandinavia, Canada, and eastern Russia in the northern hemisphere and to Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Tasmania, New Zealand, and a now ice-free Antarctica in the southern hemisphere, with the highland regions of Ethiopia and Lesotho acting as similar havens in Africa.¹⁵ Doubtless, those who find themselves residing outside such sanctuaries are expected to be killed by famine. Given an increased average temperature of 6° C—the most severe case of climate change considered by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to be likely or even possible in the twenty-first century—the Earth’s oceans are expected to be acidified, largely anoxic, and thus almost entirely bereft of life, while ‘super-hurricanes’ that circumnavigate the globe are to be regular events; we are even told that the synergy of methane-air clouds produced by the mass emission of ocean-dwelling methane hydrates released by prior climate change and of the hydrogen sulfide created by

¹⁴ *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2008), p. 186–213

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214–235

the mass-rotting of formerly existing organic beings could result in the dismantling of the ozone layer.¹⁶ In fact, Lynas sees in this worst-case scenario a possible parallel with the mass-extinction event that occurred at the end of the Permian Age 251 million years ago, when average global temperatures rose by 6° C and approximately 95 percent of all extant species went extinct. Clearly, humanity itself cannot be considered a species exempt from such peril.

If the science underpinning the various predictive scenarios regarding likely future climate change is sound—and no compelling reason to doubt such seems to exist—then it is surely true that the phenomenon of catastrophic climate change imperils the very future survival of humanity. As Elizabeth Kolbert writes in her dark assessment of recent warming trends,¹⁷ it is as though technologically ‘advanced’ societies are enacting their own death as well as the destruction of most of life on Earth. Reflecting on Adorno’s reflections on progress may, then, prove to be a useful present task.

As strange as it may be to say for a philosopher generally known for his seemingly desperate pessimism, Adorno could be said to be too optimistic in “Progress” regarding the very prospect of progress. The specter of catastrophic anthropogenic climate change that hangs over the future seems to negate the very geographical and physical pre-conditions that it is to be imagined would be necessary for the realization of Adorno’s sense of social redemption—the occurrence of the “liberating event,” the emergence of a world in which “no one shall go hungry” and no one will “fear to be different”¹⁸—that he sees as possible. This latest in a long string of catastrophes that have marked human history, for its part,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236–263

¹⁷ *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 189

¹⁸ *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005 [1951]), p. 245, 156–7

amounts to climate genocide, as Gideon Polya rightly claims:¹⁹ it constitutes the mass-murder of a hitherto unprecedented number of humans by capitalism. Billions are expected to die; the renowned Earth-scientist James Lovelock expects “about 80%” of the world’s population to have perished due to the changes wrought by climate catastrophe before the end of this century.²⁰ The extremity of the present state of affairs, indeed, is so absolute that its characterization by Noam Chomsky in the 1992 documentary *Manufacturing Consent* as “the possibly terminal phase of human history” is hardly a presently inaccurate conclusion. In light of such considerations, then, it seems unclear how Adorno could today justify his claim that progress can begin “at any instant.”

This aspect of Adorno’s argument notwithstanding, much of the rest of his commentary on progress seems rather valuable. He is certainly correct to claim “progress today” to at minimum demand “the prevention and avoidance of total catastrophe”;²¹ the radicality of Adorno’s positive vision of progress—the demand that the “domination exacted over nature” be “halt[ed]” and that the “happiness of unborn generations” be secured—undoubtedly pre-supposes an “organization of the world”²² fundamentally different from that which currently exists. Just as “[w]rong life cannot be lived rightly,”²³ so cannot the realization of such be found within prevailing social relations: “Where bourgeois society satisfies the concept [of progress] which it harbors for itself, it knows

¹⁹ Cf., inter alia, “G8 Failure Means Climate Genocide for Developing World,” *Countercurrents*, 11 July 2009; see also Polya’s website on the issue (sites.google.com).

²⁰ Decca Aitkenhead, “Enjoy life while you can,” *The Guardian*, 1 March 2008

²¹ *History & Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006 [1964–1965]), p. 143

²² *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2000), p. 176

²³ Adorno, *op. cit.* (2005 [1951]), p. 39