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## Adorno's Critique of the New Right-Wing Extremism: How (Not) to Face the Past, Present, and Future

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*This paper serves three purposes relating to a lecture Adorno gave in 1967 on "the new right-wing extremism" that was on the rise then in West Germany; in 2019, the lecture was published in print for the first time in German, to wide acclaim, followed by an English translation that appeared in 2020. First, it is important to situate the lecture in its historical and political context, and to relate it to Adorno's status as a critical theorist in West Germany. Secondly, Adorno's diagnosis of the new right-wing extremism (and related forms of populism) and his conclusions about how to resist and counteract it are relevant to the current political situation in the United States, even though he presented his analysis more than half a century ago. Thirdly, Adorno's lecture provided the model for a type of education that is oriented toward enabling students to face unpleasant facts about modern social life in constructive ways, including recognizing and resisting right-wing populism and extremism, in an age that imposes greater and greater uncertainty and challenges on individuals. In conclusion, it is evident that in a rapidly changing world, the "tricks" of right-wing populists and extremists are astonishingly unoriginal and static, which in part may explain their appeal and effectiveness. Reading the pedagogy Adorno suggested as a practical application of his critical theory highlights the importance of enabling individuals to recognize the "normalcy" of proliferating experiences of cognitive dissonance, and to respond to such experiences by adopting a productive rather than defeatist stance with regard to the increasing complexity and the intensifying contradictions of modern societies in the twenty-first century, as they are accompanied by myriad possibilities and threats.*

I consider the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy. ... That fascism lives on, that the oft-invoked working through of the past has to this day been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, an empty and cold forgetting, is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist.

Theodor W. Adorno ([1959] 2005, p. 90, 98)

[O]ne might refer to the fascist movements as the wounds, the scars of a democracy that, to this day, has not yet lived up to its own concept.

Theodor W. Adorno ([1967] 2020, p. 9)

In 2019, the original German version of Theodor W. Adorno's 1967 public lecture, "Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalismus," appeared in print for the first time (Adorno [1967] 2019; translation: *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, Adorno [1967] 2020; subsequently *Aspects*)<sup>1</sup> Thus, the publication of this lecture occurred half a century after Adorno's death in 1969, in the context of proliferating right-wing populist movements in Germany and elsewhere, and a growing number of right-wing governments around the world. What may be most striking about the lecture, in retrospect, is not so much that his effort was directed at illuminating right-wing trends that are virulent again today, but that he did so with astonishing clarity, efficiency and accuracy so many years ago, while difficulties remain today to conceive of effective strategies to contain or prevent the destructive potential of right-wing movements and politics. On the one hand, these difficulties might be indicators that the appeal of fascism and its ability to garner support is symptomatic of problematic dimensions of modern societies that are integral to their functioning and structure, such as the persistence of a spectrum of inequalities; on the other hand, this appeal also might be expressive of the limitations of *formal* democracy that today is being viewed, erroneously, as a sufficient substitute and approximation of an emphatic understanding of *substantive* democracy, broadly conceived. After addressing the need to distinguish between populism, radicalism, and extremism, I will situate Adorno's lecture in its historical and political context in the 1960s in West Germany, in the process pointing out parallels with current circumstances in (unified) Germany. Next, I will provide a summary of key points of his diagnosis of the *new* right-wing extremism, focusing especially on the role of fear, and compile a catalogue of practical strategies and tactics he suggested for resisting and counteracting right-wing populist ideas and forms of extremism. Even though Adorno presented his analysis more than half a century ago, the section that follows will illustrate in cursory fashion the relevance of his diagnosis as well as practical suggestions for how to assess the current political situation in the United States, by employing the category of American exceptionalism, with analytical (rather than political or ideological) intent. Although Adorno did not address the issue of education explicitly in his 1967 lecture, it is so heavily implied that appreciating fully what he was trying to convey demands drawing attention to the type of education (and requisite mindset) he was advocating towards the end of his life, during exactly the same time period when he gave his lecture on the new right-wing extremism. Without having become familiar with this kind of education, many individuals will not be able to face, and especially not be likely to master, the challenges of life in modern societies constructively, and in ways are consonant with their values and life goals. The type of education Adorno advocated is intended to foster explicitly spelled-out, critical and reflexive perspectives on the past, present, and future – with regard to both individuals' socially and historically situated selves, and their particular society's darker side. Adorno's combined preference for the openness of the essay form, and his reservations about his lectures being recorded, illustrate his pedagogical commitments exceedingly well and support related propositions he formulated on many occasions. In its succinctness, Adorno's 1967 lecture

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<sup>1</sup> The recording of the original lecture in German had been available for years on the web-site of the Österreichische Mediathek, Audio-visual Archive of the Technical Museum, Vienna, for years: <https://www.mediathek.at/oesterreich-am-wort/suche/treffer/atom/014EEA8D-336-0005D-00000D5C-014E5066/pool/BWEB/> (Adorno 1967a). The web-site also includes several other recordings of Adorno lectures, see <https://www.mediathek.at/oesterreich-am-wort/aus-aktuellem-anlass/archivaufnahmen-von-und-mit-theodor-w-adorno/>.

– influenced and inspired as it was by his American experience, and representative of his multifaceted work as a whole – may have the potential of serving as a model for how to enhance our understanding of political and educational dilemmas all modern societies should have faced much more explicitly, non-defensively, critically, and reflexively, in the past, must face in the present, and will have to commit to facing in the future, if ever more predictable catastrophes of many kinds are to be averted, and the preconditions of those catastrophes transformed in favor of modes of social, political, and economic organization that are more conducive to authentic (rather than increasingly alienated, anomic, and disenchanting) forms of individual, social, public, and societal life.

### *Populism, Radicalism, Extremism*

Adorno's lecture was located at the intersection of populism, radicalism, and extremism, though neither explicitly, nor necessarily in ways that were intended to clarify the issues at hand, and the differences involved. For one thing, Adorno never referred to populism in the lecture, which is a term that at the time was not as common as it is today.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the lecture was interspersed with references to and observations about "people" and "the people." These remarks, references, and observations pertained to people as *subjects*, as active – though not necessarily self-possessing – individuals belonging to larger aggregates, such as societies or countries, yet holding certain views, having specific experiences, and representing particular practices from a catalogue of options provided by their society or country, with various implications for how they see and situate themselves in relation to their own, each other's, and their society's past, present, and future, and how they confront corresponding challenges. In addition, Adorno acknowledged that in modern societies, "people" – as individuals and groups of individuals – in myriad ways are being "framed" as *objects*, e.g., as the bearers of ideology and the targets of propaganda who are expected to serve certain purposes, by forces – both concrete groups of actors and abstract processes – that usually are not transparent to most members of a society, and which would have to be revealed and identified overtly for individuals to be able to move toward being subjects with agency.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the original German version, Adorno referred to "right-wing radicalism" (*Rechtsradikalismus*), whereas the translation refers to "right-

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<sup>2</sup> As far as I was able to determine, in Adorno's twenty-volume set of collected works in German, he used "populist" just once (in vol. 14, p. 308), in the section on musical life in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* ([1962] 1988), p. 118, and he did not refer to "populism" at all.

<sup>3</sup> This is an important issue that I cannot address here in detail; suffice it to say that frequently and erroneously, such forces are being identified in terms of "conspiracies," even though they may be representative of the normal operations of corporate capitalism, as recently scrutinized by Jane Mayer (2016) and Nancy MacLean (2017), or of what I have referred to elsewhere as the "constitutional logic" of modern societies (Dahms 2009, esp. 91-94; 2012; in preparation; and Jalata and Dahms, 2015); neither the "normal" – i.e., internally consistent and predictable – operations of corporate capitalism (see Panageotou 2017), nor the "constitutional logic" of modern societies, is consistent with "common sense" assumptions individuals obtain in the process of socialization and education, nor are they admissible in terms of conventional assumptions; still, many people yearn for more or less easy explanations in an increasingly disorienting world, regardless of whether they have the necessary mindset, training, and skills, or willingness to make the effort to acquire them, or not. Regarding frequent flaws in conspiracies "theories," see, for instance, deHaven-Smith (2014) and Cassam (2019).

wing *extremism*” (which, not surprisingly, would translate as *Rechtsextremismus*, and which Adorno is not known to have used). However, this distinction is indicative less of a clear conceptual difference than of different terminological conventions in time and space: during the first two decades of the Federal Republic of Germany, which coincided with the last twenty years of Adorno’s life (after returning from America in 1949), the established usage was “right-wing radicalism.” which during the early 1970s – at the time of nascent left-wing and international terrorism (Aust [1987] 2008) – was replaced by “right-wing extremism.”

Since the beginning of the current century, populism, radicalism, and extremism are terms that have been used frequently in political and cultural discourse and analyses, to draw attention to, describe, try to respond to, advocate, or assess profound changes and reorientations in, or in relation to, modern democratic societies. In academic debates, social theory and social research, interest in the phenomena these terms refer to, along with their origins and growing appeal in public life, has been intensifying continuously. Yet, even in academia, it is not unusual for these terms to be used loosely and interchangeably, and they do not often reach the level of clarity typically associated with carefully formulated and distinguished *concepts*. Indeed, it is in the nature of these terms that differences in how speakers or writers have been using them is confusing, in part because they commonly appear to refer to similar – if not exactly the same – phenomena, and because populism, radicalism, and extremism also are used as labels to refer to a range of agendas, activities, and actions. Often, how populism, radicalism, or extremism is being used tells us more about the users and their agenda than about the phenomena, and it does not necessarily advance the purpose of clarifying the distinctiveness of a specific social movement, an ideology, a set of political goals, or the vital aspects of the condition of modernity or democracy. In addition, rather than serving the purpose of illuminating pivotal and controversial issues and challenges, the terms also are being employed and deployed to reject any and all views that do not directly and strongly reaffirm conventional or mainstream notions about how to act in a particular situation or how to position oneself with regard to a particular issue, such as “democracy,” without specifying the kind of democracy that is being alluded to or regard for careful distinctions and specific circumstances, or whether or not at least some of the grievances voiced by populists, radicals or extremists may or do have a basis in reality, in lived experiences, or are justified in some form. At the same time, there are – undeniably – important differences that must be acknowledged and distinctions which must be made, for a productive engagement with a range of phenomena that do not all fit into one category, to be within reach.

In recent years, among the phenomena the three terms refer to, both *populism* and *extremism* have been examined and discussed to a much greater extent than *radicalism*, with populism applying especially to trends in societies with democratic political systems and cultures. Conceptually, radicalism and extremism refer to more or less abstract categories and often pursue goals that are “global” in nature (in the sense of: without discernible limits), and with practical intent being oriented toward the transformation or creation of a *totality* (e.g., society, humankind, or planetary civilization).<sup>4</sup> Abstract categories are being applied or goals

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<sup>4</sup> In a kind of “short-circuit,” liberal theorists, such as Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Ralf Dahrendorf, more or less blatantly took the etymologically shared root of “totality” as a philosophical and theoretical concept and “totalitarianism” as a political concept as evidence that thought that aspires to address and clarify issues at the level of

pursued with determination, and occasionally with a sense of moral righteousness, regardless of whether they are grounded in a shared and agreed-upon reality, and whether the goals, realistically speaking, are at all attainable. In some cases, actions even may be motivated by the recognition that the successful transposition of abstract categories into reality in fact is highly unlikely. By contrast, populism joins a long line of efforts to advocate the “interest of the people,” of promoting the “real” interests of the people that make up society, or of being most responsive to popular needs and demands. According to William Outhwaite (2018, p. 1790),

Populism, like nationalism and democracy, is an ideology of popular rule. However, where nationalism (in some of its aspects) stresses the civic or ethnic ‘belonging’ of the people, populism invokes ‘the people’ as opposed to elites, such as an established political class. It can therefore take a left- or right-wing form, and is often ambiguous or ambivalent between them.<sup>5</sup>

The distinction between left-wing and right-wing populism indeed has received much attention in recent years, including in the U.S., especially since the 2016 Presidential campaign, which was accompanied by the formation of two opposing forms of populism, represented each by a Presidential candidate whose campaigns rejected established approaches and strategies to achieving goals that they deemed to benefit mostly the political class. Although populism usually is seen in terms of left-wing or right-wing ideologies, there is nothing inherently fixed that demands that it should lean in one political direction or the other. In both fact and principle, promoting the interest of the people implies *all* the people, not just this group as opposed to that group, and if attainable, orienting actions toward such a goal would be difficult to disagree with. However, promoting the interest of all the people constitutes a truly tall order: who determines who “the people” are and what “the people” want, and how does one go about making such determinations, in the absence of established and widely accepted and supported practices designed to insure that the interests and needs of all the people will be taken into consideration and account of? After all, for the most part, “the people” is an indispensable rhetorical device employed for the purpose of attracting voters or to generate mass-loyalty, and to simulate unity where there are conflicting and competing interests, the constant potential for strife, and an absence of shared understanding and purpose, except under certain highly unusual circumstances, such as after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (“United We Stand!”), but not during the current Coronavirus pandemic during which the tensions between different segments of the population are on full display.<sup>6</sup> Would it be possible to identify and assess conflicting interests

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*totality* inevitably, in some way, lays the foundation for, and legitimates, forms of *totalitarianism*. See, e.g., Rotenstreich (2000).

<sup>5</sup> See also Müller (2016) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017); regarding extremism, see Berger (2018).

<sup>6</sup> This complex of issues has been discussed at length in the debate about American exceptionalism, if employed as a productive analytical and comparative concept in social and political theory, as well as sociology, but not as a political or ideological category. At the beginning of the first chapter of Seymour Martin Lipset’s (1996) related work, he wrote,

Born out of revolution, the United States is a country organized around an ideology, which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of a good society. Americanism, as different people have pointed out, is an “ism” or ideology in the same way that communism or fascism or liberalism are isms. As [the British writer, philosopher, and critic] G. K. Chesterton put it: ‘America is the only nation in the world founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the

and whether and how well existing strategies to reconcile such interests might work? Is it possible to truly reconcile conflicting interests at a time of continuously diminishing solidarity, when the latter concept is used mostly as a means of political propaganda, without corresponding commitments and efforts to sustain and cultivate actual solidarity across groups in society?<sup>7</sup> Considering the immense obstacles that have been standing (or intentionally were placed) in the way of successful forms of both collective action and political programs which may be genuinely oriented towards the advancement of “the people’s interest,” in recent decades, with the ideology and policies of neoliberalism having been especially effective at thwarting progressive efforts, it may have been inevitable that populism has taken more or less radical and extreme forms, focusing on right-wing or left-wing ideals, ideas, goals, and tactics. At the same, though, it is important not to establish a simple and seemingly straightforward equivalence between both versions of populism, as the substance of their ideals, ideas, goals, and tactics generally are qualitatively different, with potentially very different implications and intended end-results.

Both *radicalism* and *extremism* are different from populism, since at the most fundamental level, they do not have a referent such as “the people” (vague as the latter may be in many instances), but follow and advocate an abstract ideal or set of principles that is more or less highly contested, and distinguishing radicalism and extremism from each other is more difficult. To begin with, context usually does play a key role in determining what the terms in fact do refer to, in different countries, political parties, and time-periods. For instance, there is not necessarily anything wrong with pursuing or applying a *radical* approach to achieving an objective, since *going to the root* of an issue or perspective, for instance for analytical, theoretical or critical purposes, may not only be justified, but necessary for a task at hand. On the other hand, adopting an *extremist* position to achieve a goal implies a structural flaw, a mismatch between a task or challenge and the basic presuppositions that inform practical steps, or a strategy chosen to attain a goal or prevent a development or event. The lacuna between “radical” and “extremist” is further complicated if we – as in the case of *populism* – try to compare between *radicalism* and *extremism* as “isms” – as *ideological* renderings.

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Declaration of Independence.’ ... [T]he nation’s ideology can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. (p. 31)

Note that Lipset identified populism as one of the five key dimensions of “Americanism.” The quote within the quote is from Chesterton (1922, p. 7), not to be confused with the British fascist A. K. Chesterton. The ubiquity of tensions within American society, which – in terms of its foundation – may celebrate competition to a greater extent than any other society, resonate strongly with Mugambi Jouet’s (2017) more recent book on American exceptionalism, and his central observation that in many ways, American conservatives (who, if they vote, usually support the Republican Party) are not only separated by a major ideological, intellectual, and policy-related gulf from Europeans, and in many ways from the rest of the world, but also from liberal and progressive Americans who tend to support the Democratic Party (again, to the extent that they vote). In a sense, in terms of population, there are “two Americas” which appear to see less and less eye to eye, on more and more issues, as time goes by. Disagreements about whether to support lockdowns and to wear masks during the pandemic illustrates this gulf in attitudes, convictions, and willingness to consider and support the welfare of others (or not). See also Brown (2005) and Voss (1994). Regarding the implicitly and more or less subtly limiting horizon of American ideology, see Dahms (2019b).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., McCarthy (2017), who uses the U.S. pensions system as a foil for an in-depth analysis; on a related topic, also Hardy and Hazelrigg (2007).

Radicalism as an ideology may amount to the stance that under specific conditions, in the face of particular circumstances, anything short of radical position is unjustifiable – maintaining the *radical* stance is taken to be morally, politically, or culturally imperative, and anything short of it will adulterate how we grasp a problem, choose to advocate an approach to tackling a problem, or conceive of a reference frame necessary for solving a problem. By contrast, maintaining an *extreme* viewpoint or starting point for practical actions, by definition, is “out of bounds” and exaggerated, not merely by those who disagree or who certain actions may be directed at, but also those who perpetrate an action – the excessiveness of the action is the means of choice to attain the goal, e.g., to disseminate “a message.” Put differently, a *radical* approach implies the possibility of a categorical distinction between, on the one hand, how a situation is being assessed, e.g., through a theoretical, analytical, research-related (as in basic research), or ideological lens for the purpose of *diagnosis*, and on the other hand, an array of possible *conclusions* that can be drawn with regard to what to do practically, in light of the diagnosis, e.g., whether to accept or ignore it, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, such a distinction does not apply with regard to an *extremist* position: there is neither an interest in the accuracy or legitimacy of a diagnosis or the evidence it might have produced, especially from the vantage point of others (for instance, the extremists’ targets), but also with regard to the extremist precepts, on the basis of which a course of action could be scrutinized; extremists exist in a universe of self-fulfilling prophesies in which nothing is being tolerated that does not confirm or reinforce the extremist position and objectives, and there is no real need for a diagnosis, except within the narrow confines of means in relation to ends: which action to choose to attain a desirable goal that was set in the past, and which must not be examined or questioned in terms of previously unavailable data. In this regard, too, especially etymologically, there is a major difference between radicals and extremists: a radical must engage in a measure of reflexivity, since going to the root of a matter demands a distinction between surface appearances and underlying causes, whereas an extremist must not permit the possibility of crucial distinctions beyond the assignment of good and evil, which is taken to be obvious and clear-cut, and which all actions must reaffirm.

To return to Adorno’s lecture on right-wing radicalism/extremism: recalling the earlier point regarding the need to recognize that differences between populism, radicalism, and extremism tend to be influenced not least by changing terminological conventions in specific societies during particular time periods, and acknowledging the fact that Adorno’s analysis of right-wing radicalism/extremism was formulated in (West) Germany and resonated strongly in unified Germany more than half a century later, it may not be entirely surprising that – possibly expressing a more or less similar combination of sensibilities and mentality – the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) – the German domestic

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<sup>8</sup> Claus Offe’s comparison of similarities and differences between attacks on the welfare state from the Left and from the Right during the early 1980s found that the “analyses” (really, their *diagnoses*) presented by “the liberal-conservative and the socialist critics,” of the problematic character of the welfare state as it started to become evident during the 1970s, “exhibit[ed] somewhat surprising parallels” ([1981] 1984, p. 157). By contrast, their conflicting conclusions about how to remedy those problems pointed in very different directions.



security agency – currently provides this official distinction between right-wing radicalism and right-wing extremism:

Efforts that are being directed against the core of our constitution – the free democratic basic order – are being referred to as *extremist*. There is often a lack of clarity about the concept of extremism. Unjustifiably, it often is being equated with *radicalism*. Thus, critics of capitalism, for example, who express fundamental doubts about the structure of our economic and social order, and who want to change it from its foundation, are not yet extremists. In our pluralistic social order, radical political views have their legitimate place. Those who want to realize their radical objectives do not have to fear being observed by the Protection of the Constitution; at least not as long they recognize the basic principles of our constitutional order. (quoted in Nandlinger 2008; my translation; emphases added)

Since in this distinction, what Adorno referred to in the 1960s as “right-wing radicalism” is equivalent with the current usage of “right-wing extremism,” we do not have to concern ourselves with the distinction between radicalism and extremism with regard to his lecture, but it is still useful to keep in mind that there are bound to be important differences between radicalism and extremism, and that these differences are likely to have a bearing on a more rigorous distinction between right-wing populism and left-wing populism.

#### *Adorno and Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism in Context*

The purpose of the lecture Adorno gave on April 6, 1967, at the University of Vienna in Austria, entitled “Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism” (Adorno [1967] 2020) was to present<sup>9</sup> “informal observations” (p. 1; literally, “loose remarks”) intended to complement existing theories of right-wing extremism. He was motivated to do so in light of recent electoral successes of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), which had been founded in 1964 and was the only neo-Nazi party in West Germany. Just over two decades after the end of World War II, the NPD, which styled itself after the main established parties in West Germany during

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<sup>9</sup> The 1967 lecture whose recent publication provided the occasion for this article had been recorded in Vienna and has been available online (Adorno 1967). It appeared in print for the first time in summer 2019 in German, initially on its own as a small paperback with an afterword by the historian Volker Weiss, as *Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalismus* (Adorno [1967] 2019), and later that year in a volume of Adorno lectures, *Vorträge 1949-1968*, and edited with great care by Michael Schwarz (Adorno 2019), as part of Adorno’s *Nachgelassene Schriften* (posthumous writings) which comprise many volumes, including, e.g., his correspondence, and seminar notes and transcripts. Both *Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalismus* and *Vorträge 1949-1968* were published by Suhrkamp, which also published Adorno’s *Collected Writings* in twenty volumes, and a long list of associated volumes, conference proceedings, and secondary literature; the English translation by Wieland Hoban appeared in the U.K. in April of 2020, and in the U.S. in June, under the imprint of Polity. While the German edition of the lecture on its own plus Weiss’s afterword includes one single footnote referring to a lecture Adorno gave the night before on social conflict, also in Vienna on the same occasion (though without the related references: see Adorno 1967b for the lecture, and Adorno [1968] 1972 for the essay), the translated version of *Aspekte* has three additional clarifying endnotes, but the same text included in *Vorträge 1949-1968* comes with two informative paragraphs and forty-four endnotes by the editor, most of which are exceedingly detailed and helpful (pp. 730-742). I consistently will refer to the translation of the lecture in italics, since both the original print publication in German, as well as only version available in English, appeared as stand-alone publications.

the postwar era (especially CDU/CSU – the Christian Democratic Union in most of West Germany, and Christian Social Union in Bavaria; SPD – the Social Democratic Party; and FDP – the Free Democratic Party), successfully garnered enough votes to be represented in several West German state parliaments, but was not able to reach the required 5% minimum of votes cast to be represented in the federal parliament. In *Aspects*, Adorno expanded on themes he previously and explicitly had addressed, and related insights he had presented eight years earlier before the Coordinating Council for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Wiesbaden, in his well-known 1959 public lecture, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” ([1959] 2005), at a time when there was no right-wing party in West Germany.<sup>10</sup> Adorno later referred to it as “an attempt to deal with the threat [of right-wing extremism] not through fruitless indignation and cosmetic measures, but rather by comprehending it in its deeper dimensions” (Adorno [1962] 2005, p. 308).<sup>11</sup> He returned to these themes precisely because during the mid-1960s, the newly founded right-wing NPD achieved a series of electoral successes.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The 1959 lecture appeared in print shortly after Adorno had delivered it (Adorno 1959) and then in 1963, in a collection of his essays (Adorno 1963). A recording was aired as part of the educational programming of Hesse state radio (where both Wiesbaden and Frankfurt are located, the former being the state capital) in early 1960, which is available as the first of a set of CDs with Adorno lectures and an interview (Adorno [1960] 1999/2006). The first translation into English appeared under a different title in 1986 (Adorno [1959] 1986), but the above-mentioned version I will rely on here appeared in 2005.

<sup>11</sup> After Nazi Germany’s capitulation in May 1945, the victorious Allies formed four occupation zones. West Germany resulted from a merger between the western sectors controlled by France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, while East Germany was identical with the Soviet Zone; both lasted from 1949-1990, when they were unified under the umbrella of the legal and political system of West Germany. The distinction between East, West, and unified Germany is important for many reasons, including for the purpose of this article. For instance, while the western Allies demanded that their zones adopt western-style democratic political systems within the Federal Republic of Germany, and also made more or less formal and determined efforts to establish a commitment to democratic citizenship and the rule of law, the German Democratic Republic was modeled on Soviet communism. While the western Allies also tried to instill – within limits – a sense of responsibility and an admission of culpability among leaders and the citizenry for the Nazi period that translated – among other things – into reparation payments to other countries, the Soviets allowed, indeed encouraged East Germans to view West Germans as fascists who bore all the responsibility for Nazi crimes and for unleashing World War II. In West Germany, by the 1970s, resistance to facing up to Germany’s responsibility for some of *the* worst atrocities ever committed and for millions of deaths started to weaken, in no small part as a consequence of a major change in government 1969 that brought with it far-reaching educational reforms. We will return to some of these issues below. For a trend in the military that many suspected and which recently has come to light and confirmed, and which also highlights a *measure* of difference between the former East and West Germany, see Bennhold (2020).

<sup>12</sup> The English edition includes the clarifying endnote (carried over from the endnotes included in Adorno 2019) to the effect that the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) was a “collective movement that initially united a spectrum extending from national conservatives to right-wing extremists and, as a party, became the leading German neo-Nazi organization. In the new millennium it became largely insignificant” (Adorno [1967] 2020, p. 66). Inevitably, as usually is the case, the situation is more complicated. Suffice it to say here that the party originated in *West* Germany during the 1960s, when Germany was still divided, and played no role in “actually existing socialist” East Germany – as the officials in the German Democratic Republic referred to their system – since it would have been illegal. The success of the NPD played an important role in Adorno’s *Aspects*, and it will be necessary to address this below merely in cursory fashion, since – as is typical for parliamentary democracy – the political party landscape in West Germany was (and in unified Germany is) far too complicated to detail on this occasion, and does not compare to the American two-party system. For a useful and early examination of the NPD’s ideology, see Schreiber and Chen (1971).

What was *new* about this form of right-wing extremism was that the NPD propagated and promoted ideas and approaches to social, political, cultural and economic challenges that were not identical with, but in many ways inspired by the National Socialists, and more than thirty years *after* the latter had begun to implement similar ideas and motifs, and more than twenty years after the detrimental and destructive consequences resulting from their efforts had become blatantly apparent – during World War II, the Holocaust, with Nazi Germany’s unconditional capitulation in 1945, and in the years that followed. In addition, even though most West Germans remained in a state of mostly defensive denial about the Nazi era and – depending on their age – their involvement during the time period, the incongruity between the NPD’s approach to “solving problems” and the nature and condition of the real societal circumstances that prevailed during the 1960s in politics, culture, and society, was apparent to most voters. On the other hand, there is a perverse sort of congruity inasmuch as especially *formally* democratic systems for the most part were then and are now not truly suitable to meeting political, social, economic, and cultural challenges either, and their success largely has been resting on their ability to *manage* those challenges in ways that relieve the bulk of citizens from having to acknowledge and worry about corresponding paradoxes, contradictions, threats, and the permanent presence of crisis, while delaying efforts to address the causes of those challenges into a distant, and from our vantage point, ever more uncertain and precarious future (see Wolin 2008).

A productive reading of Adorno’s 1967 lecture in the present context, as democracy is being weakened, undercut, and under attack around the world once again, requires situating it in broad strokes in the socio-historical and political context to which it was a response and into which it was an intervention. In addition, the lecture resonates with many aspects of Adorno’s critical-theoretical work, as the latter evolved from the 1930s to the late 1960s. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that *critical theory* was not conceived in Germany, but in 1937 in New York, by Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, after they had spent three years in the United States (Horkheimer [1937] 1986, Marcuse [1937] 2009). After Hitler came to power and the Nazis had taken over the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in 1933, Horkheimer – who as director had made preparations to pull up shop, if necessary – arranged for the Institute to leave Frankfurt and move – first to Geneva, then to Paris – to settle in a building on the campus of Columbia University in New York in 1934. In important regards, the conceptualization of critical theory reflected their early experiences of living and working in the United States, especially with regard to the (in)ability of mainstream approaches in the sciences, the social sciences, and philosophy, to reflect on and respond to the exceedingly disturbing world-historical situation, as fascism was spreading and becoming increasingly influential internationally, and while the only concrete attempt to rein in the spread of capitalism had begun to deteriorate into Stalinism.<sup>13</sup> Adorno, who was not a member of the Institute at the time, had remained in Europe, staying in regular contact with Horkheimer from Oxford, England, where he lived and worked between 1934 and 1938, and joined the Institute for Social Research in New York a few months after Horkheimer’s and Marcuse’s respective essays introducing and advocating critical theory had appeared in print.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding some shared elements of the New Deal, Italian fascism, and National Socialism, see Schivelbusch (2007).

<sup>14</sup> Regarding Adorno’s time in Oxford, see Müller-Doohm ([2003] 2004), pp. 187-241.

As it turned out, in retrospect, without Adorno's determined commitment to promoting and developing further this tradition of thought, and willingness to embrace his American experience (and somewhat ambivalent experience of life in America<sup>15</sup>), critical theory in all likelihood would not have become as recognized and prominent after World War II, initially in West Germany, decades later in the U.S., and then in (unified) Germany after 1990. Indeed, Adorno's years in the United States consistently and distinctively exerted a clearly discernible influence in his writings, at a much higher pitch than in the works of Horkheimer (who returned to West Germany at approximately the same time as Adorno) or possibly even Marcuse (who decided not to return to Europe). Moreover, Adorno's active participation in empirical research activities, as well as his focused concern with social, cultural, and artistic conditions and trends, sensitized him to a much greater extent to differences between European and American life, and to social expectations and modes of communication and interaction characteristic in and of the latter. Finally, even a merely initial assessment of the relevance of Adorno's *Aspects* today demands that insights he spelled out and enumerated in his lecture be related to recent and current work and research which resonates with, confirms, or develops further his observations, thus illustrating the persistent relevance of his mode of theorizing and critiquing societies with democratic political systems in the twenty-first century.

Despite various ups and downs and regular shifts in the appreciation of Adorno's writings and overall contribution since Adorno's passing in 1969, he never entirely disappeared from what Habermas ([1962] 1989) has been referring to as the "public sphere," initially in West Germany, and since 1990, in unified Germany. In intellectual and artistic circles, Adorno and his work continue to occupy a prominent place in German culture and society. Although there was a noteworthy Adorno revival of sorts in 2003, on the occasion of the centennial of his birth, and amplified by the publication of three biographies, numerous conferences, and programming on television and radio, few would have expected the strong and almost enthusiastic reaction in the media to the release in print of his 1967 lecture in 2019, half a century after his unexpected death, which occurred just over a month before he would have turned sixty-six years old.<sup>16</sup> For several weeks, Adorno once again was everywhere, to the excitement of many, and the chagrin and annoyance of some.<sup>17</sup> The reason was as simple as it was obvious: the rise in preceding years of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a center-right conservative party that has been fraught with internal conflict between more moderate and more far-right groups, including a strong right-

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<sup>15</sup> Despite are many related misrepresentations and problematic assessments, Adorno's American experience, was much more positive than often is claimed; e.g., Jenemann (2007), Mariotti (2016); for a problematic misrepresentation, see Offe (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Adorno was born on September 11, 1903, and died on August 6, 1969. The German edition of *Aspects* appeared on July 14, 2019. The biographies were by Detlev Claussen ([2003] 2008), Stefan Müller-Doohm ([2003] 2004), and Lorenz Jäger ([2003] 2004). Of the three, Claussen's is very engaging, Müller-Doohm's impressively detailed and comprehensive, and Jäger's most problematic and least necessary, in that his stance regarding Adorno the person and his work is based on hostility or lack of comprehension, or both.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Dietschreit (2020), Dirsch (2020), Mersman (2019), Moldenhauer (2019), Reichwein (2019), Schuster (2019), Widmann (2019). For examples of radio or television programming, and responses in newspapers, see <https://www.3sat.de/kultur/kulturzeit/buch-adorno-aspekte-des-neuen-rechtsradikalismus-100.html>, <https://www.swr.de/swr2/doku-und-feature/swr2-essay-2019-12-09-100.html>.

wing populist wing, and which, like the NPD in the mid-1960s, initially won seats in several state parliaments, and then superseded the success of its precursor, the NPD, by entering the federal parliament in Berlin in 2017, with 12.6% of the votes.<sup>18</sup>

Many moderate, liberal and progressive Germans were stunned and consternated by the AfD's rise and success, which received an additional impetus and became more xenophobic and anti-immigrant when, during the 2015 refugees crisis caused mostly by the Syrian conflict in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, German Chancellor Angela Merkel committed to helping refugees especially from war-torn Syria and Libya's civil war, but also from other parts of Africa, to seek asylum in Germany, while close to one million arrived in Germany. Merkel's "Wir schaffen das!" (We can handle it!) initially received broad support across the German population, especially in the former West German states that became the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD) in 1949, but in the former East Germany (the late German Democratic Republic, or DDR, which institutionally and legally had been absorbed politically, legally, and economically into the BRD in 1990), resistance quickly took shape, especially in Dresden in the growth of PEGIDA (or Pegida) – Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident – a pan-European, anti-Islamic, and far-right political movement, whose demonstrations had begun in 2014. Although the relationship between the AfD and Pegida has been strained throughout, there has been synergistic (if tenuous, never formal) cooperation, and many personal associations, e.g., with AfD members participating in Pegida demonstrations (see Klikauer 2020; for analyses of right-wing populism in different European countries that were published in 2013, along with counter-strategies, see Melzer and Serafin 2013, especially Botsch, Kopke, and Virchow 2013).

Despite a wave of blog posts, newspaper and magazine articles, editorials, and scholarly publications, as well as debates in the mass media, which were dedicated to explaining the formation of Pegida and the success of the AfD, none of the analyses or related hypotheses presented stood out as providing a remotely satisfying explanation. In the meantime, prominent members and leaders of the AfD, including Alexander Gauland, a former member of the conservative party, the Christian Democrats, made increasingly outrageous claims, such as that the Nazi period was "bird shit" within the purportedly grand 1000-year German history, and several AfD members were charged with engaging in "Volksverhetzung" (incitement of the people, usually on the basis of objectively incorrect, misleading, or knowingly false claims relating to National Socialism and with manipulative political intent, such as Holocaust denial), a punishable offense, and similar charges. To many citizens and observers, it occurred that the up until then unexpectedly successful model of postwar (West) German democracy and political stability might be in peril, as in successive state elections and the most recent federal election, the rabidly anti-constructive right-wing AfD clearly exceeded the phenomenon of a "protest vote" and was able to establish a substantial measure of reliable popular support.

Yet, just as Adorno and his work remained an integral component especially of the (West) German intellectual and cultural public sphere, so, too, at least tacit support for right-wing positions and politics never entirely disappeared from (West) German politics. Aside from the NPD, the Republikaner Party (a national conservative party opposed to immigration founded in

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<sup>18</sup> The AfD was founded in 2013, in response to the European debt crisis – the Euro zone crisis that began in 2009. See Costa Cabral, Gonçalves, and Rodrigues (2017) regarding the Euro crisis.

1983, and modeled on the Republican Party in the U.S.) was a noteworthy instance, even though its half-life was rather short, and its appeal geographically limited. The famous “Historians’ Dispute” (see Knowlton and Cates 1993) of the mid-1980s highlighted another undeniable blemish on the commitment in West Germany to democracy and unwillingness to learn from the past, at the highest level of government, triggered by Habermas in an article in one of the main West German weeklies, *DIE ZEIT*, in which he drew attention to the prominence of revisionist historians among conservative chancellor Helmut Kohl’s closest advisors (who, after the SPD-FPD coalition had ended in 1982, as party leader of the CDU headed a coalition government that included the CSU – the CDU’s Bavarian version equivalent – as well as the FDP).

One also must keep in mind that whenever the Christian Democrats – the conservative “catch-all party” – worked with the Social Democrats at the federal level in Germany, as from 1966 until 1969 in a “Grand Coalition,” as well as between 2005 and 2009, and since 2013, support for right-wing populist groups tended to strengthen, since during these “legislative periods” of cooperation with the SPD, the CDU/CSU no longer provided a “home” for the most conservative and right-wing groups in West Germany, and later in Germany. It is noteworthy that in the former East German “actually existing socialist” states, the AfD has been more popular than in the West, and more extreme. With the rise of the AfD, which coincided with developments elsewhere – such as the Brexit movement and referendum of 2016, the 2016 Presidential election campaign and its outcome in the U.S., Duterte in the Philippines, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and moves toward “illiberal democracy” within the borders of the EU, as in Hungary and Poland – groups and citizens in German that have been committed to democracy were increasingly flustered by several elements of the AfD’s success, which seemed to adhere to and reflect a more or less mystifying logic, such as employing democratic tools and procedures to advocate against or subvert democracy.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, the publication of Adorno’s *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, combined with historian Volker Weiss’s helpful “Afterword” (2020), struck a chord and was appreciated as an effective way to begin to situate right-wing trends and movements in societies with democratic political systems, in general, and the rise and electoral successes of the AfD, in particular, in a larger historical and international context fraught with similar developments. It had been apparent for some time that the accelerating pace of social change, related uncertainties, and concurrent real or perceived threats of many different kinds scared and made a growing number of individuals susceptible to simpler answers than the complexities of a globalizing world allowed. The latter for some time has been translating into a peculiar kind of resentment and anger directed at purportedly singularly (and singularly powerful) responsible parties (including especially established political parties), groups with specific characteristics (such as immigrants), or decision-makers purported to pursue surreptitious and malevolent agendas. During the Coronavirus pandemic, for instance, right-wing groups in Germany and elsewhere

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<sup>19</sup> For a set of sociological analyses of Brexit, many provided by social and political theorists such as Gurminder Bhambra, Craig Calhoun, Colin Crouch, Gerard Delanty, John Holmwood, and Simon Susen, see Outhwaite (2017), including Dahms (2017a); also Diamond (2020).

have been suggesting that efforts are afoot to create a totalitarian world government, among many other similar claims being made in many countries.<sup>20</sup>

Still, how were Adorno's "informal observations," formulated in 1967, perceived to be so noteworthy in 2019, especially since they were entirely in keeping with his diverse interests, many of his publications, and the research agendas pursued at the Institute for Social Research, by himself and several of his colleagues, such as Max Horkheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, before and after his arrival in New York in 1938 and formal employment at the Institute, and after his return to Germany in 1949?<sup>21</sup> As Adorno kept pointing in out his lecture, conspicuous affinities exist between his observations in *Aspects* and insights gained from his involvement in *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, Sanford. [1950] 2019)), the famous (and somewhat notorious) study whose research had been conducted during the 1940s, and whose results were published in 1950, with Adorno having written the introduction and several other parts.<sup>22</sup> One of the main conclusions presented in *The Authoritarian Personality* was that in liberal democracies, a substantial segment of the population is not necessarily in support of liberal democracy or its values, and frequently are opposed to them, without necessarily revealing – or being willing to reveal – this fact.<sup>23</sup> From the vantage point of liberal democracy and positions that are consonant with it, this notion evidently is highly disturbing – after all, what reasonable person would not be in support of at least some of the personal and collective advantages and benefits liberal democracies have to offer over all other historically known and empirically existing forms of government in societies comprising millions of members? The evidence that is emerging in recent years, and for which ample indications were available throughout the history of democracy, suggests that the share of those with ambivalent or negative attitudes toward democracy, especially if it does not serve above all their own very tangible interests, is much greater than was assumed.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, to liberal democracy and its proponents, the notion that many citizens of modern societies with democratic political systems would oppose it, is largely anathema – despite the fact that most institutions and regulated processes in modern societies with democratic political systems were designed and built specifically to make it difficult for those eager to take advantage of others, to harm others, to denigrate others, to do so, and that to the extent to which (and in the ways in which) these and other practices have turned out to be discernible and observable and irrepressible, that they occur within the limits of law, whose enforcement in various ways is fraught with the perpetuation of injustices, and especially social injustices, that modern social structures – as specific forms of social organization – inherently are contingent on. In addition, this qualifier is necessary since the *economic* system modern societies with democratic political systems are based upon, at the same time legitimates, relies upon, and encourages activities that

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<sup>20</sup> For a related article, see D'Urso (2020).

<sup>21</sup> See Wiggershaus ([1986] 2007), pp. 149-260.

<sup>22</sup> I will not even begin to delve into the expansive literature that emerged in response to this work, but would like to mention a short piece that was published almost a decade ago, before concern with right-wing populism and extremism became a widely discussed theme: Stoner and Lybeck (2011).

<sup>23</sup> See my essay on Brexit (Dahms 2017a).

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Jouet (2017).

are designed to facilitate and perfect techniques for taking advantage of others, harming others, and denigrating others, even if in subtle ways, *within clearly defined boundaries which are beneficial to the stability and functioning of modern societies as specific social orders and distinctive forms of social, political, and economic structure.*

*Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism (1967)*

Adorno set the stage by referring to the above-mentioned, earlier public lecture and subsequent publication, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” (Adorno [1959] 2005). The lecture and essay are well-known for Adorno having highlighted the need to confront German history in light and because of the unspeakable atrocities committed during the Nazi era, in the name of Germany, and by many of its members at all levels of social and bureaucratic organization, from the very top – the national government – to the very bottom – in everyday life and interpersonal relations. Ignoring the darker features and episodes of any society’s past and present inevitably comes at a price, in the form of myriad consequences that manifest themselves in the very fabric of social, political, cultural and economic life, in many ways. Specifically, Adorno addressed paradoxes in West German politics, culture, and education, and difficulties and impediments to live up to claims which would suggest that West German society was committed to taking on the challenge of working through the past in constructive fashion, to ensure that nothing of the sort would ever happen again, and to strengthen forces and dimensions in society determined to prevent related tendencies.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as he showed, for the most part, such claims cover up that most Germans, including especially many individuals in decision-making positions, developed uncanny skills to reject or dispel confrontation with and to avoid or subvert actualization of those claims. At the time in Germany – and this is true for societies in general, including modern societies to this day, and contrary to appearances – processes of socialization and priorities in education for the most part are coded in ways that are meant to turn children into “good,” obedient members of society who are eager to act and make decisions in ways which support and stabilize, are beneficial to, and reinforce the dominant features of a given society, such as with regard to social structure and economic inequalities.<sup>26</sup> Inevitably, children don’t have much of a sense – if any – of what their socialization and education means, where and how they originated, which patterns define and orient them, and what tasks and myriad functions they are supposed and expected to fulfill, with what kinds of implications and consequences, as far as institutions and different segments of a given population are concerned. After all, individuals are prone to reliving not only their own past, but the past of their forebears also. This

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<sup>25</sup> Note that unless I explicitly am referring to East Germany or the German Democratic Republic, my observation will apply to West Germany (until 1990) or to unified Germany (since 1990). Whereas in West Germany, the earlier and initially rather disingenuous claims about working through the Nazi past – an effort that was demanded by Allies, especially the U.S. – took hold at a certain level of intensity, especially in the educational system and cultural institutions, as well as the mass media, in East German, such efforts were neither made, nor expected by the Soviet Union; see Dirks (2005), Leide (2007). Incidentally, Austria, where Adorno held his 1967 lecture (and which had joined Nazi Germany in 1938), a process of working through the past began, like in West Germany, during the 1970s, when the Social Democrat Bruno Kreisky was chancellor (see Neugebauer 2000). For a discussion of Germany and Austria in relation to effects that the Vichy Regime had on postwar French politics and culture, see Axer (2011).

<sup>26</sup> For an informative overview over this and related issues, see the handbook edited by Apple, Au, and Gandin (2009).



is an issue in all societies in which social structure and identity structure are sufficiently compatible, complementary, and congruent, to insure that existing social and especially economic inequalities are being maintained, along with the division between those who benefit from the existing social order and those who make it work and pay the price for its operations – socially, psychologically, emotionally, physically, and politically.<sup>27</sup>

Arguably, the dimension of Adorno's *Aspects* that may well be most relevant today, especially in the context of social theory, pertains to the ability and willingness – or lack thereof – of individuals, especially as members of certain groups characterized by distinctive modes of socialization and education, to respond to proliferating and different kinds of expectations, to seize upon the opportunities, and to bear the burdens that living in the early twenty-first century entails. Like a thread, the singular theme that resonates throughout the different dimensions of the new right-wing extremism Adorno addressed in his lecture is *fear*. Evidently, there has been an intrinsic link between the inclination to support or subscribe to right-wing extremism, along with a sense of increasingly being overwhelmed by the demands individuals have had to face, cope with, and confront in the post-World War II modern world, and especially under conditions of globalization, and concurrent threats to one's established identity, as it is tied to, and both a reflection and a function of, concrete socio-historical circumstances. The evidence would suggest that the proliferation and intensity of this inclination to be favorably inclined towards forms of right-wing extremism has been increasing in recent years. Put differently, how individuals are positioned and able – or not – to face the past, present, and future, appears to translate into and to be expressed in their political views and preferences, and the latter in reverse may also serve as indicators of the former. In his 1959 lecture, Adorno observed that “working through the past” – which during the postwar years in Germany had been put forth as a necessary means for maintaining a moral compass, mental and emotional health, and what Fromm ([1955] 1990) referred to as a “sane society,” in political and cultural life had deteriorated into

[a fashionable] slogan that has become highly suspect during the last years. In this usage “working through the past” does not mean seriously working upon the past, that is through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory. The attitude that everything should be forgotten and forgiven, which would be proper for those who suffered injustice, is practiced by those party supporters who committed the injustice. ...

One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive. (Adorno [1959] 2005, p. 89)

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<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, I have framed this issue in terms of “planetary sociology,” see Dahms (2018), esp. 166-167, and Dahms (forthcoming).

### Diagnosis

At the beginning of *Aspects*, Adorno picked up a theme he addressed in his 1959 lecture, “the thesis that the reason for right-wing extremism, or the potential for such a right-wing extremism, which was not yet truly visible at the time, is that the social conditions for fascism continue to exist,” and that “despite the collapse of fascism itself, the conditions for fascist movements are still socially, if not politically, present” (Adorno [1967] 2020, pp. 1-2). He explained these social conditions as causally related to economics and the fact that the process of capital becoming more and more concentrated continues unabated. Yet, it is precisely this “tendency toward concentration” that produces a very basic and common fear, or rather, a set of fears, since

[it] still creates the possibility of constantly downgrading strata of society that were clearly bourgeois in terms of their subjective class consciousness and want to cling to, and possibly reinforce, their privileges and social status. These groups still tend towards a hatred of socialism, or what they call socialism; that is, *they lay the blame for their own potential downgrading not on the apparatus that causes it, but on those who were critical towards the system in which they once had a status, at least in a traditional sense*. Whether they are still critical and have the same practices today is another matter. (p. 2; emphasis added)

Without the constant “threat of impoverishment” (p. 3), right-wing extremism would be much less attractive. Among its possible causes, the possibility of “technological unemployment continues to haunt society to such a degree that in the age of automation ... even the people who stand within the production process already feel potentially superfluous – I put this very starkly – they really feel potentially unemployed” (ibid.). Anticipating how many individuals have been experiencing globalization, Adorno referred to the fact that “in the age of the great power blocs” – at the time, the conflict between the superpowers U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. – the role of nations is bound to diminish, with clear implications for many individuals: “in both socio-psychological and real terms, there is a very widespread fear of being absorbed by these blocs and, in the process, being severely impaired in one’s material existence” (p. 4): to the extent that individual identity is wrapped up with or grounded in national identity, what towards the end of the century was described as the impending “end of the nation-state” indeed must have been frightening and have accounted for anti-globalization attitudes at least to a certain extent. Adorno compared efforts to firmly hold on to the nation at a time when the real circumstances of more and more countries, during the Cold War, became less and less conducive to independent national decision-making, to Catholic witch trials during the Counter-Reformation: both instances describe phenomena – the nation and Catholicism – that were in the process of becoming less influential (and never may have been as influential as nostalgic imagination would have had it). Just as the witch trials did not occur during the Middle Ages, when Catholicism was still hegemonic in Europe, but during the early modern period when Catholicism needed to defend and assert itself against nascent forms of Protestantism, so, too, the nation was being celebrated during the 1960s – a period of declining importance. “And this fluctuation, this ambivalence between an overwrought nationalism and the doubt about it, which has to be

covered up so that one can convince oneself and others, so to speak – this could already be observed [in 1959]” (p. 5).

Adorno then turned to a set of initial conclusions that all were linked to an imminent fear of the consequences of societal developments that was at the heart of the new right-wing extremism – a fear of loss of identity and an inability (or resentful unwillingness) to face the modern condition, with adherents of newer versions of fascism being distributed across the entire population, regardless of social class or strata positions, differences between rural and urban populations becoming more intense, and new fascism was not just being attractive to established Nazis or sympathizers, but also to younger people, especially those whose identities had formed under National Socialism and were threatened by Germany’s collapse and capitulation (pp. 6-8).

Referring to research relating to the “lunatic fringe” in the U.S., Adorno acknowledged that in all democracies, a certain percentage of the population is likely to resist or reject the expectations, standards, and values of democratic societies, and pointed out that this may be symptomatic at least in part of the fact that all existing democratic systems have remained incomplete and formal, in terms of socio-economic criteria and conditions (pp. 8-9). He rejected attempts to tie increases in right-wing extremism to business cycles, with economic downturns supposedly making such extremism more appealing; empirical evidence did not confirm such a link.

Moreover, while fears are a central factor in the new right-wing extremism, paradoxically, the anticipation of horror is a central feature also, and draws attention to a complex relationship between fear and a peculiar excitement at the prospect of social catastrophe: while being concerned about “what will become of it all” should there be a major crisis, individuals with such concerns also tend to yearn for catastrophe, and feed off of apocalyptic fantasies. The strength of an *unconscious* desire for disaster and catastrophe should not be underestimated, since it is not just psychologically motivated, but has an objective foundation:

Someone who is unable to see anything ahead of them and does not want the social foundation to change really has no alternative but, like Richard Wagner’s Wotan, to say, “Do you know what Wotan wants? The end.” This person, from the perspective of their own social situation, longs for demise – though not the demise of their own group, as far as possible, the demise of all. (pp. 10-11)<sup>28</sup>

Certain aspects of the *new* right-wing extremism were integral features of German society, such as a strong inclination towards efficient organizations, a favoring of unity, and rejection of loners,

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<sup>28</sup> A minor detail: both Volker Weiss in his “Afterword” (2020), p. 53, and Michael Schwarz in a related endnote in Adorno (2019), p. 732n633, reference Wotan’s purported question and answer, as Adorno purportedly quoted it. However, since in its original form, *Aspects* was a lecture, Adorno did not reference this quote, as he might have (but probably would not: his writings are filled with implicit and explicit references meant for those in the know, who are presumed to be familiar with what he was alluding to, and the specific context where it originated); still, in this instance, in the flow of free speech, Wotan’s question and answer – “Do you know what Wotan wants? The end.” – was not *one* quote, but *two separate quotes*: Adorno combined the question, which Wotan posed in *Siegfried* (the third opera in *The Ring of the Nibelung* cycle) to the earth goddess, Erda, with the answer, which Wotan gave in *Die Walküre*, the previous, second *Ring* opera, in his conversation with Brünnhilde, his favorite daughter: “Auf geb’ ich mein Werk; nur Eines will ich noch: das Ende, das Ende!” – “Ended is my work, but one thing waits me yet: the ending, the downfall!” (libretto by Frederick Jameson).

as well as “the idea that political compromise per se is already something degenerate” (p. 12), which was strong in certain segments of the bourgeoisie – the fear of betraying one’s self by working with opponents. Adorno further pointed out that neo-Nazis are prone to pretend or exaggerate purported achievements, which trigger a concern among those reluctant to join that they be left behind. Moreover, Germans “seem to live in perpetual fear for their national identity, a fear that clearly contributes to an overvaluation of national consciousness” (ibid.), e.g., in the face of the division of Germany into East and West.

Adorno emphasized that one must not underestimate these movements on account of their low intellectual level and lack of theory; rather, Right-wing movements are generally capable of extraordinary perfection in applying and relying on available means of communication, even though usually their actions and goals usually are not informed by a coherent and discernible theory, the level of intellectual sophistication is typically low, and the tension between ends and means is fraught by a peculiar blindness and abstruseness. Yet, this constellation of rational means (which are being used with consciousness and purpose) and irrational ends,

corresponds to the overall tendency of civilization, which leads to such a perfection of techniques and means while the overall social purpose falls by the wayside. The ingenuity of the propaganda used by these parties and movements is that it balances out the ... unquestionable difference between the real interests and the fraudulent aims they espouse. It is the very substance of the matter, just as it was with the Nazis. When the means increasingly become substitutes for aims, one can almost say that, *in these extreme right-wing movements, propaganda actually constitutes the substance of politics.*” (p. 13; emphasis added)

Given that political groupings have a capacity to survive systems and disasters (p. 14), “all the manipulation and coercion of these [right-wing] movements, the fact that they are somewhat akin to the ghost of a ghost” (p. 15), manifests as their potential to grow into delusional systems. Drawing on *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford [1950] 2019), Adorno referred to the “manipulative type” – individuals “who are simultaneously cold, without relationships, strictly technological in their mindset – but also insane in a certain sense [representing a] strange unity of a delusional system and technological perfection [that] seems to be on the rise and once again playing a decisive part in these movements” (p. 16).

Right-wing extremists and those who support them tend to respond well to the “cultural sector” being used

as the area in which they can rage most and will surely try and try even more to rage. There is a whole array of designated enemies. One of these is the imago of the communist. ... [Yet, today] there is no longer a communist party in Germany, and this has really given communism a sort of mythical character – that is, it has become completely abstract; and this peculiar abstractness means that anything that somehow does not fit is subsumed under this all-purpose term ‘communism’ and opposed as something communist. (pp. 18-19)

Intellectuals, “another *bête noire*, of course – as long as one cannot be openly anti-Semitic and as long as one cannot murder the Jews, because that has already happened – ... are especially hated. The phrase ‘left-wing intellectual’ is another one of these bugbears” (p. 21).<sup>29</sup>

Adorno went on to reiterate the absence of any kind of theory that the new right-wing extremism might be able to rely on; the peculiar role existentialism played in legitimating rampant anti-intellectualism (p. 22); the peculiar and paradoxical prominence of anti-Americanism (p. 26); and the warped ways in which anti-Semitism and ideology are being relied upon and deployed (p. 23), with a strangely inverted attitude toward democracy: “Openly anti-democratic aspects are removed. On the contrary: they constantly invoke true democracy and accuse the others of being anti-democratic” (p. 24): “In its content, of course, this [right-wing] ideology, in so far as it is an independent, fully developed ideology – *and I consider the ideological component entirely secondary to the political will to have one’s turn* – is one essentially based on Nazi ideology. ... [I]t is amazing how little in the way of new elements has been added to the old repertoire, how secondary and rehashed it is” (p. 25; emphasis added).

There is, however, a peculiar unity between a highly fragmented ideology and propaganda, whose basis is the appeal to the *authority-bound personality*, the genuine and true audience of right-wing movements and parties (p. 29), and in related fashion, a combined hatred and deep-seated fear of psychoanalysis as a means to reveal the workings of the unconscious. Right-wing extremists have no interest in grasping how they are driven by the unconscious, and any attempt to convey this possibility – or that they may be captives of their unconscious – instantaneously produces rage, which is symptomatic of a particular type of syndrome: right-wing propaganda specifically is not meant to, and does not bring unconscious tendencies out in the open, but pushes them further into the unconscious – to artificially keep them there. A pronounced fixation on the reliance of symbols is symptomatic of this syndrome, and “it is a substantial part of this syndrome that these authority-bound characters are inaccessible, that they will not let anything get through to them” (p. 38). This explains why “a relatively small number of recurring, standardized and completely objectified tricks that are very poor and thin in themselves yet, by being constantly repeated, gain a certain propagandist value for these movements” (p. 30). In sum, “right-wing extremism is not a psychological and ideological problem but a very real and political one. Yet the factually wrong, untrue nature of its own substance forces it to operate with ideological means, which in this case take the form of propagandist means” (p. 39).

### *Practical (and Pedagogical) Implications*

Having covered a vast array of topics – ideology, propaganda, power, anti-Semitism, anti-intellectualism, anti-Americanism, communism, the authoritarian personality, the unconscious, democracy, ghosts, and apocalypse – Adorno also provided a range of suggestions about how to respond actively and constructively to the new right-wing extremism in the 1960s. His suggestions add up to a call for critical self-reflexivity, to face the challenge in ways that are not fraught by fear but motivated by determined resistance to both the phenomenon of right-wing extremism, and the causes that sustain it. As he put it at the end of his lecture,

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<sup>29</sup> “Bugbears” is a somewhat odd word, especially in American usage; Adorno referred to *Schreckwort* – “scare word.”

Perhaps some of you will ask me, or would like to ask me, what I think about the future of right-wing extremism. I think this is the wrong question, for it is much too contemplative. This way of thinking, which views such things from the outset like natural disasters about which one makes predictions, like whirlwinds or meteorological disasters, this already shows a form of resignation whereby one essentially eliminates oneself as a political subject; it expresses a harmfully spectator-like relationship with reality. How these things will continue, and the responsibility for how they will continue, that ultimately lies in our hands. (p. 40)

Adorno strongly advised against operating “with ethical appeals, with appeals to humanity, for the word ‘humanity’ itself, and everything associated with it, sends the people in question into a rage; they see it as fear and weakness” and he identified as

one of the most crucial aspects of how to resist this movement – the only thing that really strikes me as effective is to warn the potential followers of right-wing extremism about its own consequences, to convey to them that this politics will inevitably lead its own followers to their doom too, and that this doom was part of it from the outset, just as Hitler started saying, at an early stage, ‘Then I’d rather put a bullet in my head’, and then repeated the claim at every opportunity. So if one is serious about opposing these things, one must refer to the central interests of those who are targeted by the propaganda. This applies especially to young people, whom one must warn about every kind of drill, about the restriction of their privacy and their lifestyle. (p. 17)

Rather than reconstructing Adorno’s suggestions for how to confront the phenomenon of the new right-wing extremism and related “tricks” and techniques, which are interspersed throughout his lecture, it may be most useful to compile them into a list of bullet-points, not least because they take the form of clear instructions. While this treatment may appear to be incompatible with Adorno’s dialectical way of thinking and theorizing, he evidently was intent on providing a sort of catalogue with practically oriented critical instructions for how to contest right-wing ideologies and movements, and a reminder about the varied forms that especially extremist tactics and strategies take. His suggestions were as follows:

- Study closely and resist a sophisticated “technique in the new manipulation of anti-Semitism,” i.e., allusion and innuendo, especially its cumulative effect.
- “[T]ry to find legal means by which a democratic state would be able to intervene” (pp. 23-24) whenever the manipulative anti-Semitism technique is being used.
- Develop an “art of opposing [the proclivity of right-wing extremists to put truth in the service of untruth that] lies substantially in picking out the abuse of truth for untruth and resisting it” (p. 26).
- Scrutinize attacks on the democratic political establishment and parties that are in support of democracy, which provide supporters of right-wing movements with “the feeling that now, with this movement that seeks precisely to abolish freedom, they are regaining their freedom, their freedom of decision and spontaneity” (which is linked to anti-Americanism in a strange manner) (p. 27).

- Analyze the “autonomy of the symbol in relation to what it represents,” since it is an “allergic point” (p. 34).
- Avoid “the tactic of keeping quiet about these things [which] has never paid off, and [the new right-wing] development has surely advanced much too far today for it to work” (p. 37).
- Appeal to individuals’ real interests, instead of moralizing, since research for *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, Sanford [1950] 2019) showed that

even prejudiced personalities, who were certainly authoritarian, repressive, politically and economically reactionary, when it came to their own transparent interests, transparent to themselves, reacted quite differently. So they were mortal enemies of the Roosevelt administration, for example, but with those institutions that were of direct benefit to them, such as tenant protection or cheaper medicines, that was where their anti-Rooseveltianism immediately stopped and they behaved relatively rationally. This split in people’s consciousness strikes me as one of the most promising points of departure to counter the developments I have discussed (p. 37).

- Focus on “the real subjects of a study that would need to be understood and changed ... the right-wing extremists, not those against whom they mobilize their hatred” (p. 38).
- Make “a socio-psychological problem out of these [authoritarian] personalities who behave in this way and not any other, by reflecting on them, and on the connections between their ideology and their psychological, their socio-psychological structures ... [in order to eliminate] a certain naivety in the social climate ... and a certain detoxification has taken place” (pp. 38-39).
- Clearly identify the various “tricks” right-wing extremists use (as identified by Adorno), “give them very drastic names, describe them precisely, describe their implications and thus attempt to immunize the masses against these tricks, as it were, for nobody wants to be the fool.” (p. 39).
- Show “that the entire thing is based on a gigantic psychological ... rip-off” (p. 39).
- “[A]side from the political struggle by purely political means ... confront [right-wing extremism] on its very own turf. ... [W]e must not fight lies with lies, we must not try to be just as clever as it is, but we must counteract it with the full force of reason, with the genuinely unideological truth” (pp. 39-40).

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Among the many different angles from which *Aspects* can be read today, two might be most striking. Regarding the first angle, Adorno drew attention to several key issues that have come to the fore with the rise of the Right and its growing appeal in recent years, and which social theorists and social scientists have worked to identify, after they had been neglected for decades. Moreover, there is a conspicuous congruency between his thought and his ability to look behind the veil of modern societies, including the formally democratic political systems without which

modern societies, such as they are, could not exist and function. In terms of the first angle, a series of works and observations have been published over the course of the last decade (e.g., relating to white privilege, apocalypticism, rejection of “socialism” in any form, and the unconscious) that confirm how needed the type of diagnostic scrutiny Adorno practiced remains today, and that we must strive to sustain a similar critical focus even when problematic issues do not force themselves upon us, and especially when progress and the various achievements of the modern age (e.g., civil rights, democracy, rule of law, and prosperity) do not appear to be under threat. After all, it is in the very nature of modern societies that these achievements *perpetually* are under threat, not just by certain groups and actors, but also and even more so by the logic according to which modern societies maintain order and “evolve” – the perverse *logic* – *indeed the socio-logic* – *of capital*, above all else.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of the second angle, the urgent pertinence of Adorno’s determined commitment to scrutinizing modern societies and uncovering conventional, ideological, uncritical, and simply false and unfounded views that persist in, are about, and to some extent make possible and reinforce societies of this type as warped and inherently contradictory realities, provided a model for studying a social universe in which facts and norms keep colliding, without any realistic expectation that they will be reconcilable in the foreseeable future, in the absence of major qualitative transformations. He was willing to reject the widespread notion, especially among liberals and progressives, that all the people who inhabit these societies are concerned and interested in the welfare of others, unless specific experiences or circumstances prevent them from developing such concern and the ability to relate to others as equals or productively, to engage in empathy; in point of fact, among many other things, *neoliberalism* constitutes an incentive structure not to develop such concern and abilities. Instead, he acknowledged the many social, political, and cultural costs and economic benefits that come with this notion, as it conflicts with reality (as ample evidence has been suggesting throughout history, including recent history) and has been translating into and supporting the operations of modern societies, with costs and benefits being distributed unequally across society. Predictably, the pertinence of Adorno’s commitment to unflinching critique continues to account for his writings and version of critical theory either being welcomed and appreciated, or regarded as a most annoying, unsettling, and brazen *impertinence*, not just in certain political quarters, such as the *alt-right* (e.g., Jay 2010/2011, Huyssen 2017, Wendling 2018, Forscher and Kteily 2019), but also among academics who pursue research and adhere to approaches in ways that are consonant with official and mainstream perspectives and representations of modern societies and do not require an explicit – and explicitly spelled out – commitment to critique.

#### Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism in America Today

When trying to assess the continuing relevance of Adorno’s *Aspects* in the present context, including in the United States, it evidently is important to avoid simple over-generalizations of his observations or superimposing his categories or reference frame directly. Over the course of his life, Adorno became an increasingly astute observer and was attuned to regular convulsions and adaptations modern societies had been going through, including in his personal experience,

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<sup>30</sup> See Dahms (2017b, 2020a, in preparation).



during his teenage years which coincided with First World War and the collapse of German Empire, followed by the Weimar Republic from 1919 until early 1933 as Germany's first and flawed experiment with democracy, then during the first year of the Nazi era, before his move to England in 1934 (while continuing to visit Germany each summer until 1937), then his years in the United States from 1938 until 1949, and finally in West Germany after his return to Frankfurt that year.<sup>31</sup> The long list of pointed conclusions he drew and the verdicts he was not reluctant to pass may have *seemed* to have been overstated at the time, but in retrospect, many of his statements appear to have applied rather literally and certainly do so today, as long as we keep in mind that they do not allow for simple, isolated and reductionist applications. As he put in "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" ([1959] 2005, p. 99), "I have exaggerated the somber side, following the maxim that only exaggeration per se can be the medium of truth." Rather, his verdicts and conclusions must be interpreted first within his agenda and the larger web of his positions, insights, and overall purpose, as they pertained to rescuing a modicum of humanity in a world increasingly incompatible with the notion of a good (or undamaged) life, especially after the combined catastrophes of National Socialism, Stalinism, Holocaust, and World War II (see Adorno [1951] 2005).

As is well known, Adorno regarded with suspicion the desire to return to normalcy, to forget, ignore, downplay or rationalize the horrors of his or any other era in history that was fraught with catastrophes caused by humans, as they draw attention to the latency of what social theorists and scientists in recent years have started to refer to as the "dark side of modern society" – as a betrayal of the intellectual's commitment to illuminating the social worlds we inhabit, distinctive as they are in space and time.<sup>32</sup> Critical social theorists, philosophers, and social researchers ought to maintain this commitment as par for the course, especially since proponents of mainstream approaches frequently obsess – implicitly, if not explicitly – over how to reconcile the purported sanctity (but common inanity) of everyday life, with its often silly distractions, contradictory and conflicting practices and values, and irresistible narrow-minded preoccupations, with the requirements of knowledge about (modern) societies becoming less and less sustainable along an expanding spectrum of indicators, if they ever were sustainable to begin with.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, there appears to be a correlation between societies becoming more and more difficult to maintain due to many different types of intensifying strain, on the one hand, and how, on the other hand, they continue to stay stable by perpetuating – not least through everyday life practices, patterns, and habits – types of inequality, exclusion, and exploitation which are incompatible with the "self-descriptions" modern societies promote of themselves, and the validity claims they insist they embody, in no small measure through the legal, political, and

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<sup>31</sup> There was a structural and proto-methodological comparativism at work in the research and perspectives of many members of the Institute for Social Research of the so-called Frankfurt School that also applies to Adorno; see Dahms (2017c).

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Mignolo (2011), Alexander (2013).

<sup>33</sup> For my delineation and critique of mainstream approaches, as they neglect to examine the gravity concrete socio-historical conditions exert on efforts to illuminate those conditions, see Dahms (2008).

educational systems.<sup>34</sup> In a growing number of instances, the determination to interpret in terms of everyday categories large-scale processes of transformation at the societal level that clearly both precede and are beyond the reach of human decision-making and influence – i.e., under most circumstances, human decision-making and influence are shaped by, but do not have the capacity to alter those processes transformations, except in very small ways – is producing disturbing and disorienting effects which many individuals have a hard time acknowledging and accepting.<sup>35</sup> How we face the past, present, and future, with what kind of consequences for ourselves and others, depends on how well prepared we are to accept and understand, without despairing, that modern societies emerged and in many regards function and maintain order as a result of (and through) anonymous processes that we have little or no control over, but which shape and even constitute us to a large extent – our identities and selves, individually and especially socially and collectively, including at the national level. Whether or not processes of socialization and especially educational institutions and priorities are conducive to turning unavoidable experiences of cognitive dissonance – which in modern societies are socially and economically necessary for how they are structured and function – into occasions for attaining greater (and ideally empowering) awareness and understanding of the vicissitudes of politics, culture, and economy in the context of global civilization, is bound to influence how individuals will cope with those experiences, and how many will turn violent, and to what extent.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> I am referring here to Luhmann's use of the concept, "self-description," and its potential centrality to social theory, as a complement to ideology critique (though Luhmann did not intend it as such); see, e.g., Albert (2016/2019):

[A]lthough Luhmann's theory is a theory that is also a theory about politics, it is not a political theory. Rather, for Luhmann political theory is a form of reflexive self-description of and within the political system. ...

While public opinion provides a basic reflective scheme for the self-observation of the political system that is highly flexible in accommodating contingency, the self-description of the political system relies on a range of basic semantic figures that have been "frozen" since the late 18th century. Luhmann's diagnosis in this respect does not deny variation and evolution, but emphasizes continuity in the three basic figures of representation, sovereignty, and democracy. All three figures provide related solutions to the problem of communicating about the system's unity within the system, which inevitably leads to paradoxical communication, as communication within the system about its unity in fact itself perpetuates the system (it is not an observation from the outside). Put differently, the system needs to deal with the paradox inherent in the scheme of parts/whole, that is the paradox inherent in a unity that is supposed to mark a difference (of the system and its environment).

These paradoxes cannot be resolved. ...

<sup>35</sup> Leebrick's (2015) study of the process of environmental gentrification in rural and small-town Appalachia (rather than in urban settings) employs early Frankfurt School critical theory (among other frames) to illuminate social change under conditions of global capitalism, and is highly instructive in this regard.

<sup>36</sup> Drawing on Adorno and Lipset, Erwin K. Scheuch and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (1967) developed a model "that is based on the assumption that the potential for radical right-wing movements exists in all industrialized societies and should be understood as a 'normal pathological' condition. In all fast-growing modernizing countries there are people who cannot cope with economic and cultural dislocation, and who react to the pressures of readjustment with rigidity and closed-mindedness. These reactions can be mobilized by right-wing movements or parties offering political philosophies that promise an elimination of pressures and a simpler, better society. These philosophies do not contain just any utopia but a romanticized version of the nation before the first large wave of modernization. The core of the

To some extent, this constellation between cognitive dissonance and willful unawareness presents a paradox par excellence: on the one hand, we have the option of grasping how the constitutional logic of modern societies is inversely related to individual human agency; on the other hand, grasping and accepting this logic is necessary for whatever measure of such agency may remain. Without the necessary kind of educational priorities, individuals will be more and more likely to be “caught like the deer in the headlight,” incapable to weigh the alternatives, and become increasingly disinterested, “simply” making a choice and then adhering to it for as long as possible, or they will become increasingly resentful.

Expanding on the analysis Adorno presented in *Aspects*, right-wing populists and extremists resent that modern society is based on a logic that severely limits individual human agency. Yet, they insist that the values, preferences and choices that motivate their actions (white supremacy, racism, sexism, etc.) are their own, while adhering to a program that closely mirrors the anonymous processes modern societies rest upon, and which frequently resemble or are modeled on premodern patterns of power and domination (and tied to persistent social inequalities, forms of discrimination, etc.). Right-wing extremists appear not to be interested in understanding any these linkages, and if they do, then only in order to reaffirm the premodern patterns, even though modern societies necessitate a form of purposeful resistance against how they are structured and function, in order for individuals to retain any amount of autonomy. This purposeful resistance is incongruous with the resentful stance of many right-wing extremists with regard to modern society, which they reject because its stability, and its ability to maintain enough legitimacy in the eyes of enough of its members, rests on and depends on the consistent promulgation of claims about its operations that point beyond the inequalities and forms of discrimination that are integral components of its fabric. What right-wing extremists reject about modern societies are precisely these aspirational claims, not the fact that they are not being actualized; they would prefer for those claims not to be made, and for inequalities and discrimination to remain, as long they would be among the beneficiaries. They also never would allow themselves to grasp any of these dynamics, since doing so would shake the illusion of their own individual autonomy and self-determination and shatter the values and presumptions their existence and worldview are based upon.

There are many angles from which the relevance of *Aspects* for the U.S. could be examined. Evidently, his perspective was profoundly influenced by his American experience, and constitutes a sort of hybrid of lessons learned under exceptional circumstances in several socio-historical and political contexts – four different political systems in Germany, and his years in the United States between 1938 and 1949. Several of the issues he identified and discussed have special weight in America, such as the emphasis in certain religious groups on apocalypse, and the cultural prominence of imaginaries related to Armageddon, which in other nations with predominantly Christian populations are much less pronounced. Fear in general is a much more common feature in the United States, partly because of attitudes about government, and partly

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problem consists of a specifically a-synchronous dealing with the past, especially a dissent about the evaluation of modernity in the respective societies” (Minkenberg and Schain 2003, pp. 156-7). Note that the notion of “normal pathology thesis” is not a consensus position in the related literature; for instance, Cas Mudde (2010) has been advocating a shift from *normal pathology* to *pathological normalcy*. See also Mudde (2007, 2019) and Taylor, Currie and Holbrook (2013).

because of a widespread distrust with regard to “others,” including many Americans, as expressed in the strong gun culture and extent of private gun ownership, and exacerbated by the celebration of violence in entertainment. However, my focus here will be on education as an antidote to fear, regardless of whether fear is a response to difficulties to cope with increasingly challenging, complex, and contradictory expectations and demands, especially in relation to work and the need make a living, in the absence of a social safety-net as it still exists, if in reduced fashion, in most other industrialized nations. In fact, the issues that often have been addressed in terms of *American exceptionalism* intersect in telling ways with the currency of Adorno’s warnings about the new right-wing extremism, with exceptionalism not being important as a basis for ideological combat, but as an analytical and comparative reference frame. To begin with, a major impediment to assessments of the condition and prospects of a particular society, it is not sufficient to try to illuminate the society from within, as it is largely impossible to distinguish between features that are specific to a particular society, and features that are shared by all societies of the same time. Thus, American society being a modern society does not translate necessarily into America being more similar than different when compared to other modern societies; the opposite may be the case, depending on the specific issue and aspect of social reality at hand. By implication, efforts to identify the defining features of a particular society necessarily must rely at least on one other society of the same type as a foil for comparison. In many ways, the discourse about American exceptionalism, if it is employed as a means to identify distinctiveness, rather than superiority (as usually is the case when the concept is being deployed for ideological purposes), can serve the purpose of recognizing how unusual American society as a modern society in fact is, without having to go through the arduous process of familiarizing oneself with at least one other society, which is not especially likely to succeed in any case, in the absence of extended lived experience within the other society.

Whether and how citizens of the future will have the opportunity to gain an adequate understanding of American exceptionalism, in the sense of American distinctiveness, will impact directly on the ability of most individuals to appreciate both the brighter aspects and the darker aspects of American society, and what effects the resulting field of tensions will have on their own life choices, with regard to an array of potential opportunities and impediments, e.g., whether they should expect to experience more or less systematic discrimination, and what status America will have in the global economy and the system of international relations, especially as it manifests itself in terms of the threat of war, and many related issues, including the form and content of democracy, and their ability to influence policy or are its passive and powerless targets. After all, we are currently once again living in a time period during which the tracks are being laid down for how and by whom the medium-term future will be shaped. Determining who will have the opportunity to participate in this process and be involved in related decisions is a highly contested issue today, with well-organized efforts afoot to make sure that some groups of citizens will be excluded from this process, at least as much as possible, and others trying to withstand the influence of vested interests, power or wealth (which have made their peace with the logic of capital and are willing to do its bidding, as long as they are being generously remunerated for their efforts).

Under such circumstances, the role of education could not possibly be overstated, and this is where Adorno’s *Aspects* implicitly (but undeniably) relate to his contributions to education.

Above all else, Adorno may have been an educator, and not only in his formal occupation, but also very much as a public speaker and personality, as indicated earlier. The thrust of his thought was directed at conceiving and then practicing the kind of education intended and designed to prevent the sort of developments of which right-wing extremism is one of the worst and most dangerous examples (see Cho 2009). At his time, these circumstances may not have been quite as conducive to noticing the intensity and speed of social change, the pressures and strain it has been imposing on individuals, and the degree to which many are utterly unprepared to meet resulting challenges. Short of stopping progress in modern societies, and thus terminating their very possibility, the onus this condition imposes on education is enormous, to enable young people to understand their circumstances, the pressures they face, and the future that looms – and where it matters most, it appears that education is failing this task. In many ways, this is especially pronounced in the United States, which has many of the world’s top universities, yet educational priorities are tailored in specific ways that are oriented towards skilling and training, responding to market needs, and protecting the existing social and economic structure, in a highly individualized fashion. Moreover, especially public education is highly ahistorical. Despite occasional fits and starts, history has remained an afterthought, and even more so, historical reflexivity. There has never been a sustained and determined effort to “work through the American past,” especially as far as the nation’s origins are concerned, the prominent role that violence has been playing has been internalized in many ways rather than properly assessed. Yet, a past ignored is a past prone to return to haunt us and to be repeated, at whatever price and costs. In his essay on “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” and referring to the reality imagined in *Brave New World*, Adorno ominously may have anticipated a terrifying future, which in many ways reads like our present:

“History is bunk,” an expression attributed to [Henry] Ford, relegates to the junkpile everything not in line with the most recent method of industrial production, including, ultimately, all continuity of life. Such reduction cripples [human beings]. Their inability to perceive or think anything unlike themselves, the inescapable self-sufficiency of their lives, the law of pure subjective functionalism—all result in pure desubjectivization. Purged of all myths, the scientifically manufactured subject-objects of the anti-*Weltgeist* are infantile. In line with mass culture, the half-involuntary, half-organized regressions of today finally turn into compulsory ordinances governing leisure time, the “proper standard of infantile decorum”, Hell’s laughter at the Christian dictum, “If you do not become as little children...” The blame rests with the substitution of means for all ends. The cult of the instrument, cut off from every objective aim ..., and the fetishistic love of gadgetry, both unmistakable lunatic traits ingrained in precisely those people who pride themselves on being practical and realistic, are elevated to the norm of life. (Adorno [1955] 1967, pp. 102-3)

The discrepancy between the forces that are shaping or determining socialization processes and those that influence educational priorities and practices continues to grow, and anxiety in the face of rampant uncertainty is proliferating at greater and greater speed (see Crombez 2018). Facing the future is contingent on the ability to face the past, and in the absence of the latter, the present is being ground up between the factual horrors that never were fully acknowledged and

examined, and the imagined horrors that are looming in the future. Adorno's characterization of the social causes of the new right-wing extremism not only apply still, they are getting more intense – *worse* – in many ways. Fear of the consequences of automation and technological development (see Ford 2015, Knowles 2017) is more real than ever, and more justified, as projections suggest that with increasing reliance on artificial intelligence, millions of jobs will be destroyed, without a sufficiently equivalent number of jobs being created or being necessary – to recall one of Adorno's observations in *Aspects* (p. 3), superfluous humans no longer will be needed to keep the economic machine humming. Combine this sense of impending obsolescence with the fear that the status and influence of the United States in the world is declining, that the formerly "greatest nation on the face of the Earth"<sup>37</sup> conspicuously is in danger of losing this purported quality, including in regards in which it once was undeniable, that those with white privilege feel under attack, and that maintaining a middle-class standard of living has been getting more difficult, and many other developments, not just in the agricultural sector, the feeling of vertigo is difficult to avoid.<sup>38</sup>

In many ways, such developments and related issues feed back into education not just as an ideal, but as a concrete practice and set of institutions mediated by policies, which in recent decades have been influenced and promoted neoliberalism. Yet, in the United States, like many other aspects of political, social, cultural and even economic life, education also suffers from far-reaching anti-intellectualism. Mugambi Jouet has traced the deterioration of what started as an epoch of enlightenment in America, which in many regards already had characterized colonial life and manifested itself fully in the Constitution, into widespread anti-intellectualism. In his recent book on *Exceptional America* (2017), with the benefit of an insider-outsider, Mugambi Jouet argued

that American exceptionalism is not only what divides Americans from the world – it is also what divides Americans from each other. Compared to other Westerners, Americans are far more polarized over fundamental questions regarding the purpose of government, socioeconomic equality, the literal veracity of the Bible, sexual morality, science, human rights, and foreign policy. As a result, America is torn apart by conflicts and injustices existing nowhere else or to nowhere near the same extent in the modern Western world. (p. 6-7)

Jouet explains this unique polarization as grounded in anti-intellectualism, Christian fundamentalism, culture wars of faith, sex, and gender, the tension between democracy and plutocracy, the fact that many Americans vote against their own economic interests or not at all, mass incarceration, executions, and gun violence, and America's position in – and many Americans' attitudes toward the rest of – the world. Tellingly, all these dimensions can be traced back to education fulfilling a peculiar set of roles that appear to aggravate features of American life that put it in an outsider's position among modern societies.

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<sup>37</sup> Jouet (2017) uses this phrase as a foil, to emphasize his analysis of the distinctiveness rather than the superiority of American society (pp. 19, 24, 26, 235).

<sup>38</sup> Jock Young (2007) has provided a rather effective and convincing analysis that is pertinent in this regard.

Intriguingly, America and other nations are moving apart and closer at the same time. While liberal America is mainly evolving in the same direction as the rest of the West, conservative America has become an outlier because of its unusual ideology. Liberal America's worldview is not simply vastly different from the worldview in conservative America but also closer to the dominant worldview elsewhere in the Western world: Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Tellingly, universal healthcare is broadly supported by both liberals and conservatives in all Western nations except America, where Republicans persistently denounce the evils of "socialized medicine." In other words, "conservatism" tends to have a deeply different meaning in America than other Western nations. (p. 6)

As far as anti-intellectualism is concerned, Jouet is not suggesting that it has "fully eradicated the spirit of American enlightenment" (p. 57), which would be an odd claim to make, "since diverse examples demonstrate how a vibrant intellectual life has coexisted in America alongside anti-intellectualism – a powerful reminder that it is a nation of fascinating contradictions" (ibid). Rather, "[a]nti-intellectual populism could foster American decline, as it impedes rational-decision making and problem-solving. It also contributes to polarization by titling conservative America to the far right, thereby hindering the possibility to compromise with liberal America" (p. 74). Recall Adorno's point about right-wing extremists in Germany regarding compromise as a sign of degenerateness, which throws a peculiar light on American conservatives, whose commitments to democracy would appear to be in doubt. "[T]he Republican Party is a mainstream party – a leading party in a two-party system – that as already heavily influenced by extremist leaders and a reactionary base adopting hardline positions on virtually every single issue" (pp. 78-9) well before the most recent Presidential election.

Because demagoguery has a noxious effect on the political debate, its prevalence in America has powerfully contributed to social polarization. A crop of extraordinarily anti-intellectual leaders, who would usually be relegated to the fringe in other Western democracies, are regularly able to attain top offices. Resorting to an astounding degree of disinformation, they exploit their supporters' ignorance, skepticism of education, and irrationality. (p. 79)

So, is the problem then there is not enough education, since like any other institutional context in American society with the exception of the military, a system of intricate stratification is in place that serves all, from the very rich to the poor, and which insures that the existing class structure will remain as stable as possible? As often is the case, the problem is much more qualitative than quantitative, and pertains to the pedagogical costs that come – among many other factors – with the need to sustain a widespread sense that America is "the greatest nation on the face of the Earth." This imperative, which defines the confines especially of primary and secondary education, and which reverberates in institutions of higher learning, as is further reinforced in other aspects of public life, especially the mass media, translates into invisible barriers on thought that pertain especially to the darker side of American society – the darker side of American history.

It is in this regard that education represents the other side of Adorno's critique of the new right-wing extremism. At the time when Adorno presented *Aspects*, most Germans resisted all efforts to face the past, and was focused on almost exclusively economic matters, looking forward to a prosperous future. Soon, the students would rebel and trigger developments that contributed to a major change in government, and a few years after the SPD-FDP administration came into power in 1969, the first major recession hit the world economy after World War II, threatening the "economic miracle" approach to the future. At the same time, however, educational reforms were being implemented that targeted the higher levels of the public school system, and required that two years of classes in the History specifically would be dedicated to learning about the history of National Socialism, German culpability in World Wars I and II, responsibility for the Holocaust. To my knowledge, this was the only instance to date that the political establishment in any society – supported by the educational system – encouraged several cohorts of high school students to apply and refine a critical perspective on their nation's history (see Neiman 2019, also Dahms 2019a, esp. pp. 224-27).

During the 1960s, among all his other projects and commitments, Adorno also dedicated time and energy to advocating a model for the kind of pedagogy that is necessary in all modern societies, if members of society are to attain a critically-reflexive level of understanding their society, as a precondition for developing a healthy sense of purpose and self, characterized by maturity. As Volker Heins wrote,

Adorno's interest in teaching was not external to his theoretical work; both were closely intertwined. Like other representational processes that have given rise to grand narratives of historical suffering, Critical Theory did not evolve in an institutional vacuum. Rather, the process unfolded within the institutional arena of the system of higher education, to which a core group of remigrated German intellectuals added the "Frankfurt School", as it was beginning to be called from the late 1950s onwards. It also unfolded within the wider civil society of West Germany and its communicative institutions. The choice of these arenas implied that meaning work was meant to be linked not only to social research, but also to the teaching of both students and the wider public. (Heins 2012, p. 71)

Heins, whose article appropriately is titled "Saying Things that Hurt," provides the following illustration for the effect and appeal Adorno has for his audiences:

Adorno filled large auditoriums and attracted a wide readership because he offered a narrative that integrated the horrendous events surrounding the disappearance of the Jews from Europe into the larger framework of a narrative. The construction of the Holocaust as a traumatizing universal symbol of senseless human suffering prompted audiences across Germany not only to identify with the victims of the concentration camps, but also with victims of the Vietnam War or the nuclear bomb – situations that, according to Adorno, had "certain catastrophic similarities" (Adorno 2006: 8; 2000b: 101, 106) with the Holocaust. Sometimes Adorno uses the Holocaust not only as a generic symbol to draw attention to the Vietnam War or other events, but also to dispel the illusion that anybody in the modern world lives on *terra firma*. The message is not simply:



identify yourselves with the victims of barbarism. It is also: you too are victims! Every one of you is an "object"; no one enjoys genuine "protection!". "The world is a system of horror!", etc. (Heins 2005: 37–8, 113)<sup>39</sup>

Adorno advocated a very specific and increasingly important kind of education, and on right-wing extremism being symptomatic of failed or tilted education. The fear of losing privileges in many ways is indicative of an inability to face facts, in general, and of fear rather than facts influencing one's actions and decisions. In particular, it is important to be able to face unpleasant facts, considering that resistance to facing such facts threatens one's sense of self and identity, a situation which in a rapidly changing world is fraught with uncertainty and unpredictability, and requires a mode of teaching and learning that is incongruous with society protecting itself as a petrified social structure. Most teachers are ill-equipped to take on this kind of educational challenge and may not even be in the position to conceive of it. Some of the difficulties that come with the effort to read Adorno have to do with the fact that the movement of thought must be followed and reconstructed, instead of focusing on isolated statements pulled out and looked at on their own. This is important methodologically: there are no clear-cut conclusions, but dialectical assessments that jive with the way reality works, which is not static, but highly dynamic. If readers and listeners are not willing to follow along and "submit" to the argument, on the assumption that they may learn something new, the result inevitably will be a caricature of what Adorno was working to convey.

In his best-known contribution to a critical theory of education, "Education for Maturity and Responsibility" (Adorno and Becker [1969] 1999), in a conversation with the pedagogue Hellmut Becker on radio in 1969, Adorno said,

The underlying cause is, of course, the contradiction in our society that the social arrangements under which we live remain heteronomous, which means that no individual in today's society can, on their own, determine the nature of their own existence; that as long as this remains the case, society will continue to mould people through a vast number of different structures and processes, in such a way that, living within this heteronomous framework, they swallow and accept everything, without its true nature even being available to their consciousnesses. This does, of course, extend into our institutions, into discussion of political education and other such questions. The real problem of maturity today is whether and how one can work against this – and who this 'one' is, is a major question in its own right too. (p. 30)

If anything, the tension between heteronomy and maturity has increased precipitously in the interim, amplifying further the need to conceive of strategies designed to strengthen individuals' autonomy and ability to engage in forms of agency that are consistent with the reasons for making the effort to attain agency, and with the objectives to be attained. The concept Adorno used, *Mündigkeit*, and for which the English language does not have an exact translation or corresponding word, prominently was a key reference point for Immanuel Kant's understanding of enlightenment:

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<sup>39</sup> Heins provides the following references for Adorno's formulation, "certain catastrophic similarities": Adorno ([2001] 2006, p. 8; [1998] 2000, pp. 101, 106).

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity [Unmündigkeit]. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! [Dare to be wise!] Have courage to use your own understanding! (Kant [1784] 2009, p. 1)*

Though Adorno was critical of Kant, the idea of maturity was central to both his thinking and the project of critical theory generally. Though the expectation should be that individuals would aspire to become and remain mature, like many other expectations, developments in recent years require perspectives on modern societies that are much more differentiated, or conducive to a much higher level of differentiation, with regard to whom and what such expectations in fact apply, and how. As heteronomy has been increasing during the last half century – especially since the onset of neoliberalism during the 1980s and the acceleration of globalization during the 1990s as an explicitly discernible and theorized process – enabling individuals to be mature nominally has remained a social, political, cultural and educational priority; but if promoted in earnestness through institutions and organizations, it would slow, disrupt, or redirect the trajectory of societal change that has taken hold in recent decades, since individuals as (more) self-aware and self-possessing actor would influence many different types of well-established and canonized decision-making processes.<sup>40</sup>

*Adorno as Critical Communicator and Teacher: Essays and Lectures as Forms of Resistance*

It is one of the many ironies of the current state of affairs around the world that education for the most part ignores this paradoxical tension between projecting individual autonomy as highly desirable, on the one hand, and acknowledging that the type of social organization that our lives are patterned on is incompatible with such autonomy, on the other hand. Without determined and explicitly constructive efforts to ensure that individuals are capable of engaging in individual autonomy and of seizing on opportunities that objectively (and not merely subjectively) exist in modern societies, ideas, notions, and practices supporting or being oriented

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<sup>40</sup> As Iain MacDonald (2011, p. 685) aptly wrote,

The paradox implicit here is indeed disturbing, namely, that an education in maturity requires an autonomy that reality both demands and causes to atrophy, like a bonsai tree, stunted and yet still somehow clinging to the potentiality proper to it. Does Adorno mean that we can never achieve substantial autonomy? Not at all. For autonomy is not a state of affairs or a condition that one actualizes once and for all in history; and heteronomy is not a sovereign power that arbitrarily struggles to suppress autonomy. Heteronomy is hardened autonomy, fearful of its fading reality; it is society wresting away from the individual the very power by which it came to be what it is: that of the individual experiencing and giving voice to contradictions. Autonomy, conversely, is the individual's contribution to spirit's becoming, which is to say: it is the indictment of the heteronomy whose historical stagnancy now (it is always 'now') calls for autonomy. Maturity, autonomy's generational coming of age, is in this regard simply the courage to experience the lived tension between autonomy and heteronomy without succumbing to either of the twin vanities of individual grandeur or resignation.

See also Susan Neiman (2008, 2014); with regard to heteronomy, see especially Postone (2009).

solely toward individual autonomy, without stressing corresponding and predictable difficulties to enact such autonomy, will cause increasing levels of frustration that easily can turn destructive.

Indeed, remaining cognizant of the field of tensions between everyday life and forms of structural violence above all requires a culture of remembering those who fell prey especially to horrors that were “man-made” with intentionality, as well as awareness of those who continue to fall prey to the seemingly normal and unavoidable workings of modern societies, within and across particular societies, both directly and indirectly, and the suffering they entail. Needless to say, the day-to-day operations and professional requirements that modern societies rest upon and have been imposing on individuals during the twentieth and especially the twenty-first century, thwart such remembering and awareness. As Adorno formulated in *Minima Moralia*,

For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity. All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity. It is the sufferings of [human beings] that should be shared: the smallest step towards their pleasures is one towards the hardening of their pain ([1951] 1978, p. 26).

In the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, as soon as lockdowns lasted for more than a few weeks, many individuals proclaimed that they had great difficulties coping without being able to meet those with whom they had had regular encounters, or without being able to make new encounters, and insisted on their constitutional rights; yet, it was difficult to avoid the impression that those very important social relationships many were claiming to be missing were an important part in the personal regimes of distraction many individuals maintain in order to be able to cope, and it was far more important to many to reestablish those regimes as quickly as possible, than to diminish the suffering of others, including especially the elderly and those whose immune systems were compromised for other health-related reasons.

Despite Adorno’s assertion that “[f]or the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity,” he was both a prolific writer and a prolific lecturer and teacher. In both regards, however, specific modes of communication were key to his efforts, not least because he was highly aware of the pitfalls of communication, both academically, and in everyday life. Also in *Minima Moralia*, he observed that “[t]he chance conversation in the train, when, to avoid dispute, one consents to a few statements that one knows ultimately to implicate murder, is already a betrayal; no thought is immune against communication, and to utter it in the wrong place and in wrong agreement is enough to undermine its truth” ([1951] 2005, p. 25). In an essay written between 1954 and 1958, Adorno explained and justified his preference for the *essay* as a literary form that is exceptionally conducive to a writing style and an approach to addressing pivotal social-theoretical, aesthetic, and philosophical issues, and aspects of the individual-society nexus, by enabling the writer to provide an analysis in which every point is, as it were, equidistant from the center of the issue(s) addressed and examined and, by implication, of the essay itself:<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This essay originally was included in the first volume of *Noten zur Literatur* (1958, pp. 9-49; published in English for the first time in 1984; again in a different translation in Adorno [1958] 1991, pp. 3-23), clearly as a kind of programmatic statement against prevailing views in Germany at the time, of the essay as “a hybrid ... [that lacks] a convincing tradition ... and [whose] strenuous requirements have only rarely been met” (Adorno [1958] 1984, p. 151).

The essay owes its freedom in its choice of objects, its sovereignty vis-à-vis all priorities of fact or theory to the circumstance that for it all objects are equally near the center to the principle that casts a spell over everything. The essay refuses to glorify concern for the primal as something more primal than concern for the mediated, because to the essay primacy itself is an object of reflection, something negative. It corresponds to a situation in which the primal, as a standpoint of the mind within a falsely socialized world, becomes a lie. (Adorno [1958] 1984, p. 167)

Indeed, it is not possible to state explicitly or to convey directly and unambiguously the importance and substance of an essay regarding its most important and valuable insights, observations, and claims, in a few sentences, in a manner that is consistent with its purpose. In fact, any attempt to bring the “heart” of an essay – a message, an observation, an “argument” – out in the open, to the point, and to present it seemingly ready-made to the reader, knocks the living spirit out of it and turn what ought to be an instance of active thought into dead matter entirely – a proposition, hypothesis, statement of fact, the specific context being immaterial, and prone to turning into dogma. Adorno’s affinity with dialectical thought can be explained through this lens and on the basis of this conviction, as can his reservations about – indeed, his opposition to – the simplicity of positivism, which he regarded as utterly incongruous with the nature of human and social reality in the modern age in general, and as an obstacle to the study of social, political, and cultural life, especially in the history of the twentieth century, if left to its own devices.<sup>42</sup>

[T]he essay is not intimidated by the depraved profundity which claims that truth and history are incompatible. If truth in fact has a temporal core, then the full historical content becomes an integral moment in truth; the *a posteriori* becomes concretely *a priori*... The relation to experience – and from it the essay takes as much substance as does traditional theory from its categories – is a relation to all of history; merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins with what is nearest to it, is itself mediated by the all-encompassing experience of historical humanity; the claim that socio-historical contents are nevertheless supposed to be only indirectly important compared with the immediate life of the individual is a simple self-delusion of an individualistic society and ideology. (Adorno [1958] 1984, p. 158)

Adorno’s stance regarding authoritarianism, and his remarks about the new right-wing extremism, must be appreciated in this reference frame, even though *Aspects*, as a public lecture, did not constitute an opportunity to adhere and exemplify the essay form. The movement of thought, however, which evidently is at work, shares with the essay an unwillingness to organize the material in a manner that would have adhered to standards of clear and easily accessible presentation. After all, what Adorno was trying to get across did not exactly lend itself to a straightforward list of facts: that *authoritarian and right-wing responses could not be less suitable as strategies for coping with and addressing the challenges of modern life and especially the abstract, anonymous, and uncontrollable processes that sustain it, except in terms of the narrow-minded and short-*

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<sup>42</sup> See Adorno’s introduction and contributions to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (Adorno et al., [1969] 1976), pp. 1-86 and 105-122.

*sighted acquisition of temporary political power designed to take advantage of those challenges for personal (or a group's or class's) gain or profit, and most importantly with regard to the burden of conceiving of solutions to persistent challenges that modern societies have been both generating and facing to date, and especially those they inescapably will have to confront in an increasingly uncertain future, given the growing array of looming crises.*

Adorno's critique of identity thinking as both the centerpiece and the focal point of his version of critical theory, and his rejection of mechanisms and ways of relating to the world that preclude appreciation of and respect for *non-identity*, are directed at how modern ways of relating to world and other(s) are synchronous with, reinforce, and indeed amplify and further intensify processes of alienation and reification.<sup>43</sup> Adorno's take on critical theory also is highly consonant, compatible, and complementary with – and expands on – the works of classical social theory. This affinity is particularly pronounced with regard to what Marx described as *capital accumulation* producing ever higher levels of *alienation*, what Durkheim saw as an inexorable process of greater and greater *division of labor* producing more and more intense forms of *anomie*, and what Weber framed as the ongoing *rationalization* of everything existing which – modeled on a Protestant ethic that is increasingly devoid of meaning – has been leading to the *disenchantment* of the world (see Dahms 2009, 2017b). If these processes – which include, but go beyond the ones theorized by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber – are being left unchecked and allowed to play out on their respective terms, the vanishing point of modern society is not the beginning of the “human millennium,” but the erosion or destruction of the social, potentially along with human civilization. Adorno's work was driven by a similar concern as the efforts of classical social theorists, his response being a more determined effort to promote a radical understanding of modernity in a manner that was oriented toward illuminating those operations and contradictions which members of society typically are ill-equipped (and not supposed to be able) to grasp, especially not in terms that “fit the bill,” partly because they are not being encouraged to make related efforts, and partly because they are actively being discouraged to do so, via a vast incentive structure designed and maintained to keep the underlying logic of modern societies from view.<sup>44</sup> To the extent to which individuals comply with or submit to such discouragement, their experiences are not truly theirs, but transpositions of the workings of modern societies as at least partially regressive social systems, into the practices and conduct of individual and social everyday life, and forms of social interaction and intersubjectivity.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, in Adorno's view, the advantages of the essay form in an era and under societal conditions that thwart the possibility of systematic knowledge about the intricacies, dynamics, and inherent tensions of those societal conditions, and in terms of how they are being perceived

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<sup>43</sup> Regarding Adorno and non-identity, see Wellmer ([1984] 2012); regarding the continuing relevance of alienation and reification, see Dahms (2011), chs. 3 and 5.

<sup>44</sup> The combined result of the evolutionary nature of modern society as a heteronomous process that occurs beyond the influence and control of humans, and of certain groups making sure (to the extent that they can) that this underlying logic remains hidden, in order for those same groups being able to continue to benefit from them, may well be that fewer and fewer problems – such as *social* problems – are being perceived as solvable, or resolvable, so much so that more and more people are inclined to accept them and move on. See Dahms (2011), ch. 4.

<sup>45</sup> With regards to practices typically associated with “love,” see Dahms (2020a, 2020b).

by individuals as members of different groups, correlate with the pace and nature of social change in the modern age. The evolutionary vanishing point of modern societies from the outset was unclear, independent of or next to human will and desires, and outside the confines of most developmental narratives, ideologies, theological or theoretical traditions, but is especially so today.<sup>46</sup> How, then, to communicate this effectively even to interested audiences, in a manner that does not pervert the insights that are meant to come across? How to be an effective teacher at a time when it is exceedingly difficult to convey alternatives to an increasingly warped world in which, for example, humankind maintains itself by continuously reducing the global population of vertebrate animals, e.g., by 52 per cent between 1970 and 2010 (WWF 2014)?

As the advantages of the essay form pertain to the core of what is to be conveyed, the fact that this core cannot be expressed or stated outright, and any effort at doing so in fact would destroy its content and turn it more or less into its opposite, was the nature of knowledge about human existence and social conditions at least since the second half of the twentieth century. This constellation applies to an even greater extent in the twenty-first century, in the age of social media, despite the expectation that is so pervasive today: that all that matters ought to be conducive to explicit, unmediated expression. Yet, this expectation is merely a conceit, and less and less appropriate, making it more and more difficult for more and more individuals (whose total number meanwhile also has been increasing), to face the past, present, and future in ways that are conducive genuine rather than simulated agency.

Whereas the essay was Adorno's preferred form of writing, he had reservations about the spoken word being turned into text. As Michael Schwarz, the editor of Adorno's *Vorträge 1948-1949* (2019), wrote in a 2011 article about the neglect in research to date of Adorno as a public speaker and lecturer, the latter "felt an unease about recording the ephemeral, about objectifying the improvised and storing it. He had almost all recordings of his lectures erased. Regarding speech, which is used up in the moment, he did not have the will to preserve it. His unwillingness to let something be printed that did not meet his sensitive textual standards was strong" (Schwarz 2011, p. 289; my translation). Fortunately, in recent years, many of his lectures have become available, as well as a growing number of recordings of lectures, speeches, and interviews.<sup>47</sup> Still, as Schwarz described in detail, many of Adorno's publications initially were speeches or lectures, which enabled him to "test" his arguments, analyses, and critiques in front of audiences, and which he continued to refine later on. Adorno doubtlessly was able to appreciate the advantages of directly addressing and interacting with his listeners, and in turn reading his listeners and their reactions to what and how he presented his analyses and insights. He engaged both in free speech and presented fully formulated texts that he read to the audience, depending on his objective or what the organizers needed or asked for. He was a frequent speaker, employing many different formats, often taking the initiative in suggesting contributions or themes he was interested in addressing. During the 1950s and 1960s, Adorno contributed almost 300 times to radio programming on public radio – a format he had become acquainted with before the Nazis came to power in Germany, making seven appearances in 1931 alone – plus more than 300 appearances

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<sup>46</sup> See Lyotard ([1979] 1984; see also Dahms (1992).

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Adorno ([1993] 2000, [2001] 2006; [2003] 2008; [1995] 2001).

in front of live audiences.<sup>48</sup> Although it often appeared to audiences that what Adorno presented was fully developed, this often was not the case, with him often speaking extemporaneously, just using a few handwritten notes jotted down on a piece of paper. As far as he was concerned, there was “an abyss between the spoken word and the texts that [he had] worked through good and proper” (p. 289; my translation). In fact, whenever Adorno wrote, he did so for readers, not for listeners, and many of his lectures were over the heads of at least most of the members in the audience (p. 291), partly because he was not prone to reiterating his views over and over, instead frequently developing them anew. During the last two decades of his life, Adorno participated in 114 radio dialogues and interviews, with such well-known figures as the fellow critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, the film director Fritz Lang, the writer Elias Canetti, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the sociologist Arnold Gehlen, the conductor Pierre Boulez and the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (p. 292). Adorno did not shy away from controversy and caused the occasional *éclat*, but he typically was entirely open-minded, spontaneous, and enjoyed the discussions. “As an intellectual, he saw himself challenged to break through fixed listeners’ expectations and projections of his public role” (p. 294; my translation). Schwarz concluded,

To present critical theory as public speech would be the desideratum of a historical mode of observation that places the emphasis on what happened and was spoken, rather than on what was written. Instead of the major works and large literary forms, the diverse praxis of speech and dialogue would come into view, a broadly dispersed activity – the ‘small change’ of verbal activities. Thus, the acoustic dimension of the Frankfurt School would become recognizable, which cannot be exhausted in the form of a few radio programs. (p. 294; my translation)

If we apply Adorno’s preference for the essay form and combine it with his reservations about the spoken word, to assess his lecture on the new right-wing extremism in relation to his work overall, we might suppose that it is one of only a small number of instances where he allowed himself to state the impetus of his overall work clearly and directly: *modern society’s potential to progress permanently is in danger of being overtaken by the regressive dimensions of human and societal life, especially insofar as – paradoxically – modern society as an empirical form of social organization fosters and relies on the latter*. Although, strictly speaking, the above supposition would go too far – *Aspects* above all is about the persistent problem of the new right-wing extremism in so-called democratic societies – the lecture still does provide strong indications of key motifs at work in Adorno’s writings and of how to read them today, even though he delivered the lecture just over two years before his passing and more than half a century ago, and under what appeared to be increasingly disconcerting circumstances. Ironically, and practically speaking, his *immediate* concerns would have been partly alleviated by the fact that as a result of

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<sup>48</sup> After World War II, all television and radio in West Germany was “public-legal” (*Öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk*): “Since the years 1948/49, an umbrella term for the system of democratic radio [and television] for all established then in the western zones, i.e., the later Federal Republic of Germany. The term is derived from the fact that all the radio stations of the allied occupied forces with their transfer into German control – according to allied or German law – were organized as institutions of public law.” (my translation); [https://www.ard.de/home/Oeffentlich\\_rechtlicher\\_Rundfunk/458368/index.html](https://www.ard.de/home/Oeffentlich_rechtlicher_Rundfunk/458368/index.html). – Regarding Adorno’s engagement on public radio in Germany, see Parkinson (2014); in the U.S., see Mariotti (2014).

the federal election on September 29, 1969, just weeks after Adorno's death (on August 6), the SPD under the leadership of Willy Brandt – who had been in the resistance against the Nazis – and the FDP were able to form a progressive, “social-liberal” coalition government for the first time after World War II, thus forcing the CDU/CSU into opposition, enabling the latter to distinguish itself more starkly from the SPD as its former “grand coalition” partner (from 1966 until 1969). The coalition the new administration was based upon effectively pulled the rug from underneath *both* the right-wing NPD as a viable political party with popular support (the party garnered 4.3% of the more important “secondary votes” cast in the national election, thus failing to reach the required 5% needed for a party to be represented in parliament), *and* the Leftist student movement and “extra-parliamentary opposition” (APO).<sup>49</sup>

Compared to many of Adorno's other public lectures, his notes for *Aspects* were unusually extensive: seven pages of densely handwritten notes, often (and equally unusually) in complete sentences that literally anticipated his formulations (Adorno [1967] 2020, p. 41; Adorno 2019, p. 730). The care Adorno took in preparing the lecture indicates how important it was to him, and that it was not just one more obligation he agreed to and willingly or eagerly fulfilled. Evidently, the points he was making were close to his heart and getting them across effectively mattered to him. For present purposes, aside from highlighting the current relevance of the Adorno's 1967 lecture and analysis, it illustrates how the complexity of his thought and the diversity of his interests were ideally suited to explicate the breadth and the depth of the challenge right-wing extremism and related forms of populism represents in the early twenty-first century. Thus, we must aspire to both – complexity and diversity – in order to anticipate current and future challenges we already are, and undoubtedly will be facing sooner rather than later. How to conceive, then, of the kind of *praxis* that is urgently needed today and from here on out? This *praxis* will not result from focus on surface manifestations, but instead requires determination to grasp what kind of more or less visible forces produce and sustain those surface manifestations, such as right-wing movements and governments. It may be most productive to treat *Aspects* as a sort of pivot point in the proverbial hand-held fan of the many different dimensions of Adorno's overall work, as it correlated with key dimensions of modern social life, from individual experiences, to the culture industry, to art and music and their both regressive and dissident roles and fate in the administered world, sociology, negative dialectics, and education.

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<sup>49</sup> Compared to many other countries with democratic political systems, the (West) German electoral system and process are rather arcane, due to the fact that they were designed to avoid discarding votes that did not go to the winning party or candidate (as long as they amounted to at least 5% of the votes cast); by contrast, discarding votes that did not go to the winning side is not only typical for, but intended by explicitly adversarial types of democracy, as in the U.S. and Great Britain, in order to create strong government, or rather avoid weak government. – Regarding the political situation at the time, including the role of the extra-parliamentary opposition, see Burns and van der Will (1988); for a contemporary study that included a clear distinction between the extra-parliamentary opposition, which was directed at the deficits of parliamentary or representative democracy (but in support of democracy generally), and “traditional Right antiparliamentarism (*sic!*) [which] was above all hostile to the principle of democracy and only secondarily to the representative institutions through which it was expressed,” see Shell (1970), p. 653.



### Conclusion

Among social theorists, and critical theorists, in particular, Theodor W. Adorno occupies a distinctive and exposed position, for many reasons. Like none other, even compared to other prominent and highly productive representatives of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, especially Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, or to later theorists like Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, or Judith Butler, he at the same time maintained a level of consistency, rigor, and breadth in his work which, at a high level of output characterized by sophistication and mental clarity that continue to impress today, while also remaining connected to the norms and values according to which modern societies claim to function, and which they insist they support and promote like no other.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, though, Adorno was committed to calling things by their name, and he refused to fall prey to the temptation either to simplify his depiction of the world as it is, in ways that accommodated the mood of this or that era, or to expedience, or consumer demand, or the willingness of those around him to comply with the demands of their circumstances. For instance, while many others during the postwar era submitted to the regime of refraining from criticizing “western democracy” – really, modern societies in western Europe and North America – since not refraining from it was seen as support for Soviet Communism – Adorno insisted on the need to develop further, refine, and focus rigorous critique in light of developments at the time, as with regard to the “administered world.” At the same time, Adorno was never in any danger of providing ideological or theoretical cover for “actually existing socialism,” either. Just as he did in music, in theory, too, he did not compromise with the need to comply with any kind of system. In music, he regarded the challenge of atonality, as a refusal to abandon the challenge of facing freedom, and to install some kind of regime to “escape from it,” to use the title of one of Fromm’s ([1941] 1994) books, as a betrayal of the demands of the age. As a consequence, Adorno was – and his work continues to be – resented, partly because he demonstrated that as a social scientist and scholar, it is possible to describe social reality in modern societies in ways that are not fraught with compromises and the desire to accommodate the powers that be, or to not edge on, or keep in mind how we are supposed to write about reality, to comply with what we *ought to*.<sup>51</sup> There are certain artists who (or works of art which) can, in

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<sup>50</sup> Inevitably, though, high levels of consistency come at a price, often in the form of a particular type of hermeticism. Referring to the status of the “primacy of the object” in Adorno’s theory, Lawrence Hazelrigg wrote,

Adorno’s output is difficult to hold in internal coherence, given all the crosscurrents and silences that pulsate through it, as much of it was left in sketchy, incomplete, and provisional condition. On the one hand, his work can be understood as a late effort to overturn the limits which Kant left to us—that is, to offer a theory that would perform the function of a first-principle metaphysics, but without being overtly a metaphysics, and therein “rescue the nonidentical from the assaults of instrumental reason” (Habermas) ... The evident intent of Adorno’s “nonidentity thinking” or “negative dialectic” was to achieve revelation of the “conceptuality prevailing in the object itself” — that is, the concept which an “object has of itself,” of what, “left to itself,” the object “seeks to be” (Adorno). (Hazelrigg 2020, pp. 68-69),

The first quote is from Habermas ([1988] 1992, p. 123), while the last three are from Adorno ([1957] 1976, p. 69). See also Bonefeld (2012).

<sup>51</sup> Günter Dux (a leading German social theorist whose works for the most part have not been translated into English – for an important example of translated work, see Dux [2000] 2011; also Niedenzu 2012 – and who studied sociology and philosophy in Frankfurt during the time when Adorno gave his 1967 lecture) dedicated one of his books (Dux

an odd reversal, serve the purpose of telling us more about a person assessing or passing judgment on an artist or a work of art, than about the artist or a work of art. Adorno also fulfills such a function, and occupies such a position. When verdicts are being passed on his work, they frequently (though evidently not always – *nothing* is foolproof!) tell us as much or more about the person passing judgment, than about Adorno. One reason for this is that his work and thought are difficult to understand, the rationale behind his analyses, diagnoses, and conclusions difficult to grasp – they require a particular commitment, effort, and dedication, and are never easy to appreciate or understand, nor meant to be – and his verdicts demand that we reconstruct how he arrived at them, within what kind of larger normative, analytical, and theoretical reference frame, as they typically do not coincide with and conform to conventional wisdom or the limitations of “common sense.”

One of the main problems with reading Adorno and transposing his writings and assessments to subsequent or later circumstances is that they criticize conventional assumptions; how, then, can conventionalist interpretations and applications do justice to what he was trying to get across? “Doing justice” is important in this, and to all his efforts: not to turn what we study and examine into a function of what today is called “desire” – to turn the world into a function of “us” – with all our limitations – but to let the world stand as it is, to face it on its terms, rather than on ours, and draw related conclusions. It is in this regard that Adorno’s *radical* thought is not just incompatible with, but precisely opposite to, *populism* and *extremism*, both in their right-wing and left-wing incarnations. He resisted his insights being “framed” in terms of political agendas, including when his own – leftist – students demanded that he support and join their cause. Populism and extremism are inversely related to the nature of social life in the modern age generally, and especially in the current century. Where willingness to face unpleasant and disturbing complexities, contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas is called for, willful and more or less aggressive determination to render the world simple again, even if only to be in a position to take advantage of it, will not be successful, and is far more likely to aggravate and drive the tension-ridden reality we all are part of toward, or beyond the “point of no return,” a prospect that appears to become more realistic with each passing day (e.g., Goodell 2018). The conditions that have emerged demand *rational* solutions on the planetary scale, which evidently have been making *irrational* responses more appealing, even irresistible to many. While right-wing populists and extremists see this as an opportunity to possibly get their way, at least for a while, and to the medium- and long-term detriment of all, left-wing populists and extremists appear to be motivated by the will to face the looming challenges constructively, on the assumption that their strategies will lead to qualitative and last improvements, and the formation of a political reference frame that is conducive to tackling impending and emerging problems in ways that are

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2004) to examining the issue and prominent status in modern society of individuals’ actions and choices in everyday life being regulated by being told and frequently reminded that they “ought” to do this or that, but not the other thing, without reflecting on such imperatives and expectations: how we exist in a matrix of suppositions that steer our actions, desires, goals, and practices, without us being cognizant of this fact, or curious about its origins. According to Dux, normativity has to be reconstructed from knowledge of the real structures of society, which in turn are shaped by the market system, rather than conceived of in terms of abstract ethical principles; consequently, morality must be critically examined (in the sense of deconstructed), and justice clearly defined accordingly. On the need for intellectuals to resist the temptation to comply with the “ought,” see Demirović’s (1999) detailed study of the development of critical theory and its transformation into the Frankfurt School.

consonant with the values of the modern age. Yet, trends that have been underway in recent years suggest that both right-wing and left-wing proponents ignore the increasingly fundamental differences that separate both groups and their supporters, respectively, who will not disappear, or the majority populations who represent more or less insurmountable inertia and obstacles for both. What “Adorno” stands for, then, is uncompromising determination to illuminate the conflicting dynamics at play in what seems like a post-dialectical age, regardless of whether there will be a tangible payoff or not, since only such determination may retain the potential of the kind of fearless understanding of which humankind in the twenty-first century is most in need.

Finally, one of the main “criticisms” leveled at Adorno and the other first-generation critical theorists (except Marcuse) was and is that they were “too pessimistic.” Yet, optimism, at its core, is an artifact both of modern society and capitalism as ideologies – we are supposed to be optimistic, to hope that things work out – mostly to keep our eyes away from the reality of concrete situations, even though modern societies and capitalism have been running with things not working out as planned, but working for certain purposes, to the benefit of certain groups or individuals. Optimism and the prohibition against pessimism are a coping mechanism in a world in which we pre-consciously are cognizant of the fact – which we “are not supposed” to acknowledge – that we are never in control, that more or less anonymous forces (supported by certain types of human actors) are in charge and determine our fate: forces that require an uncompromising and probing look at how modern societies emerged, how they have been spreading, how they transformed our world in ways that we – born into this world – have great difficulties understanding, since we are its products and its perpetuators. Fascists and supporters of fascism recognize that they are not in control, but rather than accepting that the world in general is not conducive to humans being “in control,” they insist on *them* being in control, even though in terms of their very nature, the dimensions of politics, culture, economy, and society to a certain extent may be *influenced*, but are not *controllable* by us, even though – in the modern age – these dimensions are supposed to serve “our” interests, be modeled on “our” objectives and shaped by us, reflect and correspond with “our nature,” and be subject to “our” decision-making. Yet, society produces and sustains us, not vice versa, through everyday life, existing structures of inequalities, and systems of power, along with (increasingly bureaucratic) institutions and organizations, regardless of whether or not we acknowledge or resent this fact. Only on the basis of this realization can we begin to acquire the knowledge needed for us to be able to shape our collective fate. In order to do so, we must – interactively and intersubjectively – recognize that and how we are products of forces whose machinations that are difficult to grasp, and impossible to comprehend and transcend without the necessary and sustained collaborative effort, encouragement, and support. If the goal is to bring about lasting improvements in and of modern societies, we must accept that we are shaped by it in ways that demand the determined willingness and commitment to overcome our own, socially molded, inherently regressive selves.

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