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The Concept of The Global Subject in Adorno

By

Sebastian Kanally

A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of Philosophy
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the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

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The Concept of the Global Subject in Adorno

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August 30, 2019

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ABSTRACT

Theodor W. Adorno makes the following claim in his 1962 essay “Progress”: “The possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme, total disaster, has migrated to this global subject alone. Everything else involving progress must crystalize around it.”¹ While this is Adorno’s most explicit articulation of the importance of a global subject, it is not the only one. In multiple places across his work he makes reference to mankind’s current lack of a global subject, and the need for a global subject to develop and intervene. This paper weaves together the first systematic analysis of a “global subject [*Gesamtsubjekt*]” as Adorno uses it throughout his philosophical work. It explores this concept and takes as its guide three inter-related questions. First, how does Adorno use the concept of the global subject in his work? Second, what antecedent philosophical ideas are influencing Adorno’s understanding of what a global subject actually is? And third, how does understanding Adorno’s utilization of this concept change how we think about his ideas about revolutionary activity in our “administered world”?²

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 144.

² In “Towards a New Manifesto” Adorno explicitly stated the importance of revolution. (TNM 57). But for Adorno scholars and Adornians more generally, it is difficult to understand this position alongside the criticisms primarily from the German student movement in his later years for being “critical in theory, conformist in practice”. This line is quoted in Leslie, “Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence”, p.119. The concept of the global subject can contribute to resolving this quagmire.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Section 1: The Concept of the Global Subject and Progress</i>	6
<i>Textual Analysis of The Global Subject</i>	12
<i>Section 2: Situating the Antecedents to the Global Subject</i>	34
<i>Kant on “Humanity: Menschheit”</i>	34
<i>Marx and Hegel on “Species-Being: Gattungswesen”</i>	44
<i>Adorno’s Ideas About the Proletariat</i>	53
<i>Reflections on Maturity and Praxis</i>	58
<i>Conclusion</i>	63
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	72
VITA AUCTORIS	76

Introduction

*You say that nothing in life is black or white.
But that is a lie. A very dangerous lie.
Either we prevent a 1.5 degree of warming, or we don't.
Either we avoid setting off that irreversible chain reaction beyond human control, or we don't.
Either we choose to go on as a civilisation or we don't.
That is as black or white as it gets.
Because there are no grey areas when it comes to survival.*

-Greta Thunberg, The 1975³

Theodor W. Adorno makes the following claim in his 1962 essay “Progress”: “The possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme, total disaster, has migrated to this global subject alone. Everything else involving progress must crystalize around it.”⁴ While this is Adorno’s most explicit articulation of the importance of a global subject, it is not the only one. In multiple places across his work he makes reference to mankind’s current lack of a global subject, and the need for a global subject to develop and intervene. This paper weaves together the first systematic analysis of a “global subject [*Gesamtsubjekt*]” as Adorno uses it throughout his philosophical work. It explores this concept and takes as its guide three inter-related questions. First, how does Adorno use the concept of the global subject in his work? Second, what antecedent philosophical ideas are influencing Adorno’s understanding of what a global subject actually is? And third, how does understanding Adorno’s utilization of this concept change how we think about his ideas about revolutionary activity in our “administered world”.⁵

³ Greta Thunberg, “The 1975”. Song released by *The 1975*.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 144.

⁵ In “Towards a New Manifesto” Adorno explicitly stated the importance of revolution. (TNM 57). But for Adorno scholars and Adornians more generally, it is difficult to understand this position alongside the criticisms primarily from the German student movement in his later years for being “critical in theory,

This paper will argue that Adorno's insistence on the radical change of humanity in its entirety is elucidated by the concept of a "global subject" and this concept therefore needs to be understood as central in his work. Many commentators have failed to mention this concept or to provide any real sustained reflection on it, how Adorno uses it, and what he may mean by it. This paper maintains that the concept is important because firstly, it is a conceptual tool that highlights Adorno's acute understanding of the totalizing and catastrophic problems the human species now faces in the midst of late-stage capitalism. Secondly, it illuminates Adorno's ideas about what type of revolutionary subject is needed to address these issues through a recurring critique of totality. What is more, this concept of the global subject is indispensable for thinking through and addressing the problems the human family faces today. Establishing a global subject is a categorical imperative for humankind if we desire the survival of our species and we must face this harsh reality while thinking from within the Anthropocene.

The paper will be divided into two main sections. The first section will explore how Adorno utilizes the concept of a global subject throughout his writing. The concept is employed by Adorno in his *History and Freedom* lectures, his essay "Progress", *Negative Dialectics*, as well as "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?", and even his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, among other works. Since understanding Adorno's concept necessitates looking across multiple works, it will be necessary to point towards and contextualize the places where Adorno employs this term in his texts. The purpose of this

conformist in practice". This line is quoted in Leslie, "Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence", p.119. The concept of the global subject can contribute to resolving this quagmire.

first section is to construct a philosophical through-line of interpretation of what connects this concept in Adorno's thought.

The second section of the paper holds up this interpretation of the global subject next to antecedent philosophical ideas going back to Kant, to illuminate more closely Adorno's own ideas. Since the global subject represents a new way of understanding what a revolutionary subject would have to look like, Adorno's critical engagement with the topic of revolutionary activity will also be addressed.⁶ This task is undertaken by constructing the nexus of philosophical antecedents to the concept with which Adorno is engaging. It is important to colour the concept of the global subject with the intellectual tradition that Adorno is responding to, and critically appropriating, in order to more fully understand the phenomenon Adorno is attempting to point towards with this concept. Among the multitude of influences on Adorno, there are three main influences that will be addressed here. The three influences are Immanuel Kant's ideas about "humanity [*Menschheit*]", the Hegelian-Marxist idea of "species-being [*Gattungswesen*]", and Marx's understanding of the proletariat.

The paper will then conclude with my reflections on why the concept of a global subject is important not only for understanding Adorno, but for understanding how humankind today, in the midst of the Anthropocene, must wake up from its sleep-walk into extinction. This will be followed by some brief remarks on impediments to the global

⁶ I intentionally word this quite carefully. I do not want to claim that Adorno had complete ideas about what a future truly human society would look like. I do not want to claim either that Adorno had ideas about what a successful revolutionary subject would look like. It is indeed clear that Adorno denied that we had unrestrained epistemological access to something outside the bounds of our embeddedness in the bad life. Therefore, in approaching utopia one could only do it negatively. Adorno is indeed pessimistic, but he does leave room for thoughts ability to open up, resemble play, and break through the mere existent. When thought can locate the determinate negation of the sources of harm to individual people's lives, then thought's possibilities will open up and have the potential to catch glimpses of a better way.

subject and the importance of education in bringing the revolutionary global subject forward.

Adorno, in his writings observed and often commented on our human society's progress towards total catastrophe. The looming catastrophe that Adorno talks about is sometimes undefined and could take on many different forms. Certainly, the threat of nuclear war, the rise of fascist and tyrannical societies, and the destruction of the natural world are top candidates. However, a mainstay of Adorno's thought is his understanding and assessment of the instrumental domination of nature our societies are built on as a grave threat to the survival of our species. Adorno says that society's "principle of particular private interest" might well lead to "the death of all."⁷ The metabolism between humanity's forces of production and its impact on the global ecosystem is the gravest threat to the survival of our species.⁸

As Deborah Cook points out in the opening lines to her book, *Adorno on Nature*, "Decades before the environmental movement emerged in the 1960's, Theodor W. Adorno criticized our destructive and self-destructive relation to nature."⁹ Adorno's assessment of the impending catastrophe that the human species faces, and that the whole biosphere faces as well, is as germane today as ever. In one of many examples where Adorno is entertaining

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B Ashton. (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1973), 298.

⁸ I am using the dichotomy to get across the point that our system of production is indeed destroying the natural resources the earth provides us with. But early on, in "The Idea of Natural History", and reaffirmed in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno made clear that nature and society are not separate beings. The natural is always historical, and the historical is always natural. Adorno says that human history is natural history and natural history is also human history. And therefore, it is inadequate to think of nature on one side and historical modes of production on the other. Today it may be easier to understand this than ever before. Our global societal constitution is causing natural disasters unparalleled in human history. The earth and humankind are one, a single self-organizing biosphere, they participate in an "affinity" Adorno would come to say.

⁹ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 1.

the thought of our society destroying itself, he says in *Negative Dialectics*, “There is a universal feeling, a universal fear, that our progress in controlling nature may increasingly help to weave the very calamity it is supposed to protect us from.”¹⁰ Obviously this “very calamity it [controlling nature] is supposed to protect us from” is the destruction or extinction of our species. For Adorno, the instinct to dominate nature is an outgrowth of survival instincts. But today, the domination that was intended for the survival of the species has undermined itself and now presents a very real threat to us all.

Despite Adorno’s persistent pessimism, he displayed moments of open thought where he explored positive concepts that may assist in overcoming the calamities we face as well. These concepts include reconciliation, solidarity, critical self-reflection, non-identity, etc., and of course the global subject. The global subject sits in a dialectical nexus with many of these emphatic concepts. I will not be able to investigate all of them together here, but the concept is certainly not a stand-alone one, and shows Adorno’s grappling with ideas beyond mere negative critique. After all, Adorno thinks the central question of moral philosophy, which he further claims is the central question of philosophy in general is, “What shall we do?”¹¹ Since Adorno himself claims this is the quintessential philosophical question, commentators on Adorno should explore the positive dimensions of his thought- which are admittedly few- about what we shall do, if we intend to understand Adorno on his own terms.

The concept of the global subject can be extremely useful for our contemporary world. People are already demanding action all over the world to avoid a climate

¹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 67.

¹¹ Adorno, Theodor W. *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, and trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 3.

catastrophe.¹² It is morally deplorable, and gut-wrenching how much damage our species has inflicted to our home-planet, to our bio-sphere, which is the lifeblood of our very existence. No species but our own would be so clearly acting against its interest in its collective survival. We are headed towards the destruction of our societies, monuments, culture, and species, if we do not change our ways. As Greta Thunberg said in the quote at the opening of this paper, there are no grey areas when it comes to survival. But how do we understand and change our actions in the face of such a chronic and universal impending disaster? Most importantly, how do individuals themselves relate to such a universal problem for collective action to take place? How do parents, teachers, welders, lifeguards, etc., relate to such a problem when they must drive to work in carbon emitting vehicles because urban planning renders it the easiest way, particularly in the West? How do people today, who were forced to “surrender” the task of self-preservation to the capitalist economy, now attempt to fight the consequences of this very capitalist economy that they depend on? How can individuals relate to the spectre of climate collapse when they have to think of their individual survival? It is my claim that Adorno’s concept of the global subject opens up possibilities for thought and action in the face of crisis and represents a new categorical imperative for mankind that is unrelenting in its aim to change humankind in its entirety to avoid utter catastrophe.

Section 1: The Concept of the Global Subject and Progress

It will be necessary to provide some preliminary remarks on Adorno’s account of progress before we can understand the concept of the global subject in its entirety, the two concepts are inseparable. Adorno refers most often to the global subject in his essay

¹² School Strikes for Climate, Extinction Rebellion, YouthStrikeForClimate and many more.

“Progress” and his *History and Freedom* lectures, where he makes very clear statements on the importance of the global subject, claiming for example that any talk of progress must crystalize around the concept of the global subject alone.¹³

Adorno has a more complex engagement with the concept of “progress” than is appreciated in the secondary literature. Commentary on Adorno’s philosophical work continues to be dominated by a thoroughly pessimistic and negativist understanding of his thought. While Adorno’s assessment of modern forms of damaged life under late-stage monopoly capitalism is certainly pessimistic, you would miss something essential in his writing if you were to limit your analysis to this. Adorno’s account of progress should not be characterized entirely by his pessimistic comments about the irrationality of attributing progress as an actuality to history, comments that are exemplified in such lines as the catastrophe of Auschwitz “makes all talk of progress towards freedom seem ludicrous.”¹⁴ Adorno investigates the concept of progress philosophically, and therefore dialectically, oscillating between thoroughly negative assessments of progress that come close to a bleak picture of an angel of history looking back at pure carnage, and open thought about how the human species can hold onto such a concept.¹⁵

¹³ Adorno, “Progress,” 144.

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Rodney Livingstone. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁵ I am drawing on accounts of Adorno’s methodology that emphasize the positive dimension of Adorno’s thought, such as Cook in “Open-thinking: Adorno’s Exact Imagination” where thought in Adorno is always in some way negating what is and leaping forward into the possible. Cook says that, “determinate negation is the positive side of the negation because it may give rise to emphatic concepts that provide indirect glimpses of a better world than this one. Of course, what is other than damaged life, nonidentical with it, remains distinct from it: what ought to be does not yet exist, and what exists is not yet what it should and could be.” (pg. 14). I think this reference to “glimpses of a better world” contains the moment in Adorno, where his exploration of the possible in the notion of a global subject leaps beyond what is, or so I will attempt to argue here.

Before getting to Adorno's most philosophical assessment of the concept of progress, in his essay by that name, it should be noted that Adorno wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*- a book that he co-authored eighteen years earlier with friend and colleague Max Horkheimer in 1944. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno express an overriding pessimism about the prospects for historical progress. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* a thorough critique of modernity is on display in assessing enlightenment's "regressive moment" into barbarism.¹⁶ While Adorno and Horkheimer did think that "Enlightenment itself, having mastered itself and assumed its own power, could break through the limits of enlightenment",¹⁷ they clearly were very hesitant to give substance to what things might look like. These early insights would colour Adorno's thoughts through *History and Freedom* and *Negative Dialectics*.

This pessimism certainly stayed with Adorno. In addition to Adorno's pessimistic assessment of enlightenment rationality and technical progress, exemplified in his mention of "progress" from the "slingshot to the megaton bomb", Adorno believes that individuals are subjected to radical forms of coercion, domination, and unfreedom in all aspects of their lives. The "way of the world" for Adorno, i.e., what is characteristic of the "totally administered society", is the pervasiveness of exchange relations, and as a consequence of exchange: identity-thinking. This domination and administration has been on display in humanity's "progress" from bourgeois "freedom" to the gas chambers of World War II.

By 1962, post-war Germany was trying to put itself back together, and Adorno became a more dominant public intellectual when he returned to Germany. In "Progress"

¹⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xvi

¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 172.

Adorno explicitly engaged in a much more thoroughly dialectical analysis of both the positive and negative sides of this concept, and therefore reflected on whether it is still an important concept to retain for humankind. The progress essay reconsiders the idea of progress historically, and Adorno makes some reflections on its potential meaning in the early 1960's while Germany was still trying to recover from the atrocities of World War II. These reflections on the concept of progress are then expanded on and given some nuance in the *History and Freedom* lectures.

Adorno says at the beginning of "Progress" that a simple yes or no answer cannot be given to the question of historical progress. Nor does he think one can really define the concept of progress all that precisely. As he says, "Whoever wants to define the concept precisely easily destroys what he is aiming at."¹⁸ However, Adorno does not stop here but actually reconsiders and dialectically examines the idea of progress and comes to the conclusion that it is still meaningful. The principle of progress is still meaningful because even though progress as it is currently understood led to historical setbacks, a more emphatic notion of progress provides the condition needed for humankind to find the means to avert them in the future.¹⁹ Adorno encourages us to think of the sinking of the Titanic. "The iceberg supposedly dealt the first blow to the idea of progress",²⁰ but, when one reflects, the disaster that the iceberg represented actually brought improved shipping regulations and innovations over the next century.

Commentators have been drawn primarily towards Adorno's thought-provoking dictum that "Progress occurs where it ends."²¹ This statement points to the fact that the

¹⁸ Adorno, "Progress," 143.

¹⁹ Ibid., 154. (See also Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 109).

²⁰ Ibid., 154.

²¹ Ibid., 150.

concept of progress today is immanently tied to the domination of internal and external nature, a relic of instinctual behaviour linked to self-preservation. Where this domination ends, progress begins. Adorno points to this just before he comes to the aforementioned conclusion. He says, “Progress means: to step out of the magic spell, even out of the spell of progress that is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues.”²²

In addition to these observations about the history of domination, Adorno provides some general remarks supporting the idea of progress. For example, he supports the idea of progress when he asserts that,

If society had not passed from a hunting and gathering horde to agriculture, from slavery to the formal freedom of subjects, from the fear of demons to reason, from deprivation to provisions against epidemics and famine and to the overall improvement of living conditions, if one thus sought *more philosophico* to keep the idea of progress pure, say, to spin it out of the essence of time, then it would not have any content at all.²³

Not everything that has happened in history is completely deplorable. For example, Adorno remarks in *History and Freedom*, again on the topic of formal freedoms, that one does not know how important formal freedoms are until they are taken away (as Adorno experienced himself at the hands of the Gestapo.)²⁴ Even if individuals only enjoy formal freedoms, we can see how progressive these freedoms are when they are taken away.

Amy Allen for example notes that this line was the inspiration for the title of her book. Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

²² Adorno, “Progress,” 150.

²³ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁴ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 140.

So, with these points being made, it is clear that Adorno is ambivalent about progress. Furthermore, he certainly does think that there is no overriding theodicy, or necessity to progress in history as some philosophers have posited. Echoing this point, Amy Allen in her recent work, is correct when she notes that Adorno's methodology "reconstructs history as a story of *both progress and regress at the same time*."²⁵ Yet it is certainly suspect that Allen notes this, but fails to analyze the positive dimensions of Adorno's assessment, particularly the concept of the global subject. So what does reflection on the concept of progress yield to us today when facing utter catastrophe? It is from here we can begin to unpack Adorno's thoughts about what progress would mean today. Adorno is very clear that "[p]rogress means whether humanity is capable of preventing catastrophe."²⁶ What is more, "[p]rogress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, whose prospect opens up in face of its extinction."²⁷

So, Adorno maintains that progress would mean the very establishment of humanity in the first place, and the prevention of catastrophe. Progress would mean a conscious understanding and awareness of humanity's own "inbred nature" and therefore bring us closer to reconciling with nature as a whole and our own nature. The possibility of progress in all these formulations has migrated to this global subject alone.

Now that some preliminary remarks on Adorno's reflections on the concept of progress have been presented, we can ask what progress would be in the face of humanity's extinction, what is the global subject, and how does it fit into "[t]wo centuries of brutal history in which the moment to realize philosophy, the hope of the left Hegelians like Marx,

²⁵ Allen, *The End of Progress*, 166.

²⁶ Adorno, "Progress," 144.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

was missed.”²⁸ The following section will undertake a deep textual analysis of the concept of the “global subject” as it appears in Adorno’s work, while engaging in a critical analysis of what can be extracted from Adorno’s comments about it.

A primary focus of this section will be the focus on the dialectic of individual and society. As we will see, Adorno’s criticism of previous ideas about humanity always target the conceptual attempt to “swallow up” or engulf the individual into the totality, and therefore the complexity, the nuance, and the non-identity of the individual and the species are overlooked. Consequently, contained in the concept of the global subject is Adorno’s own gesturing towards the possibility of a different relation between the individual and the species. It represents a real unity instead of a forced totality. This new relation would be one with a non-dominating relation between the individual and the society that individual lives in. This section will also have to make the case for the importance of an emerging global subject today.

Textual Analysis of The Global Subject

Adorno employs the concept of a “self-conscious global subject [*ein seiner selbst bewußtes Gesamtsubjekt*]” near the beginning of his progress essay, and he refers to humanity’s own “global subject” becoming sufficiently self-aware in the *History and Freedom* lectures.²⁹ This could be easily misunderstood if one does not consider what Adorno means when he uses this concept. He does not articulate in much detail explicitly what this concept entails, but by drawing from comments in his discussion of progress, and comments scattered throughout his texts one can reconstruct some of Adorno’s intentions

²⁸ J.M Bernstein, “Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.

²⁹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 143.

with this concept. In addition to the *History and Freedom* lectures and his essay “Progress”, Adorno uses the concept “*Gesamtsubjekt*” in *Negative Dialectics*, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?”, his “Introduction” to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, and perhaps most interestingly in “Aldous Huxley and Utopia”.

One of the difficulties in locating this concept in Adorno’s work for English readers is the different translations of the concept. Henry Pickford (in his translation of “Progress”), and Rodney Livingstone (in his translation of the *History and Freedom* lectures) both translate *Gesamtsubjekt* as “global subject”. Alternatively, E.B Ashton translates *Gesamtsubjekt* in *Negative Dialectics* as “total subject”. What is more, in “Late Capitalism or Industrial society”, Livingstone, who translated it as “global subject” in *History and Freedom*, in this text translates the concept as “overall social subject”.³⁰

Adorno’s repeated lambasting of the “totality” i.e., capitalist society, may make the translation of *Gesamtsubjekt* as “total subject” problematic. As we will continue to see, this emphatic concept contains the culmination of Adorno’s critique of totality. Global subject on the other hand certainly contains the connotation of something beyond the principle of particular interest that is so deeply embedded in capitalism. So, what does this concept mean and how should it be translated? In Barron’s *German to English Dictionary* “*gesamt*” is translated as “whole, entire, or total”.³¹ The question comes down to what Adorno means by “*gesamt*” in placing it before “*subjekt*”. Following Adorno, however, I will hold off on

³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” in *Can One Live After Auschwitz* ed. Rolf Tiedmann, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 124.

³¹ Barron’s Foreign Language Guides, *German to English Pocket Dictionary*, (Hauppauge: Barron’s Educational Series, 2008), 144.

firm definitions for the time being in order to construct a constellation around the phenomenon in an attempt to shed light on it.³²

First I will reconstruct Adorno's use of the concept of the global subject in "Progress" and *History and Freedom*, then I will continue on to the other works in which Adorno uses the concept in, and I will end with his use of the concept in "Aldous Huxley and Utopia," because his use of the concept in that essay takes on a different focus in comparison to the other places he uses the concept. This essay reveals a more substantive account of determinate negation in his critique of utopia and totality, pointing towards other content he associates with the global subject.

Someone could object at this point, that the concept is just not as important as this paper assumes to be the case or that it does not matter because Adorno only mentions it a few times and never explores it explicitly. But it would be a short-lived criticism because Adorno clearly and explicitly says that "[t]he possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme, total disaster, has migrated to this global subject alone. Everything else involving progress must crystalize around it."³³ Those are powerful words coming from a philosopher who is often taken to have nothing to say about the future or the potential of what is beyond the actual. And some commentators have appreciated the importance of this concept. For example, Cook in *Adorno, Foucault, and the Critique of the West*, astutely points towards the global subject as Adorno's championing of sweeping and radical change.³⁴ She goes on to say that, "In the face of an increasingly totalitarian expansion of capital, only a global

³² Adorno's critique of thinking that places questions of meaning over substance is revealed in *History and Freedom* when he says, "A self-righteous defense of tidy thinking responds by offering us stones instead of bread" (HF 189). "Definitions...should follow from philosophical reflection, rather than preceding it with a view to keeping it under control." (HF 190).

³³ Adorno, "Progress," 144.

³⁴ Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Foucault, Critique of the West*, (London: Verso, 2018), 101.

subject can counter the existential threats that the ruthless pursuit of profit under late capitalism now poses.³⁵

Adorno introduces this notion when he gives some substance to what progress would look like. In his lectures on *History and Freedom* he says that,

I believe that you should start by taking progress to mean this very simple thing: that it would be better if people had no cause to fear, if there were no impending catastrophe on the horizon, if you do this, it will not provide a timeless, absolute definition of progress, but it will give the idea a concrete form. For progress today really does mean simply the prevention and avoidance of total catastrophe."³⁶

But it is important to note that Adorno's discussion of progress does not stop here. He says further that "all these reflections come to a head in the question of whether mankind will succeed in preventing catastrophe."³⁷ Thus, Adorno moves from an analysis of the concept of progress and what it may mean, to the question of the *possibility* of progress.

Can human beings in fact prevent catastrophe such as the climate crisis we face today? It is in approaching this question that Adorno arrives at the notion of a global subject. He continues:

Humanity's survival is threatened by the forms of its own global social constitution, unless humanity's own global subject becomes sufficiently self-aware to come to its rescue after all. The possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme total calamity, has migrated to this global subject alone.³⁸

It is certainly clear that Adorno is making the idea of the emergence of a global subject an immanent demand on the human species if the species wants any sort of progress to occur and if we want to see the continuation of the human species. This seems to be based on the fact that now, humanity's life is threatened on a global scale. What is more, it would not

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 143.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

be too much of a reach to claim that this statement imposes a new categorical imperative on mankind, particularly in the 21st century. Humankind must have a global subject emerge for our species' survival because the problems we face today require collective and species-wide solutions. This point seems as justified today as the moment it was penned.

The global subject is equal to the establishment of humanity itself for Adorno.³⁹ The fact that humanity's life is threatened, may in fact prove useful for human beings to finally wake up and start changing things especially- including themselves. Adorno makes this point as well when he says, "progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, whose prospect opens up in the face of its extinction."⁴⁰ Adorno claims that prospects open up in the face of extinction elsewhere as well. He clearly thinks that, or it may be better to say, he hopes that, in the face of a totalizing barrier, a block to thinking in the sense of an obstacle to our collective survival, we can think beyond what is the case. Thought can reach into possibilities and conceive a new way forward because we will have no choice. We are in such a dire situation that we have to start thinking about how we can get out of the mess we made—the threat of catastrophe is a powerful impetus to thought. If we do not want the species to die, we have to think about how to free ourselves from this threat.

Explaining this point, Adorno gives the historical example of the Titanic.⁴¹ He says that one might think that an iceberg "dealt the first blow to our faith in progress", but this misses the fact that this calamity led to unprecedented improvements in shipping over the next century. Historical setbacks as the product of the progressive principle, are essential

³⁹ A more thorough investigation into what exactly humanity as a product means for Adorno is found in Part Two.

⁴⁰ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 145.

⁴¹ Adorno, "Progress," 154. See also *History and Freedom*, 160.

to the dialectic of progress for Adorno. When the human mind is presented with a barrier, a calamity, a catastrophic state of affairs, it can open thought up to new possibilities. Analogously, Adorno thinks that it may be possible that, in the face of its extinction, humanity will finally be awakened. But awakening humanity from the spell of what merely is, to see what is possible, will not be easy because revolutionary activity has just as much to do with social solidarity and collective action, as it does with the necessary conceptual revolution, that is, understanding ourselves and who we are differently, which may be the more difficult task. But this will be explored later.

At this point it may be fruitful to mention a metaphor Adorno uses in his *History and Freedom* lectures. Adorno has a particularly illuminating image that sheds light on what he means by the global subject, or an established humanity.

If the image of an advancing humanity reminds us of a giant who, after sleeping from time immemorial, slowly bestirs himself and then storms forth, trampling down everything that gets in his way, his rude awakening is the only potential for maturity.⁴²

This image of the giant, if we take it together with the previous passage about the species facing calamities and overcoming them, points towards a new way to understand the notion of a global subject. The global subject would be a human species actually becoming self-aware (waking-up) from its own sleep-walking into extinction. The global subject would begin to act and think on behalf of the survival of the species and tear down what is antithetical to that goal. The global subject has a moral component to it as well. It must harmonize universal principles (something like a principle of harmony of the biosphere, or Benjamin's thesis considering the "happiness of unborn generations"), and an emotional,

⁴² Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 152.

impulsive disgust for our current destructive and unsustainable practices. Bringing these together could move the human species towards the first establishment of humanity.

Adorno once wrote that Auschwitz provided the human being with a new categorical imperative.⁴³ A WWF report, involving fifty-nine scientists from around the globe have found that since 1970, 60% of all mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds and fish around the world have been wiped out.⁴⁴ Since these practices of consumption by the global population are destroying life and everything on which humankind depends, there are sufficient grounds for the establishment of a new categorical imperative. That is, every individual's survival depends on the survival of the species. We must find a new way of organizing collectively so that our species can finally take control of its own direction, and therefore its own destiny to stop its destructive path. As George Monbiot puts it in an article written for *The Guardian*, "No one is coming to save us. Mass civil disobedience is essential to force a political response." "Only rebellion will prevent an ecological collapse."⁴⁵ Here Monbiot is arguing for collective action; individuals need to work collectively to address this problem because no one is coming to save us.

Adorno also makes some other interesting comments about the global subject that help to provide more substance to its goals. Immediately after mentioning the global subject, Adorno begins to speak of material needs, and the fact that they have been potentially eliminated thanks to the state of the technical means of production.

Material needs, which long seemed to mock progress, have been potentially eliminated; thanks to the present state of the technical forces of production no one

⁴³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

⁴⁴ World Wide Fund (WWF), *Living Planet Report – 2018: Aiming Higher*, ed. Monique Grooten, Rosamunde Almond, Gland, Switzerland, 2018.

⁴⁵ George Monbiot, "Only Rebellion Will Prevent an Ecological Apocalypse." *The Guardian*. (April 15, 2019), 8

on the planet need suffer deprivation anymore. Whether there will be further want and oppression – which are the same thing- will be decided solely on the avoidance of catastrophe through the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity.⁴⁶

Clearly then, the rational establishment of humanity would be one where we finally wake up and realize that we can eliminate want and oppression through self-conscious and rational establishment of our forces of production, if we only had the will and solidarity for resistance to the current order.⁴⁷ Genuine progress would negate want, oppression, and the suffering of individuals who are rooted in their forced surrender of the task of self-preservation to the capitalist economy. But in addition to this it would need to halt the destructive practices that this possibility is based on. Adorno here is reiterating Marx's focus on reorienting material production to establish a truly human society, i.e., one where we can explore and develop more completely as individuals and as a species. As he says in *Negative Dialectics*, "Anyone who traces de-formation to metaphysical processes rather than to the conditions of material production is a purveyor of ideologies."⁴⁸

This focus on the elimination of want and oppression is directly tied to another point that Adorno makes about the global subject: it would be "a human race that possesses genuine control over its own destiny right down to the concrete details."⁴⁹ This is one of the most important points in analyzing the global subject. Individuals should not be forced to submit to, or to be dominated by, a production process where they are simply relegated

⁴⁶ Adorno, "Progress," 144.

⁴⁷ There is indeed a problem with "re-orienting" existing structures to eliminate want and oppression. For example, a contributing factor to the objective possibility for humanity feeding the world is built on industrial farms and current unsustainable agricultural practices. But this system of producing food, which is new to capitalism, is a large contributing factor to the destruction of our environment by eliminating the nutrients from the soil, emitting carbon into the atmosphere, and deforestation. We cannot fall into the trap of thinking a simple change in distribution will solve this problem; the problem runs much deeper.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 284.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

to appendages of the machinery of production. Individuals should have concrete control over their ability to provide for their own existence since we live in a society of abundance and not one of scarcity. When individuals have control over what they need and require, it eliminates their dependence on the wasteful capitalist system. This aspect of the global subject will be more clearly articulated in Section Two's discussion of species-being.

Actually, establishing individuals goes hand in hand with establishing a truly human society. As Adorno says, "Just as individuals have not existed hitherto, so too there has been no global subject; the two are corollaries to one another."⁵⁰ This is quite important to Adorno's thoughts. One of the primary harms that establishing humanity would negate would be the powerlessness individuals feel in relation to a totally administered society that they are born into. Adorno is very critical of the preponderance of the exchange-based society over individuals. In surrendering to the system of capitalism an individual only is allowed a pseudo-individuality, which permits choosing between mere commodities that provide the illusion of freedom instead of choosing through self-determination and truly exploring all one's capabilities. Adorno agrees with Horkheimer in "Towards a New Manifesto": "Freedom is not the freedom to accumulate, but the fact that I have no need to accumulate."⁵¹ This goes hand in hand with the fact that "a change in the conditions of production might relieve the violent picture which the world shows to its violators."⁵²

Adorno is thus negating the totalizing and de-individualizing state of the world and negating it to understand what a truly human society could be. It would be a society that

⁵⁰ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 118.

⁵¹ Adorno, "Towards a New Manifesto," trans. Rodney Livingstone. In *New Left Review*, (September 2010, Issue 65, pp. 33-61), 37.

⁵² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 284.

focuses not on integration, but on a respect for radical differentiation. Adorno conceives of society today as a “false totality” that posits a false identity. The identity thinking in an exchange-based system like our own moves towards a forced identity. This forced identity is reflected in the fungibility of commodities under capitalism which ends by making all living things fungible as well. Adorno is therefore interested in focusing on a system that appreciates difference instead of valuing integration, only then would we have a “truly achieved identity.”⁵³ Further on this point, Adorno says that “A truly achieved identity (for the species) would have to be the consciousness of *non-identity*, or, more accurately perhaps, it would have to be the creation of a reconciled non-identity”.⁵⁴ This has to still be worked out. The dialectic of individual and species that is contained here in the concept of the global subject is indeed important to understand in Adorno, so much so that he claims in *Negative Dialectics* that “theory should carry out the dialectics of individual and species.”⁵⁵ And in *History and Freedom*, he calls this a problem of the greatest possible gravity.⁵⁶

The decentralization of the existing relations of production is essential here. As Adorno says in *History and Freedom* when critiquing the “fetishization of the concept of the nation”: “What I have in mind is something that would change the form of society itself and put an end to the abstract organization that acts so repressively towards its members.”⁵⁷ Adorno reiterates the point that organizing the relations of production for the benefit of all is not utopian because the state of technology opens up the possibility “of decentralization

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 283.

⁵⁶ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 44-45.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 111.

that actually makes it unnecessary to bring societies together into gigantic hierarchical entities.”⁵⁸

Adorno’s insistence on critiquing and questioning the very structure of modern bourgeois forms of life, and his insistence that “[i]n the meantime, however, it would already be possible to organize societies far more rationally in much smaller units that could collaborate peaceably with one another”⁵⁹, points towards his forward-looking solutions to how we might face climate change today. Huge monopolistic industrial farms and food that is shipped half way around the world contribute to incalculably large amounts of carbon emissions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has said that, cutting carbon emissions from transportation and energy is not enough to fight climate change. We also need a strategy to completely change the way the world produces food and manages land.⁶⁰

In the face of this challenge to sustainability, one of the most prominent methods that has been recommended for fighting climate change is micro-gridding. “In a future with higher temperatures, less water, more frequent and severe wildfires and more extreme weather events, microgrids can provide unparalleled reliability and resilience”⁶¹ Microgrids are a small example of how communities can fight climate change by reducing carbon emissions and their impact on the world around them. Microgrids offer resilience to extreme weather events, which is obviously an increasingly present problem today. As the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions who are an independent, non-profit

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ International Panel on Climate Change, “Climate Change and Land,” See particularly A-4.

⁶¹ Leia Guccione, “The micro(grid) solution to the macro challenge of climate change” October 14, 2013, published at GreenBiz.com.

organization working to forge practical solutions to climate change says, “Microgrids can help deploy more zero-emissions energy sources, make use of waste heat, reduce energy lost through transmission lines, help manage power supply and demand, and improve grid resilience to extreme weather.”⁶² Microgrids are one example of a democratization of resources, power and self-sufficiency to the people, instead of corporations. The same must be done with food production, and every other area of human life if we are to establish a sustainable humanity.

Individuals’ needs are of vital importance for Adorno’s understanding of an established humanity. This global subject is meant to aim at “what all men long for.”⁶³ We have the objective possibilities to feed, clothe and house the entire human population, but we have not yet realized these possibilities because these socially necessary pursuits are not rationally organized with the species in mind. Instead they are organized by corporate and private interests. This is the case, even though satisfying vital needs is indeed what all men long for, and this entails the elimination of want and oppression. But Adorno goes on further to say that “humanity must and will continue to be oppressed until the question of material needs has been resolved.”⁶⁴ Because people have more than just their chains to lose today in fighting for a better world, this is task number one. This understanding of the potential for radical particularity, the reconciliation of individual and species are all contained in this notion of a global subject becoming sufficiently self-aware.

Part of this is certainly going to be transferring the instinct for self-preservation to the species as a whole because the survival of the individual is unthinkable without the

⁶² Center for Climate Change and Energy Solutions, “Climate Change Solutions: Microgrids”, published at <https://www.c2es.org/content/microgrids/>.

⁶³ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 143.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

survival of the species. In its current shape, every action one is making towards one's own self-preservation is actually antithetical to the survival of the species. All this sounds well and good, but how do we get there? And what actually is the global subject? Is it one large international organization? Is it a collective consciousness in something like the internet? Is it a subject that has absolute sovereignty, like Hobbes' Leviathan that speaks on behalf of the human species? This is where things get a little more complicated and it necessitates a little more construction, putting things together, and interpretation.

First of all, the global subject is not an international organization. I would argue there is no moment of "representation" in the global subject. This would contradict Adorno's criticisms of large-scale organizations as contributing to the individual's unfreedom. Adorno comments on this point directly after talking about the global subject in *History and Freedom*. He writes

"I have no need to tell you this global subject of mankind is not simply an all-embracing terrestrial organization, but a human race that possesses genuine control of its own destiny right down to the concrete details, and is thus able to fend off the unseeing blows of nature. On the contrary, the mania of organization, be it for an enlarged League of Nations or for some other global organization of all mankind, might easily fall into the category of things that prevent us from achieving what all men long for, instead of promoting that cause."⁶⁵

Adorno also speaks to this point when he claims again in *History and Freedom* that "the possibility of progress, the avoidance of total catastrophe, has migrated to such a real, not merely formal, global social subject."⁶⁶

Here we see Adorno himself refuting Espen Hammer's criticism of the global subject. Hammer accuses Adorno's position of inconsistency and thereafter critiques the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 143-144.

concept of a global subject in his book *Adorno and the Political*.⁶⁷ His critique is that Adorno's advocacy of a global subject is inconsistent with his critique of large-scale unitary collectives, such as the United Nations. But the global subject is not a collective organization that acts or makes decisions for its constituent human beings and Adorno clearly rejects this understanding in the aforementioned quote. Adorno is focused on individuals and radical particularity, and the global subject lies in individuals and communities of people, not collectives or representatives. As I have said, the global subject is the establishment of humanity, and humanity cannot be understood as a generic universal concept but that accommodates radical particularity.⁶⁸

The global subject that Adorno is speaking of seems to complement Herbert Marcuse's understanding of the new sensibility.⁶⁹ It involves a new way of understanding ourselves and our relationship to the natural world. This global subject seems to point towards a conscious understanding of the naturalness of our species, i.e., that we have certain biological and ultimately animal needs for food, water, shelter etc., and we have the means of producing these things for everyone on earth. Adorno thinks it is fundamental for us to understand our own "inbred nature" i.e., that we are natural biological beings and are in no way above nature as many philosophical systems have postulated. We as human beings require clean air, clean water, space, resources etc., and if we don't curb private and

⁶⁷ Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶⁸ "Humanity can be conceived only through an "extreme form of differentiation, individuation, not as a comprehensive generic concept." Adorno, "Progress," *Critical Models*, 151.

⁶⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1972), Famously the title of Chapter Two.

corporate interests setting the direction of our forces of production, we will be in very serious danger as a species.

I think Adorno foreshadowed, or had an acute understanding that the problems that the human species now faces can only be fought on a global scale. But extremely important is the fact that Adorno does not simply mean a global approach to a problem with a united organization at the front of the fight. A global subject is something much deeper and more individual. It encompasses the nature of our species, which is also means the nature of individuals; it points towards our species-being. The global subject is Adorno's understanding of what a society might look like when humankind finally tries to consciously determine how to structure society by reconciling each individual's needs with the survival of the species. Adorno says in *History and Freedom*, "Given the current state of technological development, the fact that there are still countless millions who suffer hunger and want must be attributed to the forms of social production, *the relations of production*, not to the intrinsic difficulty of meeting people's needs."⁷⁰

Adorno mentions the global subject in some other places in his texts as well, some of which offer a different focus, and thus illuminate different aspects of what the concept is pointing towards. For example, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno mentions the *Gesamtsubjekt* in the section on "Construction of the World Spirit."⁷¹ Here E.B. Ashton translates "*Gesamtsubjekt*" as "total subject". This line reads "To this day history lacks any total subject, however construable. Its substrate is the functional connection of real individual subjects", and Adorno continues by quoting Marx and Engels,

History does nothing, does not 'possess vast wealth,' does not 'fight battles'! It is man, rather, the real, living man who does all that, who does possess and fight; it is

⁷⁰ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 144.

⁷¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 304.

not 'history' that uses man as a means to pursue its ends, as if it were a person apart. History is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his ends.⁷²

This is part of a critique of the "mystified" world-spirit as more important than living human beings. Human beings are the subjects of history. Thus, beyond Adorno's reflections on progress, he brought the concept into his *magnum opus* and bemoaned that humanity lacks a global subject. In critiquing and engaging in open thought, we must stop abstracting from the real lived individuals and their experience, and therefore not reify the species or world spirit.

Ashton translates *Gesamtsubjekt* as "total subject" but his translation is problematic for a couple reasons. In his writing Adorno is concerned with the preponderance of the capitalist system of production over the individual. He often refers to society as the universal and lambasts its oppressive character with respect to the individual. The individual cannot be free when it is forced to submit to a system of production by taking on a meaningless and alienating job as a means to his or her own survival. The individual cannot be free when the society does not care about the individual and merely sees him or her as a fungible object in the marketplace. Adorno often refers to our exchange-based society as the "totality" that preponderates over the individual in late capitalism. It is a "real objectivity asserting itself above and through individual's heads, and thus antagonistic from the outset"⁷³ Thus, translating the *Gesamtsubjekt* as "total subject" seems to distract from the fact that most of Adorno's work is critiquing claims to totality. Adorno would not want humankind reifying the solution to its problems into a perceived totality because it retains the seeds of what it should be trying to overcome.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

To reiterate, “total subject” would be an inadequate translation of this concept because Adorno’s entire project is indeed a critique of totality. As Sergio Tischler astutely points out in his article, the core critical concept in Adorno, particularly when thinking about prospects for critiquing capitalism and activism, is the category of particularity.⁷⁴ Retaining the concept of particularity, and basing the critique of capitalism on it, are essential. Tischler argues that Adorno retains the concept of particularity as a quintessential concept because it contains Adorno’s criticism of Marx and Lukács’ ideas about the proletariat. Particularity needs to be understood instead of positing that capitalist totality is overcome by another totality, i.e., the proletariat. “Adorno claims that to think of radical social change in terms of figures of totality is part of the process of perversion and fetishization of the idea of revolutionary change.”⁷⁵ And this is central to what I have been trying to present here as encompassed by the global subject. What is more, Jarvis says that “[f]or Adorno a true ‘universal’ could never, by the logic of the concept itself, refer to any particular class but only to the end of class, to the possibility of a reconciled society – a view from what is referred to at the end of *Minima Moralia* as ‘the standpoint of redemption’”.⁷⁶ But more will be said on this later, I simply want to get the point across that translating *Gesamtsubjekt* as total subject is contrary to Adorno’s entire philosophical outlook.

This dialectic of individual and society, particular and totality lies at the heart of most of Adorno’s writing and it is the paramount consideration in the global subject.

⁷⁴ Sergio Tischler, “Adorno: The Conceptual Prison of the Subject, Political Fetishism and Class Struggle,” In *Negativity & Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*, ed. John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros & Sergio Tischler, (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 203.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 108.

⁷⁶ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno a Critical Introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 51.

Adorno approaches this aspect of the emphatic concept when he says in “Introduction” to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* that “[s]ociety is objective because, on account of its underlying structure, it cannot perceive its own subjectivity because it does not possess a total subject and through its organization it thwarts the installation of such a subject.”⁷⁷ Here Adorno is equating an understanding of society’s own subjectivity with a global subject. By society’s own subjectivity he means understanding that individuals perpetuate the objective system of production. Thus, thinking and acting as if society were “objective” i.e., relations between objects must be stopped because it is purely ideological, society is a relation between subjects. This is a Marxist point that human beings should become the subjects of their own history instead of being objects of historical forces outside their control. He expands on this point earlier on in the same text when he says that “society is subjective because it refers back to the human beings who create it, and its organizational principles too refer back to subjective consciousness and its most general form of abstraction- logic, something essentially subjective.”⁷⁸

On this same point of the relation of the individual to the totality, Adorno brings up the concept of the global subject in “Aldous Huxley and Utopia.” In this essay Adorno is critiquing Aldous Huxley’s famous dystopian depiction of a *Brave New World*. One of the points that Adorno comes back to again and again in this essay is Huxley’s presentation of the eradication of individuality in *Brave New World*. The individual is subsumed into the collectivity of society and its individuality is liquidated by the nature of social conditioning and right down to the editing of biology. This criticism is certainly based on tendencies

⁷⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Introduction,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976), 33.

⁷⁸ Adorno, “Introduction,” 33.

that Adorno saw in the totally administered society he was observing, particularly in Nazi Germany and the USA. In fact, Adorno was concerned that “Through total social mediation, from the outside, as it were, a new immediacy, a new humanity would arise. American civilization shows no lack of tendencies in this direction.”⁷⁹

Further along these lines of the fungibility of everyone in this kind of dystopian future, Adorno says that *Brave New World's*

highest moral principle, supposedly, is that everyone belongs to everyone, an absolute interchangeability that extinguishes man as an individual being, liquidates as mythology his claim to exist for his own sake, and defines him as existing merely for the sake of others and thus, in Huxley's mind, as worthless.⁸⁰

Now, I am not going to comment on Adorno's analysis of Huxley, since whether Adorno misinterpreted Huxley as championing the eradication of individuality is not a matter of importance here. What is important for our purposes is what this analysis reveals about Adorno's understanding of totality and the global subject. This commentary on Huxley ends with Adorno concluding the essay by saying, “Man's choice is not between individualism and a totalitarian world-state. If the great historical perspective is to be anything more than the *Fata Morgana* of the eye which surveys only to control, it must open on to the question of whether society will come to determine itself or bring about terrestrial catastrophe.”⁸¹

Adorno also says towards the end of this essay that “[i]nstead of antagonisms, Huxley envisages something like an intrinsically non-self-contradictory total subject of technological reason, and correspondingly, a simplistic total development.”⁸² Thus, against

⁷⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981), 105.

⁸¹ Ibid., 117.

⁸² Ibid., 114.

Huxley, Adorno is critical of a global subject that would swallow up the individual because internal antagonisms, and an appreciation for the real individuality of human beings are essential to the global subject. This continues Adorno's critique of totality and his critique of the Hegelian world spirit as we will see in Part Two.

Adorno's remarks reveal his fear that there is a tendency for a concept such as a global subject to be used to justify a repressive totality, and we should be on alert to combat those attempts. We should be on alert to combat these attempts because as Adorno criticizes in multiple works, this kind of thinking is what leads to fascism and the suffering of individuals. When a reified totality is asserted above and through individual's heads, the focus on the radical particularity of individuals is lost, and individuals become as fungible as commodities. Adorno thought this focus on totality and the exchange principle led in a straight line to the fungibility of people in the gas chambers of World War II.

Adorno's comments on the global subject in other places focus on articulating the absence of such a subject in his critical analysis of the present state of society. For example, in "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" Adorno again says explicitly "No overall social subject exists"⁸³ This comment is embedded in his assessment of Marx's understanding of capitalism and whether this understanding still holds for the present day; what we can hold onto in Marx's analysis and what needs to be updated? The details of this analysis will be taken up in Part Two of the paper, but for the purposes of this section it is enough to point towards the fact that Adorno brings up the point again that humanity does not have a global subject and therefore cannot adequately address the grave issues it faces.

⁸³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society," 124.

Thus, in the global subject, there are two main principles. First the global subject encompasses a universal moment in the understanding of real people, that is, a humankind that can break through the spell of exchange relations and identity thinking. This universal moment includes an understanding that we are a species that is susceptible to natural threats. It comprises a recognition of our own “inbred nature”, i.e., our embeddedness in nature, of the fact that we are natural beings who abide by the same laws and are as vulnerable as the rest of the biosphere. We must break down the illusions of the self as something distinct from nature that have been constructed over time. This universal moment requires education and breaking the spell.

The second principle is an active control over the material necessities for individuals. Humanity would have control over its own destiny right down to these concrete details. Individuals themselves, not large-scale collectives, should have control over their own destiny. Society needs to be able to perceive its own subjectivity, and the non-identical moment between individual and society, by this I mean the respect that goes along with appreciating that all individuals have different needs and wants. The global subject would respect Marx’s dictum of “to each according to their needs” which would be actually appreciated and taken up. We would rationally reorganize the relations of production not out of greed, but out of genuine respect and dignity to ensure that the needs of all are met. We all—as a species—would work together no longer in isolation from each other to ensure that the needs of all individuals are met.

One might say that in addition to the “new categorical imperative [that] has been imposed by Hitler on ... mankind,”⁸⁴ Adorno may have illuminated the possibility of

⁸⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

another one. The angel of history must look back on the past and understand on a moral and conceptual level that we as a species can categorically never let the atrocities of Auschwitz happen again. Now although the angel of history can never see behind itself, i.e., into the future, it understands conceptually and on a somatic level that the product of human history, i.e., the material reality of our social world is disrupting the biosphere on unimaginable levels. As Adorno said, “Humanity’s survival is threatened by the forms of its own global social constitution,” and this could not be truer in today’s reflections from within the Anthropocene.

Before moving on to Part Two, there are two additional places where Adorno mentions the global subject that are worth noting, both of which are found in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*. The first is Adorno’s comment that “ [i]f the historical genesis of art works refers back to causal contexts, these do not disappear tracelessly in them; the process enacted internally by each and every artwork works back on society as the model of a possible praxis in which something on the order of a collective subject is constituted.”⁸⁵ Thus, a global subject (“collective subject” in this translation) can be gathered and constituted through conceiving of a possible praxis, for transformation of the social order in many ways, including artistic transformation. This is further elaborated when Adorno says that “[i]n every successfully realized correction, waiting over the artist’s shoulder is a collective subject that has yet to be realized.”⁸⁶

Now that Part One has established a through-line of interpretation as to what holds the concept of the global subject together in Adorno’s writings, we can move to Part Two.

⁸⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London: Continuum, 2002), 242.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

To summarize, Part One has established that the emergence of a global subject is an imperative on the entirety of the human species if we intend to survive in the face of a threat to our survival such as climate change. The global subject contains two principles within it: a conceptual reconciliation and a material reconciliation. And foundationally, theory, and society in general, must work on the dialectic of individual and species to bring this about. A global subject would be a more individuated human species, but more in tune with an understanding of our species-needs. Part Two will bring more nuance and complexity to the concept under investigation. Part Two's discussion of the philosophical antecedents to the global subject will bring more substance to what shape this global shape may take and illuminate Adorno's critique of totality.

Section 2: Situating the Antecedents to the Global Subject.

Kant on "Humanity: Menschheit"

In order to more completely understand Adorno's ideas about a global subject we must look at Adorno's understanding of humanity, since as already noted, In "Progress", Adorno says that to avoid total catastrophe we would require the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity. When Adorno is talking about humanity, he brings up Kant, and Kant's concept of *Menschheit*. Adorno notes that Kant's doctrine of progress was anchored to the "idea of the human being", and further quotes Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," which offers a good indication of what he thinks should be preserved in Kant's understanding of an established humanity. Kant says:

The highest purpose of nature- i.e., the development of all natural capacities- can be fulfilled only in a society which has not only the greatest freedom, and therefore a continual antagonism among its members, but also the most precise specification and preservation of the limits of this freedom in order that it can coexist with the

freedom of others. The highest task which nature has set for mankind must therefore be that of establishing a society in which *freedom under external laws* would be combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force, in other words establishing a perfectly *just civil constitution*. For only through the solution and fulfillment of this task can nature accomplish its other intentions with our species.⁸⁷

Many things are worth noting in this passage from Kant for Adorno. An established humanity would have both the greatest freedom, and the precise specification of the limits to this freedom. If humankind is to achieve this, it is in virtue of its own antagonisms which move toward the kingdom of freedom. Adorno's understanding of humanity, or what is to be preserved in Kant's dialectically profound conception of humanity, is that it is not a "forced unity", but a unity that comes from the bottom up, through the internal development of its contradictions and therefore the actions and freedom of actual living human beings who will rationally establish humanity. Adorno explains this further in the essay when he says that, "If humanity were a totality that no longer held within it any limiting principle, then it would also be free of the coercion that subjects all its members to such a principle and thereby would no longer be a totality: no forced unity."⁸⁸ A totality that holds within it a principle coercing subjects is a forced unity, and Adorno thinks this is an inadequate way to think beyond current thought patterns of collectivity and totality.

Kant's "Universal History for a Cosmopolitan Purpose" focuses on the development of all human capacities, by the establishment of a "truly just civil constitution". The development of all human capacities for Kant primarily is that of self-legislation, of setting one's own ends and for humanity to become a collectivity of morally developed individuals. "Kant's doctrine stands at a watershed." Adorno says:

⁸⁷ Adorno quotes this in "Progress," 144. Kant's original quote is found in "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose", In *Kant Political Writings*, 45.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

In the most sublime passage of his philosophy of history he taught that antagonism, the entanglement of progress in myth, in the hold of nature on the domination of nature itself, in short, in the kingdom of unfreedom, tends to move by virtue of its own law towards the kingdom of freedom. Subsequently, this insight formed the basis of Hegel's 'cunning of reason'. But if that is the case, then it means nothing less than that the possibility of reconciliation is rooted in its own contradiction, that the precondition of freedom is the unfreedom that precedes it.⁸⁹

Adorno claimed that Kant's use of the concept of *Menschheit* is "dialectically profound, even though playful."⁹⁰

But Adorno rejects the Kantian notion of a universal history. Adorno does not agree with Kant's proposition that, "[a]ll the natural capacities of a creature are destined sooner or later to be developed completely and in conformity with their own end."⁹¹ Or that "[t]he history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about an internally – and for this purpose also externally – perfect political constitution as the only possible state within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely."⁹² Adorno does not believe in an overriding theodicy, or a reality of universal progress such as that posited by Kant. This is an important point because humanity, or a "perfectly just civil constitution" is the product of humankind's labour, and it could very well fail to be realized for Adorno.

Kant understands that the rational faculties, and the good will that they lead to, are the only things that are unconditionally good. This is illuminated by his humanity formulation of the categorical imperative, i.e., always treat another person not only as a means but also an end in itself. The reason one should treat others as ends in themselves is

⁸⁹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 150.

⁹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 258.

⁹¹ Immanuel, Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," In *Kant Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Second Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), First proposition.

⁹² *Ibid.* Eighth proposition.

because they have the rational faculties to direct their own lives. They can set their own ends. They are self-legislating, and if they have the courage to use their own reason then they are mature individuals that ought to be respected.

A society with the greatest freedom and precise specifications to the limit of this freedom is a cipher for a larger point. Humanity in its entirety ought to take its destiny into its own hands and determine itself instead of being heteronomously determined by a myriad of external factors. Part of this rational determination is establishing precise specifications to freedom's limits. Individuals have to accommodate the species in their actions. Actions that are clearly antagonistic to the survival of the species are not rational and should not be pursued. As Adorno says, "[t]he preservation of humanity is inexorably inscribed within the meaning of rationality: it has its end in a reasonable organization of society."⁹³ As I have noted already, Adorno is very critical of totality, and he is critical of conceptions of humanity that posit an idea, or a conception of what it means to be human as over and above individual living humans. This is the dialectically profound point in Kant's conception. The species must accommodate individuals, but at the same time the individual must also accommodate the species.

Continual antagonism and internal differentiation are essential aspects of this understanding of totality. A true totality can only consist in individuals acting by way of self-legislation under external laws and moving towards a unity. A unity cannot justifiably be posited at the outset, unless one intends the absorption of the individual into a coercive totality. As Adorno says in "On Subject and Object," "Undifferentiatedness is not unity,

⁹³ Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis", in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans Rodney Livingstone, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 273.

for the latter requires, even according to the Platonic dialectic, diverse entities of which it is the unity.”⁹⁴ Then further on, Adorno makes the further claim that “[p]eace is a state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.”⁹⁵

One can further see Adorno’s appreciation for Kant’s ideas when Adorno says, in the section of *Negative Dialectics* titled “Ontical and Ideal Moments” that “Kant must have noticed the double meaning of the word “humanity,” as the idea of being human and as the totality of all men; he introduced it into theory in a manner that was dialectically profound, even though playful.”⁹⁶ Adorno notes that in Kant’s subsequent usage of the concept of humanity, he “vacillates between ontical manners of speech and others that refer to the idea.” Adorno’s point here, one that he will critically appropriate in his own work, is that Kant neither wants to “cede the idea of humanity to the existing society nor to vaporize it into a phantasm.”⁹⁷ This encapsulates the fact that the concept itself mediates between individual living subjects and the species, in other words it encompasses the accommodation of each to the other.

In his first endnote to his translation of the progress essay Henry Pickford reinforces this point and mentions that in this essay “Adorno plays on the double meaning of *Menschheit*,”⁹⁸ in the same way we just seen Adorno praise Kant for doing. This shows Adorno’s indebtedness to Kant in appreciating the non-identity that is contained within such an emphatic concept. The non-identity contained in this concept concerns the fact that humanity is not reducible to a total world spirit, or to an idea of what it is to be a human

⁹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 247.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 258.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 358-9n1.

being. But it is neither reducible to a radical individuality that forgets about the universal features of the species. Humanity is to be conceived as both the idea of what it means to be human that has to be ushered into reality, and the individuals who comprise it. This is a thoroughly dialectical conception.

Now, although Adorno wants to preserve this dual usage of the concept of humanity, it is essential that the “*eidos*” of humanity is still something yet to be realized for Adorno. This is where Adorno is moving from the ideas of Kant, to the Hegelian-Marxist idea of humanity as a product that has to be ushered in by the conscious activity of humankind. Kant’s understanding, as we just seen, makes reference to “a teleological idea of man whose disposition is such that what he really is, is something that he first has to become.”⁹⁹ But Adorno rejects a teleological conception that humanity will be realized through a “hidden plan of nature”. He enthusiastically states “[t]he idea of man is a concept that must (and I hope will) soon be energetically worked out.”¹⁰⁰

After Adorno mentions the “famous variant” of the categorical imperative from the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, -the so-called humanity formulation- “Act so the humanity, in your person as in every other person, will always be used also as an end, never just as a means”¹⁰¹, he mentions that humanity “as the principle of being human, not as ‘the sum of all men’ is still unrealized.”¹⁰² Furthermore, in Adorno’s essay “On Subject and Object” he reiterates this point near the end, when he claims that, “The human being

⁹⁹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 145.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Third Edition, trans. James W. Ellington, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 36.

¹⁰² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 257.

is a result, not an *eidos*; the insights of Hegel and Marx penetrate all the way into the inmost aspects of the so called question of constitution.”¹⁰³

Of paramount importance here is Adorno’s continued mention that even though the individual is a “representative of the socialized human species”, there is currently an absolute and irreducible non-identity between the individual and the species, or the social mechanism, which operates over their heads and through their heads.”¹⁰⁴ This is important because of how Adorno is critical of a totality that operates over and through our heads. The totality that exists, in quite Hegelian fashion, over individuals’ heads is not rational when thinking from the position of the survival of the species or from the position of individuals. In fact, Adorno remarks “[a]s opposed to the collective powers that usurp the world spirit in the contemporary world, the universal and rational can hibernate better in the isolated individual than in the stronger battalions that have obediently abandoned the universality of reason.”¹⁰⁵

This is why, for the moment, individuals who have a more progressive consciousness must stand in as a placeholder for humanity. An individual such as Greta Thunberg with her activism and forms of resistance are more rational than a catastrophic societal constitution that carries most along in complacency.¹⁰⁶ Adorno himself gives the example of Fabian Von Schlabrendorff and his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler.¹⁰⁷ In another place Adorno says that Peter Altenberg gave voice to this progressive morality when he articulated quite concisely the moral outrage that moved Nietzsche to action, when

¹⁰³ Adorno, “On Subject and Object”, 258.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Cook, “Political Activism and Prospects for Change in Adorno,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 58, (227) (2004): 59.

¹⁰⁶ Greta Thunberg is a young Swedish Climate Activist. She initiated the school strike for climate movement by protesting outside the Swedish parliament every Friday to protest inaction on climate change.

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 240.

he collapsed in Turin when he saw the mistreatment of a horse.¹⁰⁸ It is here Adorno remarks that, “[p]rogress is encoded in a concept that all camps today unanimously defame, that of decadence.”¹⁰⁹ At this point in time, Adorno does not think that consensus is more rational than an individual’s reason necessarily. As he says, “to know the truth, one needs that irreducibly individual reason that is . . . supposedly obsolete.”¹¹⁰ This is why Adorno in “On Subject and Object” posits Kant’s transcendental subject as a cipher for society, or the conceptual and material prison that is felt by individuals as a consequence of the capitalist system. The irreducibly individual reason was present in these examples that went against the objective reason that held priority.

Given Adorno’s insistence of the non-identity between the individual and the species, it only makes sense to interpret his usage of “humanity” as something that would resemble neither the totality as it exists today nor be comprised of individuals as they currently exist. Humanity is neither one nor the other, but something distinctive yet to be realized. There is a reconciliation that has to take place between individuals and the species, and this is what needs to be realized. This will be realized when collectively we realize that any human created system can be resisted and changed. Ursula LeGuin sounded this Adornoian point when she said, “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable- but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Adorno, “Progress,” 151.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹¹⁰ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 276.

¹¹¹ Ursula, LeGuin. National Book Awards Speech. Transcription retrieved from *The Guardian*. 20. November 2014.

Adorno says that, “the possibility of progress...has migrated to such a real, not merely formal, global social subject.”¹¹² In *Negative Dialectics* he again focuses on this dialectic of *Menschheit* when he says:

Humanity, the human potential in men, may well be meant as a regulative ideal; humanity as the principle of being human, not as the “sum of all men”, is still unrealized. Even so, we cannot shake off the factual, substantive increment in the word: that every individual should be respected as a representative of the socialized human species, that he is not a mere function of the exchange process.¹¹³

This tension in Adorno serves to illuminate more than it obscures. Adorno is being much more dialectical in his usage of the term. His usage retains the non-identity of individual and society, and at the same time it implies that there could be a reconciliation between the human potential in individuals and a society where individuals are not reduced to a mere function of the exchange process. The individual subject ought to be united with the universal interest of the species.¹¹⁴ Part of the logic of the self-preservation of the individual is that it should be extended to embrace the conception of the self-preservation of the species.”¹¹⁵ This requires radical critique and transformation.

The idea of the non-identical is an essential part of this critique of totality. Adorno points to the fact that when the universal concept is posited to characterize an individual it is always inadequate. “Objects do not go into their concepts without remainder.”¹¹⁶ Further in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno says that, “[n]egative dialectics allows us to recognize the difference that has been spirited away.”¹¹⁷ This “difference” that has been spirited away is

¹¹² Adorno, “Progress,” 144.

¹¹³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 257. I have altered Ashton’s translation slightly here. Ashton mistranslates “exchange” as “barter” in this passage. I have gone with exchange.

¹¹⁴ For a discussion of redirecting individual self-preservation to the self-preservation of the species, see Cook *Adorno on Nature*, particularly chapter four: “Adorno’s Endgame”.

¹¹⁵ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 44.

¹¹⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

the radical particularity of things and individuals when one classifies and characterizes individuals under the concept of species. Individuality and the “non-identical moment” are lost or spirited away by the tradition of identity thinking, or classifying particulars under universals without an adequate reflection of their non-identity. This is important when considering what it means to be a human, and what our “species-being” is. Adorno’s conception of humanity is indebted not only to Kant, but Marx and Hegel for this reason. Marx particularly established a pluralistic understanding of our species-being that Adorno is drawing on as an outgrowth and development on Kant’s conception of humanity.

So the importance of Kant in influencing Adorno’s idea of humanity is multifaceted. Firstly, Adorno thinks that the transcendental and empirical subject in the Kantian system of philosophy is a cipher for society, i.e., society’s coercive conceptuality and the irreducible individual. This Kantian dichotomy reveals the non-identity that is inherent in the present state of society and the individuals who comprise it. Individuals are not fully identical with the social totality that pressures them to conform. In our society Adorno sees the principle of exchange, identity, and fungibility as positing an identity between individuals themselves and the species, but this is false. Secondly, because of this non-identity, humanity must be understood as a reconciliation of the antagonisms between the individual and the species, and that would represent the human species breaking through a false totality. Thirdly, humanity must be self-legislating. Humanity must take its destiny into its own hands and rationally establish itself. Humanity must emerge by becoming mature in the Kantian sense of individuals. Humanity involves seeing the individual’s freedom as depending on a conception of the species as free.

The connection here between *Menschheit* and species-being is that each is concerned with a self-determining human species comprised of self-determining individuals. While Kant focused primarily on self-determination through reason and self-legislation, Marx and Hegel with the idea of species-being made this central, but made the further important claim that individuals have to have the freedom to translate this self-determination into labour, i.e., actually working on the objective world via conscious plans and as universal beings.

Species-being provides Adorno with the conceptual tool to be able to overcome the appeal to teleology of the Kantian system, avoiding an appeal to “nature’s plan” he puts the destiny of our species in our own hands. Species-being, as it was in Hegel and Marx, was that of labour, not just determining through reason our own ends, but actually being able to labour and objectify those conscious plans into the natural world to help create a social world according to our aspirations as rational subjects and as a species.

Marx and Hegel on “Species-Being: Gattungswesen”

Hegel was an important intervention into the question of species-being, freedom and autonomy. In his work, Hegel explicitly took up the Kantian focus on the centrality of freedom, calling his philosophy a philosophy of freedom. His critique of the Kantian conception of freedom is that it was only a “negative” conception of freedom existing only in the individual’s self-legislation. The *Philosophy of Right* articulates the position that self-legislation is not enough. There have to be real world places and institutions for individuals to actually pursue and determine their own freedom. Individual freedom is only realized as social freedom. Adorno agrees with this, but, he critiques Hegel for identarian thinking because Hegel posits that the existing conditions of the bourgeois social order,

were sufficient grounds to make the metaphysical claim that the relation between society and individuals in the 19th century was indicative of the best possible constitution of humanity. Marx borrowed this idea of freedom from Hegel and thought that freedom did not come from a single willing agent, such as what is posited in the Kantian system of philosophy but is only understood as a wider societal phenomenon. Another way to put this same point is that individuals have to understand themselves as a part of a larger species or society, and only then, when humankind understands and transforms the world to be hospitable towards their own ends as a species, can it truly be free.

Adorno's critique of Hegel follows two central points. First, as I just mentioned Adorno charges Hegel for identarian thinking and therefore thinks Hegel does not respect the non-identical. Adorno sees Hegel as positing a universal world spirit as above and through individuals' heads, where the individual is merely a conduit for the larger rationality of absolute spirit. Adorno sees Hegel's philosophy as one that engulfs the individual into the totality, and therefore only holds to one side of the dialectic of humanity. Now whether Adorno's characterization of the Hegelian system is accurate or not is not of much importance here. The important point is the intervention of Hegel into this discussion with his focus on social freedom, i.e., there have to be places in the world to exercise and guarantee freedom instead of freedom merely consisting in "obeying one's own law" as it is in Kant. In addition to this, Hegel's focus on rationality being tied to an understanding of one's membership in spirit, and therefore to the species is an important connection here with Marx.

Marx's discussion of humankind's species-being comes in the famous section of the 1844 Manuscripts titled "Estranged Labour". It is in this section that Marx, looks more

closely at the objectification of the labour of the working class, and the estrangement that follows. It is here that Marx explains the different types of alienation that accompany the capitalist mode of production. First, the worker is alienated from the product of his or her labour, i.e., the objectification of the worker's talents and skills into the material world as a commodity is ripped away from them and owned by the capitalist.

Secondly, the worker is not only alienated from the product, but this alienation is embedded in the very labouring activity of the worker. The work and labour of the individual is therefore external to the worker, "he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind."¹¹⁸ Thus workers cannot realize themselves when they work; their self-conception is secondary and only exists on the weekend.

The third aspect of estranged labour is the fact that estranged labour turns man's species being, into a being alien to him, into a means to his individual existence.¹¹⁹ This will be important to explore further because Adorno thinks that the full capacity of individuals is stunted by capitalism and they are forced to only think of their individual subsistence in competition with others to the detriment of wider productive activities.

Marx says about our species-being that,

Man is a species being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but – and this is only another way of expressing it- but also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a universal and therefore free being.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan, (New York: Prometheus, 1988), 74.

¹¹⁹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 77.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

Man is a species being because he is a being that can understand himself as a member of a species, and therefore escape the direct relation of an individual animal to their life (species) activity. Species-being for Marx is what distinguishes the individuals of our species from any other animals on the planet. The character of a species is contained in the character of its life-activity. Marx describes our life activity as that of “free conscious activity”. Truly human activity is human activity that is determined by the labourer through his or her own free conscious activity.

The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity.¹²¹

Another aspect of Marx’s discussion of species-being, a point which Adorno made as well, is that “[an animal] produces one-sidedly, while man produces universally. An animal produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and *only truly produces in freedom therefrom*.¹²² Marx’s assertion is clear. Man’s species-being is that of free-conscious activity, i.e., humans can determine for themselves through their own faculties what to do. And the species can only truly produce when they are free from the immediate physical needs that preoccupy the labour of mere animals.

One of the central insights Marx offered us on this topic is his pluralist understanding of what our species-character is. Marx critiques previous understandings of human nature as identifying one human activity and reifying it to be the metaphysical characteristic of human beings. The sixth thesis on Feuerbach shows how Marx was against such an idea of reifying the human essence into a theoretical phenomenon. Instead, the

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 77, emphasis is mine.

human essence is contained dialectically with “the ensemble of social relations.”¹²³ The question of the human being cannot be asked in abstraction from any actual practical expression, in other words, it cannot be abstracted from the actual labouring activities of human beings because labouring is what humans do. And as humans social relations change, so will their ability to use this capacity.

This idea provides part of the foundation for a critique of capitalism for Marx. If humans have the capacity to understand themselves as part of a species, and objectively determine their life activities, then capitalism effectively and systematically places restrictions on that aspect of human life and forces the overwhelming majority of humankind to struggle for individual survival. Humans have the capacity- as labour under capitalism shows- to produce and act on behalf of something larger than ourselves: the species. There is no saying what a human species could look like if we unleashed this capacity from its constraints under capitalism. What we can say is that humans have this capacity, but we cannot say it is the nature- in a metaphysical sense- of our species because we have no epistemological access to what a species would look like if all its labour were directed towards the benefit of the species. But, if we have this capacity and it is stunted by capitalism, as Marx and Adorno both thought was the case, then humans cannot produce as “free and universal beings” until the other influences on labour are dealt with. Marx said, the human being “truly produces in freedom from such need”. Which is certainly among the premises underlying Adorno’s agreement with Horkheimer’s point that

¹²³ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” In *Marx and Engels Archive* (marxists.org), 2002.

“[f]reedom is not the freedom to accumulate, but the fact that I have no need to accumulate.”¹²⁴

Marx’s analysis points out a problem with labour under capitalism: “[t]he consciousness which man has of his species is thus transformed by estrangement in such a way that the species life becomes for him a means.”¹²⁵ Adorno is making the same point when he is talking about the surrendering of the task of self-preservation to the capitalist system. This act forces people to think of their own individual survival (by labouring as a means to make a paycheck) instead of the survival of the species and the development of all our free conscious capacities. It limits our “universal being” to a false focus on our “particular being”. People are under the illusion that their survival and development is antagonistic to everyone else’s and this is a false human construction. We need to unite under the principle of the survival of the species because an individual’s existence is inconceivable without the species. We must find a situation where we can unite human beings and their universal capacity, so that we can put the species’ survival as the number one priority. It is only by doing this can the species enter a truly free state of developing all human capacities.

“Thus, Marx sees human freedom as dependent upon our ability to produce objects according to our conscious plans.”¹²⁶ Capitalism, has brought about a world where our potential is systematically stunted, reducing the human being to a mere animal.¹²⁷ These boundaries of human labour that result in alienation could be removed, and we could

¹²⁴ Adorno, and Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto,” 37.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 84.

¹²⁷ Thomas E. Wartenberg, “‘Species-being’ and ‘Human Nature’ in Marx,” *Human Studies* (Vol. 5, No 2 (April -June 1982) pp. 77-95.) 87.

establish actual rational limits with the species and individuals in mind. But Adorno is also saying that capitalism does not only stunt the human species and the full development of its capacities, it is leading to its total destruction.

In a reconciled world for Adorno, the species will be reflected in individuals, and individuals will reflect the species, particularly when it comes to our productive activities. There has to be a dialectic between these two, there has to be communication between the species and the individual. Humanity today is destroying itself because the social world fails to take into account the needs of individuals, including the need for clean air, water, adequate housing, the need to not be in a constant state of anxiety and most significantly the need for the human species to continue.

Taking the species as an object of thought and acting as a self-directed individual in accordance with one's membership therein is essential to both Marx and Adorno's accounts. Having the species as an object of thought allows social labour to escape the closed circle of necessity. Instead of every individual staring at the ground, the human species would finally look around to its fellow humans and explore its potential. Adorno says in "Progress" that "[r]eality's spell over spirit prevents spirit from doing what its own concept wants to do when faced with the merely existent: to fly."¹²⁸

Herbert Marcuse says in commenting on this aspect of Marx, "Man's nature lies in his universality. His intellectual and physical faculties can be fulfilled only if all men exist as men, in a developed wealth of their human resources. Man is free only if all men are free and exist as universal beings."¹²⁹ But all humans are not free at the moment because

¹²⁸ Adorno, "Progress," 157.

¹²⁹ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. Second Edition, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1968), 275.

this type of activity that is characteristic of its life-activity is systematically contained under the current system. Individuals today have a limited sphere of activity to produce as “species-beings”. When individuals go to work the majority are labouring for the welfare of greater numbers of people than just themselves. Their labour is extended beyond mere individual necessity, but by the nature of capitalism it is mediated in every direction by private interest. What would a species look like, and how far could it develop if this capacity for free-conscious activity went towards the welfare of all human beings instead of being directed by private and corporate interest? We do not know what the species will be like until all humans can exist as universal beings. This is why it is so important to not cede the idea of humanity to the existent; the species is a product for Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Adorno.

Marcuse, again in *Reason and Revolution* insightfully comments on Marx’s concept of species being. He says that,

Man is free only if all men are free and exist and exist as ‘universal beings’. When this condition is attained, life will be shaped by the potentialities of the genus, Man, which embraces the potentialities of all the individuals that comprise it. The emphasis on this universality brings nature as well into the self-development of mankind.¹³⁰

Man is only free if all men are free as universal beings and life will actually be shaped by humankind, consciously. This means that revolutionary change has to aim at the liberation of all human beings and cannot settle for less. Now it is necessary to investigate the state of the proletariat today, and Adorno’s ideas about it.

Establishing humanity would be an internally differentiated, more individuated, and antagonistic “totality” that self-legislates and has “perfect” freedom under external

¹³⁰ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 275

laws through a just civil constitution. This Kantian influenced notion of humanity is made more concrete with the notion of species-being. In order to foster mature individuals who could rationally self-legislate themselves into a kingdom of ends, we have to allow human activity to be directed towards universality, and to develop all human capacities which are not inimical to the survival of our species. Through the capitalist mode of production, humans were forced to produce for larger groups than their family, this allowed thought to wander to greater heights and ultimately to the species itself. But it is now time to fully develop this ability if we want to prevent the most destructive scenario our current societal constitution brings.

This notion of free conscious activity, as a potential identity for our species could be established if we were able to effectively neutralize or abolish late-capitalism's coercion, but it is not so simple. This is a complex matter. There are real consequences to this coercion, such as the weakening of the ego, and manufactured scarcity on the individual. This points towards some of the impediments to a global subject. Adorno would not think that our species being-today is that of free conscious activity, but he is pointing to the fact that in establishing humanity we could find out what humans are really like. Thus, we need to look at Adorno's ideas about the proletariat and political praxis because the failure of Marxist revolutionary praxis to usher in this kind of reality requires a reflection on revolutionary theory. "If the transformation of the world failed, its interpretation also requires re-thinking."¹³¹ And the failure of the Marxist revolutionary praxis had world-historical significance for Adorno.¹³²

¹³¹ Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany's 1960's," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 40(9) (2014), 873.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 869.

Adorno's Ideas About the Proletariat

Despite the theoretical headway we have made in assessing the concept of the global subject, and its philosophical antecedents, the practical side has to now be addressed. One of Adorno's central concerns was critiquing and assessing the relationship between theory and praxis. A critical social theory needs to address why the moment of philosophy's realization had failed. Why is there still hunger, poverty, and human suffering despite the technological and scientific resources to eliminate them altogether? This section will deal with Adorno's thoughts about the relation between theory and praxis, and it will begin through his assessment of the proletariat.

Adorno is often criticized for not providing a blueprint for the future and revolutionary activity. He has been criticized for offering no substantive alternatives and was even criticized in his day for being too reactionary. Any thoughts about Adorno and revolutionary praxis are stained by the now famous event when Adorno called the police in 1969 on students occupying the university in Frankfurt. But with this in mind, Adorno does not deserve the criticism that he was inconsistent with his own theory, and too reactionary for a truly revolutionary thinker. Fabian Freyenhagen, in his partial defence of Adorno, forcefully argues that Adorno's decision to call the police on the students occupying the university is not inconsistent with the practical implications of his critical theory.¹³³ Adorno simply did not think that the world could be changed at that time.

As Freyenhagen aptly notes in the aforementioned article, Adorno's ideas about theory and praxis must be understood in light of Marx's statement that,

¹³³ Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany's 1960's," *passim*.

The thing to be done at any definite given moment of the future, the thing immediately to be done, depends of course entirely on the given historical conditions in which one has to act.¹³⁴

It is in his essay, “Reflections on Class Theory” that Adorno stakes out his position in relation to Marx in thinking about class theory. Marx’s prediction of the overcoming of capitalism through a proletariat revolution did not come true. This is an essential tenet of Adorno’s philosophy that the given historical conditions are different now. As he says at the beginning of *Negative Dialectics*, “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.”¹³⁵ Philosophy’s realization would have been a socialist revolution at the beginning of the 20th century when the proletariat still had a class consciousness. But Adorno, in thinking about the fundamental structure of class society today, thinks that things are indeed different. Marx’s analysis of class society needs to be critiqued and thought through in our contemporary world of late capitalism. Specifically, for revolutionary praxis to become possible again, it needs a renewed analysis of the present situation and its constraints.

In this essay Adorno firmly asserts himself to be still a Marxist in the sense that he too believes that history has always been the history of class struggles.¹³⁶ And today the concept is as important as the day it was penned. But on the other hand, we must also be aware that there have been structural transformations in capital since Marx’s time that need to be re-examined. Adorno makes the Hegelian claim that there needs to be a sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the concept of class under monopoly capital.¹³⁷ The concept of class needs

¹³⁴ Karl Marx, *Marx to Domela Nieuwenhuis In the Hague*, retrieved from Marxists.org. London, February 22, 1881.

¹³⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3.

¹³⁶ Adorno, “Reflections on Class Theory” in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 94.

¹³⁷ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 96.

to be preserved because “[i]ts basis, the division of society into exploiters and exploited, not only continues unabated, but is increasing in coercion and solidity.”¹³⁸ But, on the other hand, class must be questioned because the exploited cannot experience themselves as a class today. The bourgeoisie, or more precisely the disenfranchised bourgeoisie, have been engulfed into one mass class of all exploited members of society that fails to recognize itself as a class and understand their emancipatory power. There is no subjective awareness in monopoly capitalism of participating in a class.

Adorno in “Towards a New Manifesto” quotes Nietzsche and says that society today is one where there is “No herdsman and one herd.”¹³⁹ He continues that there is a “kind of false classless society. Society finds itself on the way to what looks like the perfect classless society but is in reality the very opposite.”¹⁴⁰ It is in reality its very opposite because there continue to be exploited and exploiters in present society. Objectively the exploitation immanent to capitalism is still there, yet the subjective side of class consciousness is missing. It is difficult for the CEO of a company, moving papers from one side of his desk to the other, to establish a class consciousness with the construction worker building our roads, or the McDonald’s employee working the front counter. However, all of them are integrated, oppressed by the system and are objectively exploited. Exploitation is intrinsic to the system. All human beings objectively have real interest in establishing a collective consciousness in order to mitigate their alienation and therefore suffering. Adorno says in *History and Freedom* that,

Mankind has reached a point today where even those on the commanding heights cannot enjoy their positions because even these have been whittled away to the point where they are merely functions of their own function. Even captains of

¹³⁸ Adorno, “Reflections on Class Theory,” 97.

¹³⁹ Adorno, “Towards a New Manifesto,” 40.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

industry spend their time working through mountains of documents shifting them from one side of their desk to the other, instead of ignoring office hours and reflecting on freedom.¹⁴¹

In “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society” Adorno furthers his engagement in an analysis of the question of “whether the capitalist system still predominates according to its model, however modified, or whether the development of industry has rendered the concept of capitalism obsolete.”¹⁴² Or this question can also be put, is Marx out of date?

Adorno says there is no clear yes or no answer that can be given to these kinds of questions. But, as a “initial, necessarily abstract answer”, for critique to build on, Adorno says that contemporary society is an industrial society in its forces of production,¹⁴³ while capitalist in its relations of production.¹⁴⁴

Adorno follows Marx when he makes the point that the forces of production, or the means of production which encompass the technological and scientific potential to eliminate want and oppression, are different from the relations of production. The relations of production are the social relations between the owners of the means of production, the oligarchy that is truly influencing the direction of the productive apparatus, and workers. Relations of production remain capitalist because capital is still highly concentrated, and people are still appendages of the machine.¹⁴⁵

Yet, in monopoly capitalism the ruling class is now hidden behind an invisible concentration of wealth which makes resistance all the more difficult. The root of understanding capitalism as it is today, Adorno says, lies in how capitalist relations of

¹⁴¹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 6.

¹⁴² Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society,” 111.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

production have come to dominate society as a whole, leading to extreme, albeit often invisible, concentrations of wealth and power.¹⁴⁶ The relations of production have proved to me more flexible than Marx had expected.¹⁴⁷

In addition to this, Adorno mentions that with the intervention of the welfare state, Marx's immiseration thesis no longer holds, and the ruling class effectively secures "for slaves their existence within slavery in order to ensure its own."¹⁴⁸ The will to get into the streets and demand a revolution is not nearly as high as it once was, partly because there is more to lose than just one's chains. This means that people are complacent with their home, phone, car, etc., with their minimal freedom because it is the means for their individual existence. But these commodities that they exchange the majority of their life-activity for, are in abundance. Despite this abundance, people are still forced to compete with others and therefore think of their survival as in some way in competition with others. In a society where one is forced into the rat-race, Adorno says that, "[m]aking oneself the same, becoming civilized, fitting in, uses up all the energy that might be used to do things differently."¹⁴⁹ And "[n]eed satisfaction now appears more rational than collective action."¹⁵⁰ In other words it appears more rational to submit and go to work than to protest and demand systematic change.

With the intervention of the welfare state, people enjoy an increased standard of living, shorter work days, improved conditions, etc. The welfare state contributes to the invisibility of classes by masking class relations. In the current state of mass society, and

¹⁴⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 189–92.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴⁸ Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory," 105.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

the increasing invisibility of classes, reification has increased as well. There is now societal level reification. The way of the world transforms human beings and their life-activity into formally commensurable variations of the exchange relationship.¹⁵¹ And therefore the real social relations, or the real “subjectivity” that underlies capitalism, are veiled from individuals and reified into a perceived objectivity relating objects to objects.

The new mass class is objectively the agent of revolution but subjectively it is not precisely because it lacks consciousness of itself as a class. The mass class lacks central characteristics that Marx attributed to an agent of revolution, i.e., having a class consciousness and the need (through Marx’s immiseration thesis) to get into the streets and demand revolution. Classes have been sublated into one mass class which makes the prospects for class consciousness even more difficult, as I previously alluded to with the example of the CEO and the McDonalds employee. And therefore at least in Adorno’s time it was not a revolutionary moment for these reasons. These are some of Adorno’s reflections on the proletariat, and they reveal that revolutionary activity has to take a different route today. The global subject as the agent of revolution has to liberate the entirety of humanity, partly by thinking about how these impediments can be overcome today.

Reflections on Maturity and Praxis

The lack of a subjective aspect of class consciousness leads into some of Adorno’s comments on the state of education and praxis today. Everything is fungible under the bourgeoisie principle of exchange. Individuals are liquidated into functions of the productive apparatus and only retain a pseudo-individuality; people are degraded, and the

¹⁵¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, (New York: Verso, 2005), 229.

ego is weakened. Individuals now exhibit more follow the leader tendencies in opposition to critical reflection. These impediments to social solidarity are contained in Adorno's adoption of the Kantian idea of "immaturity," i.e., along with Kant, Adorno believes that for the most part, we are unable to use our own reasoning abilities without the guidance of authority figures.¹⁵² The collectives and social movements of monopoly capitalism at the moment are inadequate for true change because of these impediments to social solidarity and the formation of strong individuals who can resist.

Moreover, since Adorno's critique of the present state of society is heavily influenced by his ideas about the immaturity of individuals, and the false totality that asserts itself over and through their heads, I will move to a brief discussion of Adorno's ideas about "education for maturity", and how the concept of maturity can be useful to help understand how to combat the increasing threats of our time. In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, moreover, he associated self-reflection with morality when he said that "the element of self-reflection has today become the true heir to what used to be called moral categories."¹⁵³

Before Adorno's untimely death in 1969, a radio broadcast was made of a conversation between him and Hellmut Becker on the topic of "Education for Maturity and Responsibility". It is here that Adorno clearly and lucidly articulates that a quintessential element of democracy is the education of individuals in "political, social, and moral awareness". Democracy necessitates a population that has the courage to make full use of its reasoning power. In order to clarify this further, Adorno refers to Kant's now famous

¹⁵² Immanuel, Kant. "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" In *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), *passim*.

¹⁵³ Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 176.

essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” and his discussion there of *Mündigkeit*, i.e., maturity and responsibility. It is in this essay that Kant famously says that enlightenment is “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage”. This means that *Unmündigkeit*, translated often as immaturity and irresponsibility, is one’s own fault if it originates in a lack of courage to use one’s own reason without the guidance of another.¹⁵⁴ Adorno claims that Kant’s understanding is “extraordinarily up-to-date”.¹⁵⁵

Becker and Adorno agree that education is entirely inadequate. Education as it was practiced then, which remains unchanged today, is too authoritarian and conformist. The education system as a whole does not focus on maturity in the Kantian sense, rather “order and commitment are being advocated and seen as good in themselves, with a total lack of concern about how things stand with regard to autonomy, and therefore to maturity.”¹⁵⁶

What is more, it is not surprising that Becker and Adorno agree, considering the critique of totality that we have been following throughout this paper, that “the question of maturity is a global problem”.¹⁵⁷ Education as it is being conducted today is forming pseudo-individuals. This means that individuals today are determined heteronomously instead of autonomously. This is particularly true in the 21st century and the explosion of the culture industry and its infiltration into the internet, i.e., the place many go to educate themselves. The problem is thus the following: how do we educate for “protest and resistance”, how do we “open people’s minds to the fact that they are constantly being deceived”?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Theodor, W. Adorno, and Hellmut Becker. “Education for Maturity and Responsibility,” Translated by Robert French, Jem Thomas and Dorothee Weymann. In *History or the Human Sciences*, (Vol. 12 No. 3 pp. 21-34. 1999), 21.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.

Adorno clearly thought, not only that there were few prospects for the social solidarity needed for a revolution, but he further indicted the global education system in its unreflective propagation of the very thing undermining a truly human society. The problem is, as Robert French and Jem Thomas concisely put it, the need to resolve the paradox in the “idea of an education that is at once authoritative and non-conformist”, which Adorno and Becker failed to do.¹⁵⁹ It is with these ideas about the education system undermining the very individuals we need to overcome an oppressive system, that I turn to Adorno’s thoughts about political praxis, which mirror a very similar problem to his indictment of education.

The disintegration of the social consciousness into different factions of society represents a real threat to the prospects for social solidarity. Each faction of society, whether it is online social media that reaffirms one’s beliefs, or social clubs, or schools, promotes conformism. In an age of alternative facts people are experiencing different information in separate spaces on the internet because of corporate interests that dominate the flow of information. This really is the objectification of pseudo-individuality. Algorithms that are created and dominated by corporate interests determine what information one sees, what products one buys, and what news comes across one’s internet feed. People are being fed their own ideologies right back to them in a self-perpetuating cycle which perpetuates the state of reification in society.

This really is the perfect manifestation of capitalism’s ideological baggage. Marx’s famous analysis of the fetishism of commodities which results in societal level reification

¹⁵⁹ Robert French and Jem Thomas “Maturity and education, citizenship and enlightenment: an introduction to Theodor Adorno and Hellmut Becker, ‘Education for maturity and responsibility’” In *History of the Human Sciences* (Vol. 12 No. 3 pp. 1-19. 1999), 1.

that we can clearly see now, makes a literally reified world of information and commodities that mediate most individual's interaction with the outside world. The point is the following: the internet has now posed a dialectical problem like no other, posing limitations and possibilities towards the hope for human solidarity and quick human action when needed, while contributing to the formation of pseudo-individuals.

In "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" Adorno observed and commented on forms of political praxis. Ultimately Adorno comes to say that praxis has to be deferred because we are not in a revolutionary situation yet, praxis as it currently exists has fascist tendencies. Forms of collective action and revolutionary praxis tend toward a follow-the-charismatic-leader style according to Adorno. There is no real discussion among people across political lines. There is no real discussion within groups. "Behind this ploy lies an authoritarian principle: the dissenter must adopt the group's opinion." "Discussion serves manipulation"¹⁶⁰

This pseudo-activity, i.e., inadequate forms of social solidarity in praxis, reveals the connection between the inadequate forms of praxis, and the pseudo-individuality that concerns Adorno about education as it exists today. Again in "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis", Adorno says that "[w]orld history once again produces in parody the kind of people whom it in fact needs."¹⁶¹ By contrast, "the sole adequate praxis would be to put all energies toward working our way out of barbarism."¹⁶² This is why Adorno comes to say that we need a new form of collectivity. We need a new way of understanding how to achieve our goals as collectives without slipping into the tendencies of old ways of thought.

¹⁶⁰ Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" 269.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 270.

¹⁶² Ibid., 268.

We need more individuals to be leaders and not falling into conformity and thus fascist tendencies.

Old ways of structuring movements did not stray too far from hierarchically organized movements. We need new ideas about action. Instead of top down action we need lateral and horizontal action. For example, the Gilets Jaunes in France are a good example of something different for example, they have been described as amorphous; they have no leader. There is no clear leader that is informing people what to do, they are laterally demanding action. The Hong Kong democracy protests in their present form have no clear old-fashioned hierarchical structure to it either. We need less vertical and more horizontal forms of organization. This is why the Gilets Jaunes, and the protests in Hong Kong are important. Climate change movements on the other hand, seem to be progressively falling backward. People are idolizing big celebrities that come out as advocates, or placing a lot of hope on a young Swedish girl's shoulders for example. And if the movement continues in this way, it will fail. The interesting and promising aspect about climate change rebellion is that the only way for it to be successful is a radically individualized and democratized approach to the problem. It cannot be solved but through horizontal action.

Conclusion

What type of real-world revolutionary activity does Adorno advocate? What kind of revolutionary activity does Adorno's negative dialectics lead to? Commentary on Adorno's ideas about political activism and revolution broadly takes two forms. There is one criticism that sees Adorno as residing in the "Grand Hotel Abyss" and presents him as "an elitist mandarin who refused to engage in resistance to the socio-economic conditions

that he criticized for more than four decades”.¹⁶³ The second focus of commentators is on Adorno’s advocacy of a rigorous critique of existing conditions, and his view that critique is the form of praxis that needs to be taken up today because theory has priority in the current conditions.¹⁶⁴

It is part of my claim in this paper that one reason why Adorno’s thoughts on revolution or political activism have been hitherto misunderstood and obscured is because the global subject has not been shown to be the missing link in the discussion, or in other words a non-totalitarian understanding of collectivity. To put it another way, the missing link could be said to be Adorno’s advocacy of a “negative totality”. The global subject is the foundation of a positive political praxis in Adorno’s work.

There should be no mistakes made about the fact that the immanent demand on the human species that Adorno makes- in the name of the global subject- is a call to revolution. The global subject would be the establishment of humanity, but it is essentially the revolutionary subject that humanity needs to prevent total catastrophe and annihilation. The establishment of the global subject would be the moment of philosophy’s realization.

Adorno is certainly still a Marxist in the sense that he thinks that humanity is a product that comes at the end of revolution. This may contradict some people’s false conception of Adorno. Some have presented Adorno as putting off the importance of revolution as not the most important demand on humankind. But in “Towards a New Manifesto”, a lucid conversation on theory and practice between Adorno and Horkheimer, Adorno claims that “[t]he fact that art exists is not rendered immaterial by the statement

¹⁶³ Cook, *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West*. 92.

¹⁶⁴ Fabian Freyenheagen, “Adorno’s Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany’s 1960’s,” Thesis 4-873.

that what really counts is revolution.”¹⁶⁵ This is a difficult comment to unpack. Adorno seems to be gesturing towards the fact that art is a revolutionary weapon, but we cannot simply take refuge in revolutionary expression or art. Everything comes down to the question of whether humanity can prevent catastrophe, and whether humanity can prevent catastrophe comes down to whether humanity is capable of establishing a revolution where it takes control over its own destiny. That is not rendered immaterial by the fact that art still exists.

Zuidervart’s book *Social Philosophy after Adorno* claims that Adorno does not have a sufficient theory of democracy or political and legal institutions to support a truly transformational theory of society. But we must look again at what Adorno thought genuine progress or success would look like. Adorno thinks it would be quite presumptuous to think one has epistemological access to what types of institutions would carry the species forward, because this is the very task we need to figure out. “Progress really does mean the avoidance of total catastrophe.” Today we are facing utter catastrophe and it is embedded in every action we take, and everything we see (commodities). In order to conduct life, as monopoly capitalism defines life, i.e., selling labour or attempting to build a business to survive, one cannot but contribute to the destruction of the planet and humanity’s collective suicide.

This is why Adorno’s radical understanding of democracy and a global subject necessitates a humanity that has “control down to the concrete details”, and humanity means “an extreme form of differentiation not as a generic concept.” What does this mean? We need everyone, all individuals to have control over the resources that determine their

¹⁶⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto”, 57.

lives, so that their lives are not determined by a “false totality”. Humanity can finally take control and become “the subject of its own history”, because humanity is a universal being. We will be free only when we no longer have to spend our entire lives searching for the means to satisfy our needs.

What would a non-dominating, a non-integrated form of praxis be? One does not have the epistemic privilege to say. But what we do know is having a class society as it exists today is leading to our extinction. Therefore, the threat of climate catastrophe necessitates a sustainable and radical understanding of the way the means of production ought to be decentralized and democratized to help. The climate crisis necessitates that a revolution be undertaken in the relations and forces of production, then thereafter a social revolution will follow because the human being is defined by its social relations and at the moment through critique we have pinpointed the central task of the revolution: the destruction of an oil based and carbon emitting society. What we are missing is the critical social consciousness to accompany and push this revolution forward. And I think Adorno provides central insights into this. It is our task to conceive of a new form of collectivity to preserve our species. A large weight is on our shoulders at the current time in the earth’s history.

What I have attempted to show in this paper is that the global subject [*Gesamtsubjekt*] is a central concept in understanding Adorno’s philosophical outlook. It is an emphatic concept that brings together many of Adorno’s other central ideas and needs to be understood, critiqued, and focused on as focal point to which they all point. The concept of the global subject is an attempt to bring together his concepts of reconciliation, non-identity between individual and society, utopia, determinate negation and more. The

concept of the global subject brings together Adorno's understanding of what true progress would be for mankind, i.e., the avoidance of total catastrophe. The possibility for the human species to avoid total catastrophe has migrated to the global subject alone, and "everything else involving progress must crystalize around it." The global subject would be "a human race that possesses genuine control over its own destiny right down to the concrete details." The global subject is Adorno's call to revolution, but it is not a blind revolution, it must be adequately steered by theory, but not reducible to it.

Most importantly, the global subject embodies Adorno's insistence that theory should critique and seek no less than the complete transformation of society in its entirety. What is more, theory should not only seek the ground for a global subject, but it is a categorical imperative on mankind to establish one before our extinction by our own hand.

I gather there to be two central tenets of a global subject, i.e., a material and conceptual reconciliation with nature. A material reconciliation with nature means that the metabolism between our forces of production and the natural world will approach harmony, while guaranteeing a democratization of the control of these resources to the people. The conceptual reconciliation comes from a new understanding of us and our "inbred nature", the natural world, and the relationship between them.

The global subject would be a more fully individuated humanity. It would be a "negative totality". This means that the dialectical conception of humanity brought down to us from Kant would establish itself as a "real totality", i.e., a real species taking control of its destiny by consciously determining its nature and path to survival. I call this a negative totality because it is a totality that is not posited at the outset, but one that comes together into a unity by its very rejection and negation of the false totality that plagues it at

the current moment – capitalist totality. It is a negative totality because it is “diverse entities coming together as a unity”¹⁶⁶ in a state of “differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.”¹⁶⁷

As I have shown Adorno is influenced by Kant’s understanding of *Menschheit*. By preserving the dialectical usage of this concept, it illuminates Adorno’s gesturing towards a non-identical totality in and through individuals. Adorno is also influenced by the Hegelian-Marxist idea of *Gattungswesen* in putting the potential for radical transformation into the hands of humanity itself. It would be a reconciliation between the individual and the species.

The global subject I argue is the missing link in a real understanding of Adorno’s complicated relationship with the topic of political praxis and revolution. Adorno was unrelenting in his insistence on the emancipation and liberation of all human beings from the false totality of monopoly capitalism, and this is admirable. Adorno probably could never truly back the revolutionary movement in his day. He knew it would fail because they had not worked this out, and we still have not. Only when theory can locate more precisely what a true negative totality is, can real change, and not its semblance take place. This requires a population that is mature in the Kantian sense, and therefore requires a fundamental reorientation of the education system for the 21st century, and a new way of collectively organizing in effective ways for our own survival. But this task is not entirely reducible to theory, the question is how might we “steer between the alternatives of spontaneity and organization”.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” 247.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 274.

This reading of Adorno, and what his work on the concept of the global subject could mean for our contemporary world is articulated from within the Anthropocene. While critique and theory must be embedded in one's own time, this is where I speak from. Climate change brings with it a very real concrete standpoint and impetus for connecting the individual with the species to establish a ground for solidarity on which to democratically revolutionize the entirety of human life to truly objective ends. Climate change is the necessary basis on which to establish first, an interest in revolution, and second, a universal interest on which we can unite a global "consciousness" for revolution. Climate change has the potential to bring together the objective and subjective sides of the revolutionary subject.

Climate change is the largest and most fundamental concern of our time. The earth is warming at alarming rates, flora and fauna are dying, the water cycles of the planet are changing, and the desertification of landscapes is growing faster than expected, all because of the unregulated pursuit of profit by individuals and corporations. The ecosystems we are a part of are becoming more volatile and unpredictable, resulting in drought's, severe weather events, which pose serious threats to many people's lives. The world's leading climate scientists now warn that if global temperatures rise 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, then efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change on human civilization will become increasingly futile. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report in October 2018 arguing that even in the rare case that the global community reaches the Paris Climate Accord goal of keeping global temperatures "well below 2C from pre-industrial levels,"¹⁶⁹ it would still be devastating for well-functioning

¹⁶⁹ United Nations, *Paris Agreement*, (2015). Article 2.1(a).

ecosystems and human adaptation to these changes will become increasingly difficult. It concluded that more radical change is needed.¹⁷⁰

It is not a stretch to articulate the fact that people are already predicting the end of human civilization as we know it. The National Center for Climate Restoration in Australia for example published a report arguing that climate change presents a “near – to mid-term existential threat to human civilization.”¹⁷¹ It is an alarming observation that today it is easier to conceive of the end of the world than the end of capitalism.¹⁷² But an end to civilization as we know it is not inevitable, if there is immediate and drastic action. An immediate and global effort is required to address humanity’s self-destructive system of production. Capitalism has littered the globe with billions of tons of plastic, destroyed environments for the sake of profit, and perpetuated a system relying on the burning of fossil fuels that is destroying us and all other life on earth. Capitalism, and the domination that it is built on, must be left behind if we are to avoid this immanent catastrophe. A global subject is needed to address a total global problem.

A global subject is humanity having control of its own survival under its own rational establishment. It may usher in a world where humanity is safe, when people have no reason to fear. An attractive feature of Adorno’s philosophy is his discussion of progress as containing an affinity between human beings and the natural world. The more we try and dominate nature the more we dominate each other and vice versa. We must halt this tendency because it will lead to our extinction, and it is equally evil because of the suffering it causes among our species.

¹⁷⁰ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Understanding Global Warming of 1.5C,” (2018).

¹⁷¹ David Spratt and Ian Dunlop, *Existential Climate-Related Security Risk: A Scenario Approach*, (May 2019), 4.

¹⁷² This quote is attributed to Fredric Jameson.

We can do better. We must do better or prepare for the worst. We need to step out of the spell that is cast over our world, the spell that is causing suffering, the spell that is causing civil unrest, and racism, hate, anxiety, and much more. Humanity has sunk into a new kind of barbarism, in an age of utopian possibilities. The climate catastrophe we now face as a species from within the Anthropocene necessitates a revolution. We have very little time left before the extinction of our species starts rapidly approaching. The only way to effectively avoid catastrophe is to take the concept of the global subject from Adorno's work and understand what is so meaningful about this concept in conceiving a way forward. A non-dominating relation to ourselves, our own species, and the natural world is the only way we can survive. Thus, we need a revolution for radical democracy, and a radical distribution and decentralization of resources to curb our individual and collective impact on the biosphere around us, to be the harbinger of the social revolution that will launch the human species into a new era of its evolution.

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