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A Subjective Understanding of the Concept of Human Suffering with the Frame of Reference of Theodor. H. Adorno and His Critical Theory Arching to a Dialectical Turn

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Abstract – Critical theorist Theodor Adorno is rarely considered as a philosopher of the body. The body which leaks, desires, rages and lusts is seemingly disjointed from the dry and dense writings that often characterize Adorno's work. As bleak as this description of Adorno's writings may be, however, the body is both central to his critique of modernity and the site of hope and desire against the total domination and suffering that capitalism imposes. This paper highlights some of the ways in which feminist philosophy of disability and disability studies, more generally, would benefit by thinking in constellation with Adorno's negative dialectic to interrogate the ways in which meanings get made about bodies and, furthermore, use the margins of difference, in relation with others, to challenge what Adorno calls the "wrong state of things." I argue that the transfigured crip to come is central to this fight against the "wrong state of things."

Keywords: Human, Suffering, Dialectical

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INTRODUCTION

Theodor Adorno is rarely taken up as a philosopher of the body within feminist philosophy, much less within disability studies. Adorno's work is routinely characterized as dry, hyper-intellectual, and dense, seemingly leaving no opening to consider the body that leaks, desires, rages and loves. And yet, however bleakly Adorno's work may be characterized, we do find sensuous and affective bodies, hoping, desiring, and struggling against suffering in his work on negative dialectics, critiques of capitalism, and enlightenment thinking. It is in virtue of the fact that Adorno takes up these bodies as they struggle against suffering that he should be regarded as an engaging thinker for feminist philosophers of disability and other disability scholars. In fact, for Adorno, critical theorizing is needed precisely to address why suffering persists in our world, despite the technological and scientific potential to mitigate or eliminate much of this suffering.

In mapping out the history of Western philosophy, Adorno shows the ways in which philosophy has aided and abetted capitalist relations of production that dominate society. He argues that critical thought is needed to overthrow capitalism and eliminate the sufferings associated with its social and cultural order, including the violence that capitalism wreaks upon bodies. In placing the body, philosophy and suffering in constellation, Adorno works through the ways in which meaning is made in modernity and posits the role of thinking negatively in moving towards a more just and equitable society. The sensuous body is central to Adorno's work and to his desire to alleviate the suffering that capitalism causes. In this paper, rather than argue for the importance of returning to Adorno's thought—and thus a return to the Frankfurt School and critical theory of the 1940s-1960s—I place Adorno's thought in constellation with feminist philosophy of disability to hold in tension the violence that capitalism wreaks upon bodies and the significance of the embodied experience of disability. By mobilizing Adorno's negative dialectic, I crip the concept of disability itself. To "crip" disability is to both destabilize it as a concept and open up desire for what it disrupts (Fritsch, 2012). Cripping disability undoes disability and forces us to confront its remainder, namely, that which is always left out of its own conception. Adorno's negative dialectic, in relation to the disabled body, indicates the ways in which sensuous critical thought is required to overcome "the wrong state of things" (Adorno 1973, 11): the sufferings

associated with capitalist domination. I argue that the transfigured crip to come is central to this fight against "the wrong state of things."

One finds only scattered references to the body in Adorno's work. Rather than absent from the body, Adorno's approach attempts to evade the homogenizing drive of identity logic that tries to simplify complexity and falsely categorize the world.[1] Throughout his work, Adorno makes clear that the ways in which identity thinking erases contradiction, antagonism and different aids and abets capitalism, all of which effects have implications for the ways in which it is possible to be embodied and experience the world with others. Because struggle and resistance are necessarily embodied, and because embodiment is limited by identity thinking, Adorno's attempt to think around and outside identity logic is important and timely for disability studies and feminist philosophers of disability. Instead of starting with the body, Adorno approaches embodiment through negative dialectics and constellations in order to avoid presenting the simplified body with which identity logic provides us. Though the scattering of references to the body in Adorno's writing do not form a unified theory of embodiment, he repeatedly brings the body into his analysis, insofar as he assumes that any resistance to the sufferings imposed by forms of capitalist domination will necessarily be embodied.

In an essay entitled "The Actuality of Philosophy," Adorno (2000) argues that difference gets erased through the ways that we come to know the world. In tracing out the history of Western philosophy, Adorno argues that thought separates the subject from the object and reduces the object to the subject's concept of it. Difference is thus collapsed into identity: the difference of the object and its complexity are collapsed in the simplified identity that the subject gives to it.

This reductionism is what Adorno calls the problem of identitarian thinking, which is a conceptualization of the world that, as he points out, permeates modern society. Although the complexity of a given object always exceeds the way in which the subject conceives it, the subject of modern society, when confronted by the remnants of the object, perceives them as a threat to its self-mastery (Lee 2005, 30). This modern subject is intolerant of contradiction, non-identity and difference in the object and strives to understand the object's complexity through the familiarity of homogenizing conceptual thought. Against this modern mode of thinking that falsely categorizes the world, Adorno is interested in developing a philosophy that examines the nonidentical, that is, the difference that identity logic erases.

CONCEPT OF HUMAN SUFFERING WITH THE FRAME OF REFERENCE OF THEODOR. H. ADORNO AND HIS CRITICAL THEORY ARCHING TO A DIALECTICAL TURN

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno (1973, 149) argues that although thought relies on identity in order to make sense of the world, it need not do so and must not be restricted to that position. As feminist philosophers, affect theorists and phenomenologists have long since emphasized, although we are defined by reductive categories and concepts, our experience of the world is irreducible to those concepts and categories. Adorno allows that our everyday use of common sense or other knowledge-formations involves identification. The representationalism of the tradition of Western philosophy is especially troubling, however, insofar as it has attempted to make this identification systematized, complete and universal. Contra the representationalism of this tradition, Adorno argues that because any concept is inadequate to its object, there will always be a gap between concept and reality: the object will always elude and captured by the concept, that is to say, there will always be a nonidentity between the object and any representation of it (Adorno, 1973, 189). Negative dialectics is a way of accounting for this non-identity.

The International Symbol of Access (ISA) exemplifies the non-identity between an object and the concept of it. The ISA is one of the most ubiquitous and prototypical representations of disability in Western societies: a white graphic depiction of a wheelchair user, faced to the right presented on a blue background. Approved and promoted globally in 1969 by Rehabilitation International, an international non-governmental organization, the ISA is recognized and used internationally as the official symbol to identify facilities that are accessible to disabled people. According to Rehabilitation International, the ISA has enabled disabled people to locate, identify and use accessible facilities and has also, through its widespread use, "created a more general awareness of the problems of accessibility faced by disabled persons" (Rehabilitation International 1978). In other words, the ISA directs individuals to accessible locations, in addition to raising general awareness about disability and accessibility by symbolizing disability.

Nevertheless, the ISA leaves much to be desired. In depicting the wheelchair as the symbol of accessibility, a person with a mobility impairment who uses a wheelchair comes to symbolize all other forms of disability. Conceptualized in this way, disability pertains only to a "young man in a wheelchair who is fit, never ill and whose only need is a physically accessible environment" (Morris 2001, 9). This internationally-recognized allegedly universal symbol, in other words, comes to contain disability as a physical impairment that requires a

wheelchair, while sidelining and erasing other forms of impairment and disability and the various needs of a disabled person. As Liat Ben-Moshe and Justin Powell have argued, furthermore, "the ISA is a part of an attempt to create concrete and clear boundaries between 'non-disabled' and 'disabled' persons when this binary belies the relational context-dependent aspect of disablement" (Ben-Moshe and Powell 2007, 495). The ISA, as a static image, does not show the fluid and changing context-dependent nature of disability and impairment that changes over the course of one's life and certainly does not account for the ways in which the violence of capitalism impacts bodies. Nor can the static character of the symbol account for the ways that developments in cybernetics, pharmaceutical therapies, prosthetic enhancements and other medical or technological interventions will, in the years ahead, radically alter what bodies can do.

In approaching the ISA negatively, we can begin to crip the ways in which it conceptualizes disability, gesturing towards the nonidentical that is concealed through identity and opening up space for the recognition of differences that this putatively universal symbol obfuscates. As Maggie O'Neil suggests: "Non-identity thinking confronts the partial truth of an object with its potential truth. In this way, criticism can advance the interests of the truth by identifying the false, by uncovering through immanent criticism the discontinuities and mediations among social phenomena" (O'Neil 1999, 25). Through the articulation of particular embodied experiences of disability, the ISA is confronted with both that which contradicts it and that which is excluded from it.

Adorno argues that in order to know an object intimately, we must think more and negatively draw upon our particular experiences that haunt the identical: "What we may call the thing itself is not positively and immediately at hand. He who wants to know it must think more, not less and yet the thing itself is by no means a thought product. It is nonidentity through identity" (Adorno 1973, 189). Critical reflection is necessary to expose the inadequacy of conceptualization and to intensify the presence of nonidentity. To turn conceptualization toward nonidentity, Adorno writes, "is the hinge of negative dialectics" (12). Although identity thinking seeks to contain nonidentity, it cannot do so. Concepts, on their own, can never provide a clear view of things themselves; but with critical reflection, we can gesture towards the nonidentical. Nonidentity has a presence that haunts us: something that has been left out or forgotten. Negative dialectics does not correct identity thinking's inaccuracy or incompleteness. Regardless of how precise an analytic concept may be, as the representation of a nonidentical entity, it will always be inadequate. With identitarian thinking, we find comfort in the security of knowing things to be true. Negative dialectics helps to accentuate this discomfiting experience and give meaning to the ways in which life will always exceed our knowledge and control.

This inevitable failure to contain nonidentity is why Adorno, in the opening words of *Negative Dialectics* (1973), seeks to free dialectics from its positive heritage of synthesis, conceiving it instead as a movement of negation. Negative dialectics, Adorno argues, is a form of thought needed in a wrong world, a wrong world full of suffering and oppression (Holloway 2009, 8). Negative dialectics is the mode of thinking that fits the antagonistic character of capitalist society and aims at overcoming it. It is in this faulty capitalistic world of equivalence that difference is thwarted. In order to struggle for a better world, we need to think "the world from that which does not fit, from those who do not fit, those who are negated and suppressed, those whose insubordination and rebelliousness break the bounds of identity, from *us* who exist in-and-against-and-beyond capital" (15; emphasis in Holloway).

DISCUSSION

Modern thought, in its pursuit of identitarian thinking, has ignored difference in part because thought is driven by a capitalist social formation whose exchange principle demands equivalence of exchange value and use value. For capital, the exchange value of a commodity will always dominate its value or utility, whereby equivalence dominates the logic of the exchange relationship. That is, the particularities of objects are subsumed by the abstract universal of its exchange value. Additionally, insofar as a system of exchange is predicated on abstract human labor value, the particular material character of work is displaced so that the particularities of various forms of labor become homogenized. All labor, then, becomes equal to and exchangeable with all other labor as abstract labor (Marx 1990, 155). In other words, the logic of capital makes everything exchangeable and denies difference and particularity. As Adorno argues, therefore, identity thinking emerges from an abstraction already at work in the market. As he comments, "no theory today escapes the marketplace" (Adorno 1973, 4). The inescapability of the marketplace and the commodification of the intellectual enterprise leads him to conclude that "theory does not contain answers to everything; it reacts to the world, which is faulty to the core" (31).

As nonidentity refuses identity, negative dialectics leads out of the circle of identification and approaches the object through constellations. For Adorno, there is neither synthesis nor totality, but rather, particularity and constellation. Constellations give form to an object without the elimination of difference that would reduce the thing to a concept that is itself subsumed within the terms of a universalizing and totalizing theory (Adorno 1973, 162). A thing can never be known in its immediacy or in unity with a concept and thus we can only

approach the thing through a constellation of concepts that sheds light on the specific aspects of it that are left out of the identifying process (Cornell 1992, 23). In this way, the particularity of an object can be seen to operate in a negative dialectical fashion against totality as the excess of any system's thought. Overcoming a totality does not require another totality, but rather, the development of the excess negated in totality. This excess is relational. Adorno writes: "As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers" (Adorno 1973, 163).

Constellations are not about acquisition of partial knowledge, but rather about recognition of the relation of concepts to each other so that conflicts between them come to light and reveal what identitarian logic has left out. A constellation is not imposed on an object, nor can it be figured out for once and for all. Rather, one deciphers the object through a mimetic capacity, which identifies *with*, rather than identifying as Drucilla Cornell points out, furthermore, "Adorno's notion of 'identifying with' is not a return to intuition or immediacy" (Cornell 1992, 23). That is, constellations can only be formed if we have grasped the way in which representation inherently fails in identity thinking. As Cornell remarks, furthermore: "We cannot immediately see into the object; we can only approach it from different angles of contextual perspectives, knowing all the while that it is never truly recognized by our conceptual apparatus" (23-24).

Negative dialectics shows that a given object remains nonidentical, even as it is represented and made familiar. When the object is experienced as nonidentical, the subject takes a stance against the limits of conceptualization and is open to the other *as* other (Cornell 1992, 24). Negative dialectics does not set up new concepts, but rather relates the old concepts to each other in order to show what has been left out—that is, what conflicts. If we take the preferred conception of an object and compare it with what the object does in practice, it becomes possible to detect contradictions between the conception and practice, that is, between what the object *is* and what the object *does*. It thus, in turn, becomes possible to return to the conception (of a given object) in order to problematize it.

For example, the emphasis on individual autonomy that permeates modern Western society is negated when we consider the concept of individual autonomy through the lens of critical disability studies (Shildrick 2009; Fritsch 2010). The critical disability studies literature that emphasizes relations of interdependence points to what is excluded from the concept of the subject when that subject is assumed to possess individual autonomy and, through the conflict of the nonidentical, exposes the complexity of the concept of individual autonomy and the possibility of other forms of being.

There are many ways in which the feminist philosophy of disability and disability studies can benefit from thinking negatively. In one exploration there are ways in which a particular difference -namely, disability is important, Garland-Thomson (2011, 604) theorizes disabled people as "misfits" within a society of equivalence, noting that "misfitting can yield innovative perspectives." She argues: "When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting" (597). The difference of disability as misfit opens up political possibilities through confronting what fits with that which does not. It is in this antagonistic misfit that the nonidentity of disability is exposed.

Critical reflection on the logic of equivalence and fitting has implications for current conceptions of difference, in general, and disability, in particular. Jasbir Puar (2012) challenges disability activists and scholars to rethink the significance that they give to disability as a difference that matters and to, instead, consider all bodies in terms of affective neoliberal control. In something akin to creating constellations, Puar moves us away from thinking through binaries of abled/disabled and reframes this relationship in terms of debility and capacity to attend to changes within capitalism. In doing so, she argues that all bodies in neoliberal capitalism are "being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, [and] enhanced capacity" (155). As such, there is no body that meets the standard of adequately able-bodied anymore, but rather there are "gradations of capacity and disability in control societies" that blur the distinction between disabled and non-disabled (ibid.). Puar contends that given biopolitical developments in neoliberal capitalism, normalizing the disabled body is no longer the major focus of medical intervention. A biopolitical shift has occurred whose focus is the differential capacitation of all bodies, she claims, not the achievement of a normative able-bodiness. That is, through capacitating processes like genetic therapies, surgeries, supplements, prosthetic enhancements, and healthism, there is a shift from regulative normality that cures or rehabilitates to biological control, where bodies are to be capacitated beyond what is thought of as the able-body. According to Puar, neoliberalism mobilizes the tension between capacity and debility to break down the binaries between normative/non-normative, disabled/abled because "debility is profitable to capitalism, but so is the demand to 'recover' from or overcome it" (154) through processes of capacitation. An economics of both debility and capacity serves the interests of neoliberal capital and reshapes formations of disability. For example, with the development of bioinformatics, where bodies are not identities, but rather data or pieces of emergent information, it is relevant to ask: "which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, and which cannot?"

(153). Such a shift changes how disability can be conceived and materialized across levels of social and material relations, in addition to questioning the presumed capacitated status of abled-bodies. This inquiry requires other modes of intervention. The point is not to disregard the role of pathology and processes of normalization, but rather to complicate the horizon by which we come to any form of embodiment at all. Therefore, Puar's intervention into disability studies examines the ways in which the difference of disability is produced and how particular forms of disability become valorized. Intervening in the ways in which the binary of disabled and abled is produced through the lens of capacity and debility makes it possible to question the ways in which the difference of disability reifies an exceptionalism and simplified conceptualization of disability that only certain privileged disabled bodies can occupy (ibid.). In this way, Puar's project grasps at the nonidentical—how disability can be theorized when the concept of disability is not contained by processes of normativity.

Puar's intervention is uncomfortable for disability studies insofar as she challenges the ways in which the field of inquiry reproduces disability as an oppressed identity and an aggrieved subject enacted through "wounded attachments" (Puar 2012, 157). Puar's project of rethinking disability is to move from disability to debility, not in order to "disavow the crucial political gains enabled by disability activists globally, but to invite a deconstruction of what ability and capacity mean, affective and otherwise, and to push for a broader politics of debility that destabilizes the seamless production of abled-bodies in relation to disability" (166). In doing so, Puar asks: "How would our political landscape transform if it actively decentered the sustained reproduction and proliferation of the grieving subject, opening instead towards an affective politics, attentive to ecologies of sensation and switchpoints of bodily capacities, to habituations and unhabituations, to tendencies, multiple temporalities, and becomings?" (157). Puar thus calls for a non-anthropocentric affective politics that moves us away from exceptional aggrieved human subjects whose injury can be converted into cultural capital. Although Puar recognizes the ways in which equivalence and identity are at work within neoliberal capitalist economies, she challenges this pairing through an examination of the processes of capacity and debility that exceed the category of disability.

CONCLUSION

If, following Adorno, we place disability in a constellation with feminist philosophy of disability and negative dialectics, we arrive at a place where disability theory is produced in reaction to a faulty world. That is, disability is conceived in relation to the capitalist mode of production, whereby exchange value and equivalence results in conceptual frameworks of identity and sameness. In negatively approaching disability, we do not set up new concepts, but rather relate old concepts to each other in order to show what has been left out of the conceptualization—what conflicts. The task of the critic is to illuminate cracks in the totality, moments of disharmony, and discrepancy. This, then, is precisely where suffering enters the picture.

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