
JAZZ, THE WOUND: NEGATIVE IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND THE PROBLEM OF WEAK SUBJECTIVITY IN THEODOR ADORNO'S TWENTIETH CENTURY*

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This essay addresses the emergence of theories of “identity” in twentieth-century politics, aesthetics, and philosophy by considering Theodor Adorno’s understanding of “negative identity” as a form of coercive categorization that nevertheless contains social knowledge. A historical account of the Frankfurt school’s relation to questions of race, anti-Semitism, and the idea of culture, the essay analyzes Adorno’s infamous jazz articles in light of the transatlantic history of Marxian political theory and its understanding of racism, subject–object relations, and models of cultural production. The result is an investigation of the history of the concept of identity, its emergence alongside the rise of cultural studies, and its relation to international cultural–aesthetic formations such as jazz. The article concludes with an examination of Adorno’s critique of idealism, cultural identity, and nationalism in light of the “wounded” political subjectivity of the modern era.

The concepts of identity and nonidentity were central to Theodor Adorno’s postwar writings. In Adorno’s thought, the concept of identity carried logical, subjective, and objective valences, relating to persons, objects, and statements. But identity also governed over the whole. Adorno defined his own critical theory in terms of the “identity of identity and nonidentity.”¹ By this he described the outcome of a process by which subjects think through (identify) the aspects of thought that are “nonidentical” to themselves—that are more or less than what they claim to be—either because these harbor hidden premises, or because their

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¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 6: 19 (hereafter AGS.) All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

very use entailed them in a web of other concepts. In his formal philosophy, Adorno used the concept expansively, writing about the nonidentical relation existing between ego, id, and superego; the nonidentity of Kant's transcendental ego with the empirical self; the nonidentity of a psychological mode of analysis and a sociological one; the identity and nonidentity of subject and object, of immanence to appearance, and of concepts to the material world. Though explicitly invoking German idealism and its heady tradition of the dialectic, Adorno intended the "negativity" of this language to bring idealism down to earth, transforming the language of metaphysics into a tool of an applied social criticism capable of analyzing the real suffering correlated with false identity. Immanent critique, the central technique of Adorno's late work, wrought philosophy out of false identity by making critique of nonidentity the reflex of all claims of identity, truth, and self-assertion.

Negative Dialectics, the book in which these claims about identity are articulated most fully, appeared in 1966, at a moment in which notions of "identity" were emerging as the centerpiece of many theoretical traditions. Mixing cultural and psychological concerns, the new sense of modern subjective "identity" posited the possession of an identity as a kind of cure for what Emile Durkheim called *anomie*. As Gerald Izenberg has argued, the twentieth century embraced this new sense of self-identity as something akin to a first principle of mental health.² By corollary, both in serious literature and in the language of psychology, the condition of *not* having an identity came to be considered tantamount to losing all sense of orientation in the world, and theorists became interested in the possibility that the truth of "objective" historical developments was to be located in the drama of identity formation. Already in 1958 one could read, in Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*, about how an individual's "identity crisis" gave birth to a movement as historically significant as the Protestant Reformation. In the 1970s, theorists would look to the generative power of identity to describe any and all sorts of cultural-historical processes—beginning with the

² The concept of identity, which solidified around liberalism's encounter with multiculturalism, communitarianism, nationalism, cultural studies, and post-structuralism in the 1980s, today shapes idioms used for describing the self in relation to the public sphere, nationalism, and emancipatory social movements. Important accounts of the role of identity in twentieth-century theory include Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1989); Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, 1995); Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA, 2004); Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton, 2006). On the literary-philosophical history of identity as a concern for subjectivity see Gerald Izenberg, "Identity Becomes an Issue: European Literature in the 1920s," *Modern Intellectual History*, 5 (2008), 279–307.

achievement of a self-conscious ego, and expanding outward to processes of self-emancipation as varied as national independence, cultural self-expression, gender and sexual liberation, and the formation of the new social movements “beyond” class.

Adorno died in 1969, but throughout the 1970s and beyond, he would continue to exercise considerable influence as a theorist of culture, selfhood, and society. Curiously, however, despite the fact that in the 1980s and 1990s the discourses of identity expanded as prolifically as the languages of “culture” to which they were related, Adorno’s theory of identity was all but neglected relative to his work on cultural, musical, and literary theory. The general critical suspicion has remained that Adorno did not appreciate the power of expressive identity.

This essay seeks to reassess Adorno’s theory of identity and its place within mid-twentieth-century philosophical and cultural discourse by exploring the interaction of three sources for Adorno’s concept of identity: his theories of culture, his concept of “wounded” or exiled subjectivity, and his understanding of Hegelian “identity” theory. In doing so it seeks to refigure our understanding of both Adorno and the history of critical theory by showing not only that Adorno’s late, technical philosophical work on the dialectic was connected to his earlier work on cultural theory, but that it was mediated by personal engagement with the idea of identity in the subjective and psychological sense that has become a staple of twentieth-century thought. Addressing the relationship between two different stages in his career, this essay seeks to illuminate how some of the limitations in Adorno’s prewar and wartime work—the dead ends, the problems he could not work through—eventually pointed the way toward the most original and ambitious work he would do later in his life. The centerpiece of this examination is his rewriting of the Kantian theory of subjective idealism into a concept of wounded subjectivity, incomplete emancipation, and negative formation of identity. This idea, I argue, emerged out of problems in his work as a cultural critic that were themselves framed by the complexity of his personal experience as a German Jewish Marxist in exile in the 1930s and 1940s, and by the ways the lessons of American exile were reinterpreted upon Adorno’s return to Germany in the 1950s as a promoter of “education after Auschwitz.” As a study of the theory of identity, this essay is part philosophical, part biographical, part historical. The meaning of Adorno’s concept of nonidentity becomes more understandable, philosophically, when it becomes clear how this concept was framed in response to historical experience.

This analysis will begin with an examination of one of Adorno’s first uses of the concept of personal identity as negative identity, a 1956 essay on the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine. Looking at how this examination of Heine refigured Adorno’s return to post-Holocaust Germany, I will show how his attempts to come to terms with the pasts of German culture and his own

ambivalent Jewish heritage brought about a new philosophical emphasis on the negative and vulnerable dimensions of subjectivity. As this concept of subjectivity became central to his philosophy, I argue, it regrounded Adorno's idea of cultural critique, transformed his aversion to biographical and culturalist explanation, created a framework upon which he could construct a sociological understanding of collective individualism, clarified the application of the dialectic between enlightenment and barbarism to cultural and political events, and reconfigured his critique of commodity fetishism and class consciousness. Retrospectively, this late interest in a philosophical analysis of identity and negative identity casts light on Adorno's most notorious failure as a cultural critic, his earlier writings on jazz, and on his early convictions concerning the necessary austerity that a Hegelian–Marxist–Kantian framework of analysis needed to have toward ethno-national and culturally particularist concepts of identity. Adorno's own late work, in other words, becomes one of the best tools for analyzing the limitations of his pre-identity phase. This critique is pursued while arguing that Adorno's prewar writings on jazz offer an incisive means of understanding how Adorno's early intellectual development—in the course of which he translated a theory of economic and cultural production into a self-reflexive practice of cultural criticism—was rooted in his experience in the Weimar Republic, wartime America, and postwar Germany, and specifically in the tension between the process of coming to terms with his own Jewishness and the way the categories of race and national culture were being articulated in contemporary America and Germany. Finally, by examining how Adorno's confrontation with the concept of culture and the problems of class and group consciousness in the jazz essays contained not only discernible flaws but the seeds of their own later revision and transformation, I explore the limitations in the prevailing concepts of identity then available to Adorno, thus offering a historical analysis of the career of the identity concept in the twentieth century.

HEINE, EXILE, AND WOUNDED SUBJECTIVITY

In 1956, the year after Theodor Adorno returned definitively to Germany from American exile, he published an essay entitled “Heine the Wound,” which asked why the name “Heine” caused such irritation in Germany. Adorno knew the simple answer to his own question. Heine, whose name had once been admired, only to be redacted out of the public squares and schoolbooks—whose name was removed from his poetry when the poetry itself could not be dislodged from the national literature—had long been a cultural symbol for the Jewish heritage that a “purified Germany” had tried to erase. While Adorno acknowledged the depth of German anti-Semitism, he argued that the hatred of Heine could not be understood as simple hatred of Jews. Germans hated Heine for the same

reason they loved him: because his version of the lyric captured and preserved the trauma as well as the promise of a German nation. The prospect of Heine's lyrical line looked out upon Germany's rivers and countryside; his language had mixed the idioms of the *Volk* with those of commerce and the newspaper; and it did so in a way that did not falsify the complex and ambivalent relation of the individual to the state and its violence. Any German reaction against the "Jew" in Heine was in fact an expression of hatred against a past that was alive in the present, and was thus, Adorno argued, a failure to come to terms with the complex questions of German integration through language, commerce, and the often violent powers of the state: in a word, hatred of Heine was German self-hatred, identity only subconsciously aware of its nonidentity.³ Heine was wounded German self-identity.

Adorno, who had consistently found all language of "identity" problematic, was of course doing more than simply inverting the valences of identity, showing how sadism was in fact rooted in masochism, how Germanness mutilated itself in trying to separate itself from supposedly "foreign" impulses: he was making a broader point about the relation between art, identity, and suffering as dimensions of historical experience. For Adorno, it was no accident that the Nazis, for all their brutality, could not expunge a poem like "Die Lorelei" from the national memory. The nonidentical was the secret of art. Nineteenth-century nations needed impossible anthems; the greatness of Heine's folksongs was defined by the fact that they incorporated the impossibility of purity within them. They drew the reader to the realities that created the "wound" within the self and the work in a way that drove the violently minded to do to Heine's name what they could not do to his poetry. The name could be hated, but the suffering that animated the art was shared. The wound that Heine's name represented was a mark of the injuries inflicted by a real historical process; as such, its sensitivity not only pointed to the historical and social nature of the lyrical self, but also opened up possibilities for better understanding the material and social dynamics—of nationalism and commerce, power and secularization—out of which the lyrical self had grown.

For the sake of understanding the history of critical theory, it is significant that the composition of "Heine, the Wound" coincided with Adorno's permanent return to Germany. It thus serves as a marker of the beginning of Adorno's late phase—a period when Adorno worked to reclaim the elements of a tradition in which he had been born, a violently disrupted tradition that he found himself reimporting to Germany as a kind of foreigner. This experience of exile and return became central to Adorno's understanding of history, and the cultural

³ AGS 11: 95.

idea of exile came to be seen by him as a philosophical problem. Violence forces nonidentity upon identity and requires the nonidentical to make that which is supposed to be ever-identical to itself—tradition—seem like it is everything if it wishes to be anything at all. This historical fact and situation, moreover, must be understood and expressed philosophically without fetishizing the so-called “poetic” power of violence as that which “creates” history. Adorno remained a student of the Enlightenment in this way, believing that the only way to come to terms with this problem was to strip identity of its cultural or collective lie: only individuals—not cultures, nations, religions or ethnicities—could ultimately emancipate themselves from the past.⁴

The metaphor of Heine as wound was for Adorno a symbol not only of exile and of negative identity, but also of the modern processes of alienation and the production of homelessness. Pointing out that Heine’s mother was not entirely fluent in German, Adorno argued that Heine was estranged from his language in a way that caused his lyric alternately to mock the language and to embrace the idioms of folk songs, populism, and collective spirit with the mimetic zeal of a foreigner or a salesman. This irony was a central dimension of modernism. Heine’s lyricism was the necessary complement to Baudelaire’s, in that Heine invested the languages of selfhood with a self-reflexivity and negativity parallel to Baudelaire’s challenge to the doctrines of aesthetic formalism. In Adorno’s view, aestheticism and lyrical irony, both forms of nonidentity, served Enlightenment by drawing attention to the excesses of Romanticism. But unlike Baudelaire, who would be sainted by the modernist movement, Heine was misunderstood and even reviled, especially among the Germans. His appeal to “the people,” couched as unrequited love, became a vulnerability for which he was held in contempt, and the dislike of Heine was cultivated by aristocratic circles who viewed not only his work but his descriptions of homelessness as commercialized and lowbrow. The Nazis fed on these misperceptions of Heine, but, argued Adorno, they could not undo the fact that the German folk tradition indeed existed as a strange mixture of enlightenment and homelessness, commercialism and longing for transcendence: Heine’s sensibilities were often most penetrating in describing how much he hated the Germany he loved. Few Germans, Adorno observed, understood the full force of Heine’s wounded doubleness or the negative identity in his lyric line until the beginning of the twentieth century, when composers like Mahler transformed the relation of lyricism and nationalism in a way that revealed the divergence between the existential longing for home and the nationalist notions of lyrical identity and common feeling. Arguing that “the power of one who mocks impotently transcends his impotence,” Adorno asserted that Heine’s ability to mock the

⁴ “Tradition” (AGS 14: 127–45) discusses repetition and emancipation through sociological and phenomenological perspectives.

manipulators of authenticity survived the Romantic period and spoke again in the age of imperialism and world war.⁵ The wound of Heine's poetry carried a truth-value that did not become widely sharable until the dynamic between power, subjectivity, and the suffering of others had realigned to disclose it.

In this incorporation of Benjamin's theory of the "temporal kernel" (*Zeitkern*) of works of art, Adorno proposed that Germans needed to become more sophisticated in the way they considered the relation between aesthetic and historical analysis.⁶ Truth is temporally bounded, concealed in the social core of objects. This approach made it possible for Adorno to use aesthetic interpretation as a means of thinking about subjectivity and historicity in general. The idea of the wound and its association with emigration became in the Heine essay part of a general theory of how critical thinking begins with failures of assimilation to the group: just as "assimilatory language is the language of unsuccessful identification," so Heine's "stereotypical theme of unrequited love" is an "image for [the] homelessness that has become everyone's homelessness, as all human beings have been as badly injured in their beings and their language as Heine the outcast was."⁷ Describing the Holocaust as an event that generalized homelessness, Adorno argued that Heine's words stood in for the general uprootedness that must seek out an "emancipated humanity" that requires no other homeland than that of "a world that produces no outcasts." The way to seek this "reconciliation," however, is not in trying to achieve a unity of being and language, but in understanding the dissonance inside the self and its fraught relation to the world that wounds it.⁸

Adorno's idea of "wounded subjectivity" acknowledged the Lukácsian theory of alienation and homelessness as well as the Heideggerian notion of "language as a house of Being," but it rejected the possibility of a prior wholeness or unalienated state and remained conscious of the violence that those two approaches entailed. "Heine, the Wound" shows that Adorno's philosophical logic grew out of a theory of historical subjectivity, and that the idea of nonidentity as a logical property developed according to social theory's need to explain the repulsion–attraction of individuals to group identities. The notion that knowledge itself is a wound, a form of alienation developed under particular historical conditions, is grounded by the idea that though each wound is particular, each process of healing is, like enlightenment itself, an individual undertaking that establishes

⁵ AGS 11: 98–9.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1972) (hereafter BGS), 5:1: 578.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Nicholsen Weber, 2 vols. (New York, 1991), 1: 83.

⁸ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (London, 1967), 122–32.

a relation to universality. This concept of identity fits the twentieth century, a century of negative identity like no other, and its conceptual origins are worth understanding.

There were situational reasons for this turn in Adorno's thought. In addressing Heine, Adorno was addressing (auto)biographical particularity—his own return to Germany, the formative and inescapable relationship with Germany that he acknowledged with this return, the Jewishness that the Nazi Germans had forced upon him, the Jewishness that he would henceforth define by accepting the work of “education after Auschwitz.” In the decade after the war, Germany had by and large only examined its National Socialist past in narrowly political terms, rather than addressing genocide as a matter of cultural and social identity and continuity. Adorno would work in the 1950s and 1960s to demonstrate how the German intellectual, philosophical, and cultural traditions were entwined with the Holocaust, while putting the finger in his own wound, underscoring how his own role as a cultural expert implicated him in the very culture that had wounded him and humanity. But Adorno's new interest in problems of identity was also retrospective in nature, a process of reflecting upon the particularity of the American culture he had encountered in exile. For if Adorno had long rejected German appeals to the category of national culture, in America he had found himself resisting a very different configuration of particularity and authenticity—one constellated around the problem of American race relations and the promise of an expressive multiculturalism. This too had been formative for Adorno, formative in the quite different sense that Adorno did not understand America until he began to leave, and formative in that the German concepts of race and culture were not fully congruent with those emergent in America. If we are to understand how Adorno turned from Enlightenment traditions of philosophy to theorizing identity and nonidentity, we must start with the nonidentity between the two traditions of culture he addressed in his career as a cultural critic.

JAZZ, THE WOUND

If the body of any cultural theory is structured not just by its rigor, but also by the quality—good or bad—of its *aperçu*, then the work of Theodor Adorno is undeniably marked by a wound. The word “jazz” names this wound; and like the wound that was Heine, the wound of jazz is defined by problems of race, culture, identity, violence, and discrimination. The mere mention of Adorno's jazz writings serves as an irritant in the world of critical theory, provoking a disheartened sigh in anyone trying to come to terms with Adorno's thought, and a sort of joy to those who dislike Adorno and all that his name stands for. All of the cards in this game have been played: Adorno has been accused of racism, of Jewish self-hatred, of Teutonic bigotry, of Eurocentrism, and of personality

flaws ranging from manic depression to sadism.⁹ And though all of these labels distort a person who not only forsook personal comfort to return to Germany after World War II, but who counts among the twentieth century's pioneering critics and analysts of racism and cultural bigotry, there is no doubt that the jazz question must be taken seriously as a limitation that reflects much about Adorno, both biographically and as a philosopher, sociologist, and cultural critic. The way to unfold this relation is to look at Adorno the way Adorno looked at Heine: the conceptual issues must be related to the material and social conditions of the world, to the problems they were hoping to solve, and to the way in which those ideas necessarily struck against their limits—limits with which the individual thinker had difficulty, and which he could do little else but internalize. If the category of jazz points to an element of Adorno's thought that seems nonidentical to itself, a historical reflection on the changing understanding of identity and culture in the twentieth century helps concretize this dynamism in theoretical terms.

Adorno wrote approximately six articles on jazz (depending upon how one counts them), all roughly within the period of the greatest immediacy of danger for him as someone who—whatever his own thoughts about the matter may have been, and they were complex—was perceived as a Jew. The first published document of Adorno's that used the word "jazz" is from 1932, and bore the title "Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik" (On the Social Situation of Music). In 1933 appeared "Abschied vom Jazz" (Farewell to Jazz). In 1936, as Adorno was moving between England and France, but was contemplating a trip to America, he wrote his first major piece explicitly on jazz, "Über Jazz," which was published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* that year. In 1938, shortly after his arrival in the United States, and during his work at the Princeton Radio Project, he published "Über den Fetischcharakter der Musik und die Regression des Hörens" (On the Fetish Quality of Music and the Regression of Listening). Shortly after this, while studying English, he wrote a medium-length review essay of the scholarship in the *Zeitschrift*. By 1941, when Adorno was finally capable of writing a proper academic article in English, he published "On Popular Music," also in the *Zeitschrift* (by that time renamed *Studies in the Social Sciences*), which largely dropped the language of "jazz" and analyzed the various forms of "high and low" radio and "popular" music; then, in 1946, he wrote a small article entitled "Jazz" for a musicological

⁹ Heinz Steinert's *Die Entdeckung der Kulturindustrie oder: Warum Professor Adorno Jazz-Musik nicht ausstehen konnte* (Wien, 1992) typifies the cultural logic of the most aggressive attacks on Adorno's jazz articles, arguing that Adorno did not understand but secretly hated the deep communal basis of great art in either Harlem or Vienna. Steinert sees little reason for a German Jewish émigré in 1937 to be wary of theories of organic, communal authenticity.

encyclopedia. Finally, in 1953, during the first years in which Adorno could be said to have “returned” to Germany, but before he was definitively there to stay, he pieced together arguments from the earlier essays into “Zeitlose Mode: Über Jazz” (“On Jazz: Timeless Modalities, Perennial Fashion”), the essay that is most commonly read today as part of the collection *Prisms*.¹⁰

The dates of these articles alone have led many to surmise that there was something “racially charged” in Adorno’s writings about jazz. This is undoubtedly true, but saying so is not the same as saying that Adorno’s writings about jazz were racist. Rather, the jazz essays mark the point at which the traditions which had shaped the young Adorno and the modes in which Adorno’s early work had been done—the nineteenth-century German Jewish tradition of humanist and universalist culture, the aesthetic politics of the 1920s avant-garde, and the explicitly antiracist mode of Marxian social critique—ran up against the very real and destructive power of racial and identity thinking in the 1930s.

As a public dispute, Adorno’s “jazz controversy” began in 1953, when the German critic and impresario Joachim-Ernst Berendt, reviewing the 1953 “On Jazz: Timeless Modalities, Perennial Fashion,” accused Adorno of being a self-hating Jew who turned his musical expertise and his wit to tearing down the great art of American pluralism, an art the Nazis had similarly honored in their attempts to efface it along with Heine’s name. Adorno reacted to this charge with horror, expressing shock at the “grotesqueness” of the charge of racism being aimed at someone “who had escaped Hitler . . . and who had just published a critically acclaimed study on the problem of racial prejudice in the United States.”¹¹ There is every sense that Adorno’s shock at the accusation was genuine. Having made this protest, however—and strongly wishing to bracket any race-inflected culturalist reading of jazz (not without good reason in Germany, c.1953)—Adorno insisted on carrying forth the debate as a purely technical argument concerning claims that Berendt (among others) had made concerning jazz’s superior musical originality relative to the classical or modernist traditions. Somewhat pedantically, Adorno drew upon his extensive knowledge of the history of composition to show the baselessness of Berendt’s claims. He argued, for example, contra Berendt, that prior to jazz’s innovations, improvisation had long been part of organ music, that polyphony had been explored by Wagner and Brahms, that the innovative neutral thirds and tonal voids that jazz critics proclaimed as jazz’s invention had in fact served as entire compositional frameworks for composers such as Bartók, and that the tension between melodic rhythm and fundamental rhythm

¹⁰ All publication dates from AGS. Richard Leppert’s commentary in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, CA, 2002), provides an invaluable narrative overview.

¹¹ AGS 10.2: 805 ff.

in the *Lieder* tradition was in fact a very rich and complicated one already in the early Romantic period. Adorno, in other words, worked to disarm Berendt's innuendo of racial or cultural bias by turning the argument into a musicological duel over which tradition "invented what first." By arguing from the universalist framework of technical innovations in musical tonality, Adorno won for himself an easy victory and avoided legitimizing the category of race, but both this victory and the deflection have necessarily come to seem to many later readers hollow and ignominious. A historical investigation of the relation between theory, praxis and self will reveal that Adorno was still working through the relation of culture to universality and group identity, and that he was doing so at a personal, practical, and theoretical level.

MUSICAL UNIVERSALITY AND THE POLITICS OF EARLY EXPERIENCE

In discussing Heine and the problem of wounded subjectivity, Adorno emphasized that Heine's early experience intermingled freedom and unfreedom, individual aesthetic and German cultural understandings of language. For Adorno, music was a yet more immediate medium of cultural experience than language. If one reads Adorno's 1933 "Vierhändig, noch einmal" essay with this in mind, it is possible to understand something fairly significant about how he came to identify music not only with intellectuality and technical achievement, but also with freedom and expression, and how the question of identity and nonidentity emerged from this analysis of experience.

The essay was written as a kind of adieu to the world he had known, and the "once more" of the title highlights the fact that no other essay Adorno would write carries quite the same attachment to the sentimental power of the nineteenth century or to the emotional significance of his own musical upbringing. In Adorno's childhood education, music indeed had stood for the full sense of freedom and universality, of bourgeois particularity and domesticity to which nineteenth-century Europe aspired. This understanding of music was central to German life generally, and to German Jewish life more particularly, given that music's color-blind universality appealed—perhaps more strongly than any other branch of the arts—across the divide that separated the ghetto from the city in the age of bourgeois culture. It is perhaps even not too much to detect, in Adorno's thoughts about this relation, a retrospective awareness of the idea of a sacred text, an interest in (or a memory of) the Jewish experience in general, and of Adorno's own Jewish heritage in particular. Much is said in the opening lines of the essay, with its interest in the *dürfen* attending the relation between text and magic, interpretation and feeling, the sacred and the particular, the good life and the highest ideals:

That form of music that we have become accustomed to labeling the classical was something I learned, as a child, to play four-handed. There was little of the literature of the symphonic or chamber music traditions that was not brought into household life with the help of the large, folio-type books obtained from the bookbinder in uniformly green-colored bindings. They seemed as if they were made to be browsed; and I was allowed [*dürfte*] to do so, even before I had learned to understand the notes, simply following them from memory and by ear-feel. Even Beethoven violin sonatas were subjected to the curious reworking [of four-handed playing]. Some pieces, like Mozart's G minor symphony, so impressed me in this time, that it seems to me, still today, as if the tension within the introductory eighth development can never be so completely reproduced by an orchestra as it can through the dubious poundings of the second player. More so than any other, this music was appropriate for the house. The piano was a piece of household furniture from which music came forth, and those who threw themselves into the music without fear of hesitations or false notes belonged to the family. Playing four-handed seemed to place the geniuses of the bourgeois nineteenth century as a gift at my cradle at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹²

The sense of historical tragedy pursued by the essay inheres in the contrast between its tender depiction of bourgeois life as sentimental, experiential inheritance and its emphatic use of the past tense: its descriptions of playing the piano as the second player, while his mother or his aunt played or sang along, are memories of a world eclipsed.¹³ And though there might be nothing "more German," in the nineteenth-century sense of this identity, than imagining the longing for home as a form of universality lost, by the same token there was something very painfully "Jewish" in transcribing the literalness of this loss c.1933. Being "allowed" to read from volumes so similar to those of the Torah was an anticipation of *Mündigkeit* and universality; the lawfulness governing both identities had been revoked by Adorno's thirtieth birthday. Violence splits identity; its negativity registers loss.

These elements of biographical identity are important for understanding Adorno's philosophical and cultural identity. The musical principle in Adorno, clearly, came from his mother and aunt, both skilled and trained performers who had to negotiate the complex marginal world of nineteenth-century musical performance—which is to say, who moved uncomfortably between being thought of as "performers" and as "artists."¹⁴ This marginality, sympathetically appreciated by the Jewish Frankfurt wine merchant Bernhard Wiesengrund (a man who by trade dispensed an aristocratic pleasure to a bourgeois world),

¹² AGS 17: 303.

¹³ The logic of culture is discussed in Hartmut Scheible, *Theodor W. Adorno: Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1989).

¹⁴ I am indebted here to Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: Ein letztes Genie* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003).

formed the familial-bourgeois basis for the child who came to identify music not only as a calling and a profession, but also as a synonym for freedom and universality itself. This identity was never free of the problems of cultural membership. The Wiesengrunds had, on account of the mixed confessional status of their union, been married in a civil ceremony in London, which itself was symbolic. Though it has been argued that one knows little of the political views of Adorno's father during these years beyond his Anglophilia and his profession, this is not quite true. It is known that though he was a prosperous bourgeois, he seems to have had no quarrel with his son's socialism. This makes sense if one surmises that the young Teddie Wiesengrund was probably encouraged to think of his relative privilege in terms of that most English of socialist tropes—a Fabian socialism, which did not think of socialism as “an alternative culture,” antithetical to the bourgeois, but rather conceived of socialism as the ideal of making good on the promise of “bourgeois universality” contained in culture. If universality, like the home itself, could be experienced at the piano bench as the gift of the nineteenth century—if cultural equality could be law—it only seemed reasonable to imagine that the experience of that universality as culture should not be denied to the laboring masses. Though later theorists of identity would denounce this ideal of universal cultural enjoyment as elitist or insufficiently radical, it is important not to forget that it was a regulative ideal within many aspects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century politics and culture.

Like many Germans in his generation, Adorno was politically radicalized by the inflation of the early 1920s, which destroyed many households, undermined plans, and undercut the economic basis of cultural dreams. Germany's growing anti-Semitism probably contributed to this radicalization, but it was not, in the first instance, the source of his political convictions. He simply did not think of himself as Jewish in the same way that the Nazis perceived him, which is to say that Adorno never viewed Judaism racially, or even as “inherited” in any objective sense. And this too fits a fairly common pattern among his Frankfurt peers. In the heavily Jewish Frankfurt—a city that had long been the object of anti-Semitic innuendo in Germany (Luther had called the city a “sinful bowl of gold”)—it was not until the last years of the Weimar Republic that it became impossible, as someone of Jewish descent, to continue viewing anti-Semitic rhetoric as simply something to be ignored.¹⁵ This did not mean, however, that one did not cultivate caution. Even as many German Jews in Adorno's situation saw their personal fortunes come to ruin during the 1920s, and watched their civil rights first symbolically and then literally revoked as the idea spread that the inflation

¹⁵ Leo Lowenthal, *An Unmastered Past: The Autobiographical Reflections of Leo Lowenthal*, ed. Martin Jay (Berkeley, 1987), 25–8.

was a Jewish conspiracy, Adorno's father was cautious enough not to be wholly consumed by events. Both Adorno's family money and his parents survived the Weimar Republic and escaped Germany itself before the outbreak of the war. Socialism—and particularly Marxism—appealed because it seemed to provide a way of understanding why the world was falling apart, why bourgeois experience and its freedoms seemed to be under the threat of extinction. Socialism was as valuable for its *Erkenntnischarakter* (its ability to help one perceive, through the aid of theory, the changing dynamics of the bourgeois, capitalist world) as it was for its capacity to express political solidarity with the disenfranchised. Though it seems hardly necessary to say so, it is a misconception to think that the only available notion of socialism during this period was one of an authoritarian or conspiratorial sort. Recognizing this helps one understand something further about Adorno's overall intellectual makeup: he assumed, like many others, that the racism of the German fascists was simply a twisted and inverted form of a theory that might actually explain what was going on in the world. Racism, at least for those in a relatively sheltered bourgeois existence in Frankfurt, could be perceived as the *Sozialismus der dummen Kerle*.¹⁶

MUSIC, SOCIAL THEORY, AND THE URGENCY OF PRAXIS

Written the year of Hitler's ascent to power, "Vierhänding, noch einmal" speaks to the supposition that Adorno would not have become a social theorist were it not for the collapse of the bourgeois world under Nazism. Up until the crisis of 1932–3, he had been primarily engaged in trying to make a career as a musician and a philosopher of subjectivity. It was in those terms that he understood himself, and understood the artistic, intellectual and scientific dimensions of bourgeois freedom prior to writing his first directly Marxian theoretical essay, his 1932 "On the Social Situation of Music." His childhood vision of (bourgeois) music as freedom would resonate through the essay.¹⁷ The essay remains impressive. Though organized according to the classic, orthodox Marxian schema of nineteenth-century political economy—the problem of production and consumption—the essay is not, as one might expect from a Marxian tract from that period, focused on a "revolutionary" theory of either

¹⁶ Adorno's commitment to both Kantian and Marxian traditions led him to consider race a suspect classification in legal, philosophical, or ethical thinking. Adorno consistently resisted equating the anticapitalist, antimodernist, anti-Semitic and dehumanizing discourses of race, useful for sociological analysis, with a "concept" thereof: race remained fundamentally a social illusion that was a by-product and tool of domination. See, for example, AGS 9.2: 248 ff. and AGS 20.1: 13–45.

¹⁷ AGS 18: 729–76.

a “proletarian” or a “bourgeois” avant-garde. “The Social Situation of Music” does not seek to create a theory of a people’s culture. Rather, it is concerned with the problem of “fetishization” in music, and with the degree to which various fixed genre categories have their origin in different nineteenth-century forms of musical production—aristocratic chamber music, proletarian men’s choirs, bourgeois forms of sheet music, etc.—and different kinds of experience: for example, folk traditions, political experience in democratic society, musical-compositional study, musical performance of guilds, theater performance, etc.

The article’s emphasis on the range and variety of musical expression stood far from the party-line Marxism of the day. “On the Social Situation of Music” can be described as an open-ended historical-diagnostic piece of writing seeking, as the title suggests, to analyze “what is happening in music today.” It attempted to read genres not so much by identifying them with class formations, as by thinking of genres and the work being performed within them as attempts to achieve universality through art—attempts at universality that are constantly pushed off course by the social pressures acting on art (commodification, technology, etc.) or by the social pressures alive in art (the desire for freedom, the relation to nature, questions of domination, the interplay of overlapping logics of development, etc.). Adorno believed that genre categories were not to be equated with class in a schematic way that called certain types of art “proletarian” and others “bourgeois.” Rather, individual works of art should be evaluated both individually and generically and related to class only through the overall relation of society and experience. This task was necessarily a difficult one. That the genres appeared to be in disarray in the era of modernism, argued Adorno, was due not only to the technical and market issues introduced by new means of production and new modes of consumption, but also to the fact that the mass-market concentration of these forms of experience in the hands of modern capitalism was altering the way in which they drew on experience and structured expectations concerning it. Untethered from earlier social contexts—each of which possessed its own awareness of history, its own index of social perception—music in the modern world was being transfigured by the commodity form, and was thus becoming exploitable both commercially and politically in new ways that escaped easy classification. As a result, Adorno argued, experience itself, and the idea of freedom that accompanied its production and reproduction through music, was being commodified, dehistoricized, ruptured and distorted.

As a general Marxian theory of a particular form of culture, “Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik” went well beyond either what had been offered sociologically by the *Völkerpsychologie* of the German academy or what had been developed by the Marxian tradition. Adorno argued that theory should not reduce the meaning of works of art to an interpretation of their social context, because to do so would be to equate society with a fully fetishized commodity

world and would leave no room to theorize emancipation itself. Since use-value and exchange-value stood in a complex dialectical relation to one another, the unfolding of this contradiction within the world of industrial production needed to be both sharply differentiated from, and systematically related to, the dialectical-historical unfolding of the tension between the commercial and artistic forms within the musical world. This was not an argument for the “objectivist” conception of art then endorsed in the Soviet Union in either its aesthetic or its theoretical modes; it was a repudiation of the idea of art as a mere transcription of social circumstances. Central here is the idea that freedom and art are intertwined, just as are freedom and individualism. Adorno defended the reality of the nineteenth-century concept of bourgeois subjectivity even as he tried to read music socially, looking into changing structures of musical expression for the sake of understanding the changing balance between forces and relations of production in the broadest dialectical material terms—which is to say, in terms of the way these freedoms and the possibility for experience were also part of what was “produced” in musical production. Another way of putting this is that Adorno thought that art held out a model, if not of unalienated production, then of a form of object orientation for the individual in which dynamic social forces and the desire for freedom were both visible. And this was retranslatable, thought Adorno, back into the realm of Marxian social theory, into the critique of commodification. Just as the people wanted something different from commodities than what they received, so they wanted something different from music as well, but these discrepancies, which were of course of two very different sorts (music’s use-value was simply different to that of a toaster or an automobile), were not to be reduced to one another, but rather used to diagnose the overall historical tendency, the *gesellschaftliche Lage*.

The power of Adorno’s essay consisted in the idea of sociohistorical “situatedness” as part of the objectivity of the work of art, and thus as something that all studies of the work must take into account. Adorno wished to reinvigorate the concept of the dialectic as the basis for the analysis of experience and society as they stood in relation to one another through the activities of human making and consumption, and he wished to do so in terms of a reading of Marx that addressed the overall dialectic between nature and society, between forces and relations of production. Such a reading would not demonize production or consumption and worship labor, nor would it view art as the ideological “dross” of the societal production, but would address each of these as constitutive elements of society.

“On the Social Situation of Music” shows the thirty-year-old Adorno at the forefront of Marxian cultural theory. The idea of setting what Leszek Kołakowski called the “Promethian–Faustian” elements of Marxian humanism to work on the problem of aesthetic genre and its material dynamics—the idea that one could develop a theoretically grounded understanding of society out of any genre,

the suggestion that there was something liberating about bourgeois art that posed a challenge to the economic-deterministic or revolutionary-conspiratorial strands of Communist politics—was both a brilliant and dangerous move in the climate in which it was proffered. This danger did not only have to do with the Nazis, who were busy waging street battles against Communists in 1932. The idea that international Communism provided a refuge on the left was disappearing. Adorno, who had followed along with the institute's own discovery of the young Marx in the 1920s and 1930s, and who had learned the better part of what he knew about Marx through reading Benjamin, Bloch, and Lukács, entered this field of politico-theoretical activity naively, though at an extremely high philosophical level. His inaugural lecture of 1931 had, brilliantly and foolishly, offered a philosophical synthesis of the post-World War I era of Marxian theoretical speculation by wedding Marx to his friend Benjamin's reinterpretation of the concept of nature. Adorno's earlier absorption in Kierkegaard had meant that when he turned to work on Marxian philosophical thought, he was already looking at Marx through the philosophical lens of Lukács's *Soul and Form* (1911) and, above all, Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (1916–20). This latter work had offered a broad generic theory based upon the concept of the inner tensions inherent within art in various "eras" of civilization, which Lukács at that point defined in terms of secularization and degeneration of spirit rather than capital. Adorno's interest in genre and its relation to bourgeois life connected with his interest in Kierkegaard via his reception of Benjamin's understanding of art as the "unleashing of human powers."¹⁸ Innovations in artistic form were, following an analogy to the Marxian *Entfesselung der produktiven Kräfte* of nature, machinery, and capital, to be treated as part of a logic of development congruent with the fetishization of commodities and yet also as moments of sociohistorical particularity in which the "monadic quality" of individual works of art mirrored the reflexive defense of human spontaneity and autonomy. Horkheimer was encouraging the development of a social-scientific synthesis of these approaches to genre: and this, in a somewhat tamed-down version, was what Adorno produced in 1932.

The irony is that 1932 was about the last year such work was possible in European society east of the Rhine. The idea of self-consciousness, upon which genre analysis hinged, was to be replaced by Party discipline. Lukács himself, the person who, along with Karl Korsch, had pioneered the field of what would later come to be called "Western Marxism," had found himself, in 1931, "Cominterned," which referred to the bizarre procedure whereby the police of European democracies arrested their more engaged Communist Party activists

¹⁸ BGS 4.1–2: 147.

and deported them to the Soviet Union. This was justified partly as a measure to quell the forces of reaction growing across Europe, partly as revenge for the revolutionary activity of the early 1920s, and partly to “protect” the individuals in question from violent attacks from ultranationalist groups. By 1932, Lukács was by no means an “independent” Marxist: he had in fact already acquiesced to two Soviet censures of his *History and Class Consciousness*, a humiliation for which he repaid the Party with redoubled outward loyalty. The Communist Party, however, continued to view his position as deviationist.

On theoretical matters, the Institute for Social Research, which had started life by laying claim to the Marxian tradition without alignment to the Soviet Union, diverged further from the Soviet line than Lukács ever had. In 1932, Frankfurt (unlike Vienna) was at a sufficient geopolitical remove from Moscow that such “Cominternation” was not likely for any of its members. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the independence of mind represented by the institute in publishing such a piece, which insisted on the ultra-revisionist and Enlightenment idea that Marx should be read (and even challenged) in terms of his ability to address the totality that is bourgeois culture. The Institute for Social Research was already beginning to hear very negative updates on the Russian situation from the director of its Moscow counterpart, the Institute for Marxism–Leninism, David Rjazanov, who reported that the Thermidor stage of the Russian Revolution was at hand. He also noted the strange fate of Lukács, who, courtesy of the Viennese police, was now “installed” at the Moscow Institute as a theorist whose primary occupation would soon become that of renouncing his early work for the pleasure of his Party colleagues. Rjazanov, a more independent thinker than Lukács, was not amused to watch the Hungarian tack politically toward the authoritarian Zhdanov, the man who would play the role of Stalin’s prosecutor in the show trials.¹⁹

MIMESIS AND SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

With a clear understanding of Adorno’s attempt to mediate between socialism and sociology in the 1930s, one can reread Adorno’s jazz critique of the period in terms of its own “woundedness.” Here one further context for Adorno’s work becomes relevant. Adorno wrote the jazz articles to become an “expert”

¹⁹ Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Cambridge, 1991), 303, quotes Wieland Herzfelde’s memoirs, which describe Lukács as a shrewd figure in a horrible situation: “Lukács always knew what to write and whom to attack. He associated with people I considered hangmen, like Zhdanov; but I can forgive his Moscow behavior. After all, we lived in constant fear.”

on American culture so that he could obtain an entry permit: in a literal sense, it was only through jazz that he escaped the prison that Europe was becoming. The changing political situation continually upended the theory that mediated between Adorno's aesthetic-cultural and political-philosophical impulses. Adorno's theoretical goal had been to examine the production and consumption of music not only in terms of the growing tendency toward commodification in capitalist society, but also in terms of an overall dialectic between nature and society, relations and forces of production, bourgeois subjectivity and its constellations within social groups. A scholarly and open-ended analysis of bourgeois society in its transformation conceived "in full freedom" was altered when the freedoms of bourgeois life entered into crisis.²⁰ A work like "On the Social Situation of Music" becomes nonidentical with itself when the world around it changes. And so does its author. As Adorno turned toward the topic of American music, he was pushed to narrow his approach on two accounts: first, to engage in politics; second, to begin to speak in code. For the purposes of Adorno's politics at the time, this drive led in two directions: the first was to champion Schönberg and his school as the defenders of a truly progressive, nonobjectivist avant-garde (which he did, much to the consternation of Lukács, who denounced the "bourgeois" Marxists of Frankfurt and their decadent Marxism); the second was to try to write about a musical form that seemed to have a broader audience, such as that of jazz. The two moves went hand in hand.

Though Adorno's relation to the Schönberg school also came to be simplified in the process of emigration, the worst victim of the need for praxis was his analysis of popular music in general, and jazz in particular. The analysis of genre as fetish was turning into the analysis of the affirmative character of culture.²¹ Little of Adorno's intrawar musical criticism was published until after the war, but his work on popular music was in demand. In the 1932 essay, Adorno, while still in Germany, had defined jazz as a commercialized combination of various banalized, dehistoricized, decontextualized forms of "light music," which had been overlaid with the nimbus of an avant-garde internationalism for the purposes of marketing a *utility music* to the machine age. Adorno compared jazz's social constellation to other forms of commercially counterfeited "folk" culture, including gimmick tunes such as "Who Rolled the Cheese to the Train

²⁰ AGS 11: 664.

²¹ The phrase "affirmative character of culture" refers to Herbert Marcuse's essay by the same name, originally published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 6 (1937), 54–94. The lead essay of *Prisms*, "Cultural Criticism and Society," drew on and extended Marcuse's concept.

Station” (“Wer hat denn den Käse zum Bahnhof gerollt?”—a piece of faux-Bavariana) or that undoubtedly reactionary invocation of fraternity life, “Trink, Brüderlein, Trink.” The examples he gives for “jazz” music, by this same analysis, are not exactly the recent works of Sidney Bechêt, but rather such forgotten classics as Paul Whiteman’s “Valencia” and “The Dancing Tambourine,” or “The Wedding of the Painted Doll” from the MGM musical *The Broadway Melody*—all of which (it seems unoffensive to say) were wretched, commercialized forms of music with strained claims to authenticity. The implied fusion of syncopated orchestral music with a graft of horns and an invocation of a communal tradition is probably representative of what the word “jazz” meant toward the end of the Weimar era in Germany (even if an ambitious critic could have, with effort, purchased some Sidney Bechêt). Significantly, Adorno did not single out jazz for his musical–sociological opprobrium, nor did he draw any absolute line between jazz and the incorporation and decontextualization of the traditions from historically and socially distinct groups that had been practiced by late Romantic or early modernist masters in their dissonant integration of *völkisch* tonal elements into their composition. Adorno’s interest continued to be in judging the social situation in terms of the overall processes of consumption and production of music. The questions he asked were how the market was harnessing the extra-market desires of individuals, how the integration of these desires with easily consumable forms was changing music, and how this process was changing the bourgeois self and its ideas of freedom. But he was also challenging the one-sided notion that the only legitimate conclusion to be drawn from Marx’s “double character of the commodity” pointed to the appropriation of the means of production by a “worker’s state.” Given that he was interested, therefore, in how mass-produced music became part of the economic system, and that his political goal was one of agitating against the anti-jazz agitators, it is hardly surprising that the word “race” is not invoked: Adorno seems to have had only a faint interest in the American social situation, as he was concerned with the social “state” of music as art. Instead, the word *Volk* is used, purely descriptively, to speculate about the desires and consumption patterns of the disenfranchised masses. Adorno would have considered it a mistake to valorize the concept of “race” in this context; by the same token, he did not consider African American jazz artists to be anything other than a special case of a disenfranchised proletariat exploited by a production system in search of light entertainment.

Shortly after the grotesque 1932 elections, Adorno took several months to draft out the two-part article, making his first attempt to articulate a simplified version of *Die gesellschaftliche Lage*’s analysis of the social and historical consciousness embedded in music—a version he hoped could be directly translated into a political praxis. This happened in a radio talk with Ernst Krenek, whose

jazz opera *Johnny spielt auf* had already been the target of demonstrations by brownshirted thugs interested in disrupting “degenerate race music.”²² The charge of degeneracy connected Nazi cultural politics to its race theories and suggested a “Jewish–African” racial–cultural axis against whose encroachments the “Aryan race” needed to defend itself in a life-or-death struggle. The psychoanalytically astute Adorno immediately interpreted these views as the reaction formation of a weak subjectivity, in terms of some sort of German nationalist fear of contamination or, perhaps, a desire to not be left behind by modernity. Such arguments would appear later in print, but in his 1932 radio conversation with Krenek, Adorno, without mentioning the Nazis, argued that one should not fear jazz, given the fact that jazz, having long been commercialized, had also long since ceased to have anything threatening about it.²³ Instead, argued Adorno, it would be better to look behind the jazz controversy and see that fear of modernity could be transcended by an insight into the material, historical, and technical forces that brought it about. To this, Adorno added that an embrace of the modernity of an avant-garde genius such as Arnold Schönberg was far more revolutionary than the commercialized fusion of classicism, *völkisch* and primitivist elements, and allegiance with technology offered by jazz. Playing on fascist conceptions of revolution and beauty, Aryan mysticism and technological power, Adorno sought to subvert the incipient revolution from the right by pointing people toward a different, cultural left.

This was certainly not brilliant political rhetoric, but it was not so dumb either. The stupidity came a year later, after the Nazis had seized power, when Adorno redoubled his investment in the same strategy of inversion—with ever-fewer opportunities to make his point in an uncompromised manner. Neither he nor Krenek was going to be allowed back on German radio. So Adorno published, in the *Europäische Revue*, an essay called “Abschied vom Jazz,” in which he repeated the same argument but in further dumbed-down terms. Here he argued that the Nazis were merely chasing a ghost in issuing a degree banning *Negermusik*. Jazz had long since ceased to have anything to do either with the “genuine music of blacks” or with the supposedly threatening “degeneration” of the big city. Jazz was a form of international musical–economic integration, whose function was to wipe out local, peasant and lower-class forms of expression, and thus to make the lower class forget their “aesthetic claims” on society. By banning jazz, argued Adorno, the Nazis were trying to ban the idea of a commercial music and to promote a pure diet of military marches and “every sort of folklore.” But, he

²² See Albrecht Dümling, *Entartete Musik*, 2nd edn (Düsseldorf, 1988).

²³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Musik im Rundfunk: Zwei unveröffentlichte Texte,” *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, 7 (1992), 20–34.

concluded, perhaps the silence created by a lack of utility music will allow for the “tension between culture and society” to break free.²⁴

The regime still stood; Adorno was forced into exile. And so, feeling isolated in Oxford in 1935–6, he decided to be more forceful—to argue more like Benjamin’s friend Bertolt Brecht, who reminded himself how to write good agitprop by placing a donkey figurine on his writing desk with a sign that said “even I must understand it!”²⁵ At the same time, Adorno, frustrated by his isolation at Oxford, was starting to contemplate the possibility of exile in the United States—a possibility becoming more distinct as the institute second-guessed its plan to maintain offices in Geneva and Paris. The overall climate of appeasement in England, and the increasingly palpable threat of war in Europe, made America the safer harbor—and, given the outcome of World War I, a strategic choice for reasons geopolitical and intellectual-cultural. American immigration restrictions were tight, however, even in the wake of Hitler’s war drums and massive expulsions, arrests, and murders of Jewish and socialist intellectuals; to escape he needed a work visa, and to do this he needed to become an expert.

Adorno achieved his dual goal of playing the agent provocateur and establishing his bona fides as an expert on American culture by writing, in England—and still in German—a further article, his 1936 “Über Jazz,” published under the absurd pseudonym Hektor Rottweiler. The name says much about the article’s spirit: by taking the name Rottweiler, the “vicious dogs favored by SS-sadists,” Adorno sought to undermine that viciousness by assuming a voice more German than German; the first name recalled the good son of Troy, the patriot, defender, and critic of his country’s policies, but also connoted mockery, and the sense that the rules of culture may need to be violated to defend culture against the barbarians.²⁶ Adorno thought he would kill two birds with one stone, adopting a strategy that Herbert Marcuse had earlier embraced in trying to transform the German term *Lebensraum* into a left-wing revolutionary idea, a strategy which Walter Benjamin would later adopt in collecting a book of letters that tried to show the strength of German men to be their capacity toward self-doubt, and

²⁴ AGS 18: 770–75.

²⁵ BGS, 4: 525.

²⁶ Adorno used this pseudonym on occasions addressing themes of reactionary culture and the breakdown of criticism, publishing several reviews concerning the “crisis in criticism” in the Austrian musical journal 23, and also an extended footnote to Leo Lowenthal’s response to Mortimer J. Adler’s idea of popular culture, “Knut Hamsun, zur Vorgeschichte der autoritären Ideologie,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 7 (1937), 338. In the latter, Adorno compared Sibelius’s combination of “technical polish” and pseudo-originality to Hamsun’s invocations of soil and blood in the presentation of “nature.” Adorno’s invective against Sibelius’s reversion to a “false tonality” was indeed more aggressive than that against Jazz.

which Adorno had himself tried in 1934 in giving a tactically subversive review to another ethno-national type of music, the “men’s choir” tradition.²⁷ Heroic–subversive though this tactic might have seemed to Adorno at the time, it was not his finest hour. “Über Jazz” introduced virtually nothing new, nor did it defuse racialized thinking when it tried to ridicule the concept of the “threat” of jazz as a manifestation of sexual insecurity.²⁸ It did, however, go further in “dumbing things down,” this time for the Americans as much as for his benighted countrymen: dropping all vocabulary of social analysis from his earlier pieces, Adorno tried his hand at providing a critique of jazz’s social character couched in the psychoanalytic (rather than Marxist) idioms of domination.

“Über Jazz” ended up providing an analysis of jazz that effaced much of the power of the social–aesthetic analyses of *gesellschaftliche Lage* not only by abandoning the overall theoretical framework for analyzing generic change in terms of the dynamics of commercialization and electronic–mechanical reproduction, but also by focusing on one genre as culture rather than conducting a more thorough, comparative social analysis. Though not without its insights, “Über Jazz” suffered from its attempt to shift the language of analysis from Marx to Freud while submerging theoretical reflection for the sake of popularization. Freudian literalism can be worse, but not much more so. Not only is practically every aspect of jazz read in terms of castration complexes and the fear of premature ejaculations—from the spasms of the jitterbug, to the vigorous sound of trumpets, to the sense of timing suggested by horns “coming in late” to join the band—but even where “Hektor Rottweiler” appears to have restrained himself, the social analysis is drowned out by the chorus. In trying to evade questions of cultural authenticity by mocking them, “Über Jazz” so strongly emphasizes the power of commercialization that the ethno-historical roots of jazz and its social worlds disappear.²⁹ Both object and subject can be wounded together.

²⁷ See Adorno’s review of Herbert Müntzel, *Die Fahne der Verfolgten*, AGS 19: 331–2. When the student newspaper *Diskus* reprinted this article in 1962, Adorno responded with a letter self-critically describing his 1934 article as an example of the “kind of stupidity” that tried to address the problems of fascism with a strategy of avant-garde inversion. Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung: Von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail 1946–1995*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1998) 2: 162, 168.

²⁸ For example, Adorno, *Prisms*, 129.

²⁹ A discussion of the musicological dimension of Adorno’s proposition is beyond the scope of this essay. Max Paddison provides an excellent analysis of how Adorno’s European ear intersected with American musical forms and the critique of mass culture. Max Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music* (New York, 1993); Paddison, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture: Essays on Critical Theory and Music* (London, 1996). Paddison is fruitfully read alongside and in contrast to Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music* (Chicago, 1989); Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley, 1989).

From the standpoint of a refugee trying to rescue German culture—and the idea of culture itself—from Hitler’s Germany between 1932 and 1937, it is clear why Adorno would have wanted to downplay the African American and Jewish dimensions of jazz. There was little to be gained in “unmasking” Nazi racism, or in telling the Rockefeller Foundation that there were unresolved racial tensions in America. There *was* a point in speaking of how modern (rather than capitalist) society was shot through with a search for a falsified, cheaply reproducible sense of immediacy; how modernity longed for a primitivism as a protest against a world that demanded continuous labor and tried to brand it as fun; how modern life advanced the interest of recorded music and mass-media celebrities over live performance and attention to matters of orchestration, tonality, harmony, or expression; how dangerous it was to celebrate “technical progress,” avant-gardism, and mass popularity while the world careened toward disaster. Critical theory had to sell to America.

From the standpoint of fifty years later, Adorno’s arguments against jazz can appear factually false and even unethical. One outcome of the multiculturalism discussion of the 1980s was to create a kind of culturalist parallel to the Kantian imperative of subjective recognition: a demand for cultural recognition and plurality that views the acknowledgement of aesthetic merit among the artworks of an oppressed group as the entry price of cosmopolitan intellectual engagement. In the course of this wave of discovering cultural theory, the dissonance between this imperative and Adorno’s condemnation of jazz came to mark the limits not only of Adorno’s relevance to the new consensus, but also of the Frankfurt school more broadly: the limits of the critique of affirmative culture. In this negative sense, Adorno’s encounter with jazz is part of the general history of identity and cultural studies that unfolded after his death.

NEGATIVE IDENTITY AND CULTURAL IDEALISM

Praxis may indeed precede theory; the wound of jazz, like that of exile, must be made to make sense biographically before it makes sense theoretically. But a question remains to be asked: what does the Adorno–Heine–jazz-as-woundedness constellation reveal about the real history of negative identity in the twentieth century? Having argued that Adorno did not understand jazz in a cultural sense in the 1930s, I would like to conclude by suggesting that the concept of negative identity Adorno developed in the 1960s demonstrates that Adorno ultimately acknowledged social theory’s need for a concept of identity, but that he was, in his last years, proposing a fusion of German idealism and cultural pluralism quite different from the one that came to dominance in the 1980s. If read historically, in terms of the emergence of Adorno’s work out of his biographical experience, his theory of negative identity offers a powerful

corrective to the concept of affirmative, cultural identity, as well as to the post-structuralist attack on subjectivity, authorship, and agency.

Adorno's turn toward Heine, weak subjectivity, and a dialectics of mimeticism began with a rejection of the idea that a fixed identity is the natural condition of the subject. The twentieth century gave broad testimony to the fact that identities are often unstable, imposed by external powers, charged with *ressentiment*, a form of domination itself. To theorize identity as a happy sliver of positive, expressive culture, Adorno argued, is to forget domination, and to overlook the wounds through which the individual might grow a critical consciousness. In *Negative Dialectics*, the question of suffering and domination informs the abstract language of epistemology:

The precondition of all truth is the need to make suffering speak. This is true because suffering is the weight of objectivity upon the subject, and because that which the subject experiences as its most subjective moment—the expression of suffering—is objectively mediated.³⁰

The wounded subjectivity that serves as the “precondition of all truth” seeks to transform experience by objectifying it. The objective world is what wounds, its product is an inherently social object of consciousness; therefore there is no “objectivity” without consciousness's conceptual, social, linguistic mediations. Rewriting Hegel's slave/master dialectic, *Negative Dialectics* here argued that human beings perceive the world truthfully because they can feel—from within their own subjectivity and identity—the negative pull of suffering and domination. Every identity bears traces of nonidentity.

The theory of wounded subjectivity of Adorno's late years represented a threefold critique of past practices: it was a critique and embrace of early Frankfurt school theory, of German Idealism's concept of the subject, of the logic connecting identity and the culture concept. Although there is a purely conceptual–philosophical way to see this connection, it comes out most clearly as an abstraction from historical–biographical exploration of Adorno's own role as a theorist.

The Heine essay represented a departure from Adorno's earlier modes of thinking about culture. By embracing the concept of identity, declaring critical subjectivity “wounded,” and seeing the logic of economic, national, and aesthetic identities as intermingled, Adorno transformed the Frankfurt approaches of *die gesellschaftliche Lage* or “The Culture Industry.”³¹ In earlier critical theory, the left-Hegelian dialectic of identity and nonidentity had sponsored an ideology critique grounded in the production model. While Horkheimer, Benjamin, and others

³⁰ AGS 6: 29.

³¹ The latter is the subtitle of the first excursus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. AGS 3: 141–5.

entertained side projects on the idea of culture as a foundation, they did so in a way that was inflected with the language of surrealist, avant-garde, or Nietzschean irrationalism and which identified the defense of culture as a consequence of the pain of being a theorist at the end of civilization. Once the Frankfurt school commenced its analysis of fascism, they addressed cultural identity and even biographical particularity primarily as failed forms of universalism. The divide between the ethical–ontological side of identity and the notion of socioeconomic reasoning left no clear place for analysis of culture as a form of materiality and as suffering at a time when the world of culture seemed to be dissolving, and when particularity seemed the special province of racist or ethno-national reasoning. Awareness of this theoretical divide and its context helps explain the unfinished business of Adorno’s 1930s jazz essays and the resumption of this theoretical project upon his return from exile.

In Adorno’s postwar theory, two key strands of thought gradually converged: he developed the metaphor of culture as a wound; and the notion of Kantian critical subjectivity as wounded subjectivity led him to rethink the role of the critic and of immanent criticism. The first moment of this embrace of the culture concept can be found in Adorno’s 1955 Introduction to *Prisms*, in which “Über Jazz” was collected. There, in the essay “Cultural Critique and Society,” Adorno rejected any absolute distinction between theory and culture, saying that the cultural critic was “of the same essence as the culture which he thinks himself above”.³² *Prisms* concludes with an essay on Veblen, written in many drafts during exile, that embraced Veblen’s idea that criticism had to dissolve the boundary between culture and barbarism before it could reconstruct it. Prior to the publication of *Prisms*, Adorno had aimed to construct theory from a singular perspective that purged the notion of identity; his theoretical introduction to *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), for example, preserved the 1930s emphasis on not taking ethno-national or ethnocentric patterns of thinking as indicative of any truth. Until *Prisms*, then, Adorno was still looking for a strong subjectivity in theory or in the avant-garde. A year later, the Heine essay dissolved the boundary between high theory and culture and lifted the ban on cultural identity. By defining knowledge as well as culture as forms of woundedness, Adorno started to view culture as a realm of weak but nascent subjectivity out of which science and epistemology, as well as the avant-garde, might grow, but from which they could never be decisively or finally separated.

If bringing wounded subjectivity to the fore required a rethinking of the relation between criticism and culture in terms of identity, it also led to a reconsideration of the status of identity within German idealism. The concept

³² AGS 10.1: 11.

of identity offered by Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, and still present in, though criticized by, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Marx, entailed a heroic subjectivity for philosophy, one that resurfaced in existentialism's agonistic image of the theorist and in positivism's investment in the impersonal scientist. After the Heine essay, Adorno challenged the ideas of truth and ethics predicated on this subjectivity by focusing on how Kantian subjectivity needed to be read against the grain of its apparent stability. In 1959, for example, Adorno argued that Kant defined the "true task of philosophical reflection" as the development of a "thought that would heal the wounds it inflicts on its own objects."³³ The idea that thought required reflection on weakness in order to be true became central to Adorno's critique of the French existentialist reading of Hegel that saw "Being" as a primordial totality or as an absolute reference point for truth. Neither thought nor subjectivity begins with wholeness, argued Adorno: wholeness is posited out of weakness and necessity—from the fear of violence or fear of the dissolution of childhood illusions. Just as Hegel's invocation of Being as the first concept is not about an ontogenic "presence" or plenitude, but rather about objectification and formal negation, so negative identity precedes identity at a logical and formal as well as subjective level. Adorno thought this account of negativity was a strictly Hegelian one, but it also had a personal origin. In 1964, in a deeply personal essay, Adorno described the process of learning to read Kant from his tutor and friend, Siegfried Kracauer: Kracauer "showed me how the most eloquent passages [in the *Critique*] are wounds" that were "inflicted by the war between the objective–ontological and subjective–idealist moments" within the work.³⁴ Here, Adorno engaged with reading as a historical act, asking, what did it mean for two "non-authentic" German-speaking Jews to read Kant in Frankfurt in the 1920s? Kant's texts, with their Enlightenment assumptions about the natural constellation of law and art, science and natural religion, reveal an expressive dimension when confronted with the negative identity of these two readers: the rift between objective–ontological and subjective–idealist moments speaks poignantly to the inner conflicts of bourgeois society and of the modern self. Emancipation is indeed incomplete if one wishes to be made whole or to be governed by laws that do not exist. This is the wound.

These two visions of wounded subjectivity—the one in culture, the one in ideality and the self—were mediated by Adorno's understanding of mimesis not just as the basis for art, but as a term for the psychoanalytic reincorporation of object relations that one feared. Mimesis is not, for Adorno, a matter of realism, or copying, but a practice of the wounded subject building identity out

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, ed. Theodor-W.-Adorno-Archiv (Frankfurt, 1993–), 4.4: 131.

³⁴ AGS 11: 389–90.

of nonidentity. Sándor Ferenczi's theory of trauma and object relations informed Adorno's reading of the dissolution of primary narcissism in terms of wounded subjectivity.³⁵ Identity production occurs as one imitates and incorporates the nonidentical fear of dissolution. The sense of oneness with the mother that Freud associated with "the oceanic feeling" in adults described retrospectively a wound, a desire to return to a set of object relations thought to include a whole self that was actually antecedent to selfhood. What Freud called sublimated desire, Adorno described as a mimetic process whereby a wounded subjectivity not only internalized the objects of desire (creating the structures of self-identity), but also forged a consciousness about equivalence and identity. Loosely speaking, the transcendental ego was a kind of superego—and mimesis and its formation of identities and nonidentities the mediator between id, ego, and superego. The libidinal economy was driven not just by desire, but by wounded imitation that created at once identity and nonidentity, attachments and aversions. The Heine essay imaginatively presented this idea in terms of German Jewish *Lieder* and lyrical selfhood; but what started out as metaphor for culture's imitative inversions and incorporations slowly became a means of synthesizing Adorno's theoretical commitments to the Kantian and Freudian traditions as well as of addressing the limitations of each in an era of "universal homelessness."

If one fails to see this historical and mimetic dimension to wounded subjectivity, one misreads the resulting theory of nonidentity as a form of martyrology, negative theology, or deconstruction: the goal of the "disenchantment of the concept" is then interpreted as resignation in the face of a world gone wrong. It would be more correct to say that, for Adorno, the impulse toward narrative and mimesis arose out of incompleteness ("as long as there are beggars, there will be myths," as Benjamin had said)—and thus that mimesis always bears traces of *ressentiment*, is always cooptable by power.³⁶ Disenchantment meant recognizing that the desire to become whole did not originate in an actual wholeness. An understanding of mimesis points to the positive interwinement of myth and enlightenment, just as the notion of wounded subjectivity is grounded in the view, half-Kantian and half-Freudian, that although only rational individualism and criticism could emancipate individuals from irrationality, rationality itself contains no positive, immanent goal. The neo-Hegelian paraphrase of this relation was that subjectivity only emerged out of the suffering of incomplete emancipation—an objectivity which came from the subject's historical unfreedom and, *pace* Kant, from its inherent incompleteness. This dialectical defense of the emancipatory dimension of reason and identity emphasized that human beings must always liberate themselves from the grip of

³⁵ AGS 6: 267–75.

³⁶ AGS 6: 203; also *Minima Moralia*, "Regressionen," AGS 4: 227–9.

nature, but that this process too was not without its nonidentical other. In the mimetic process, human beings sought to overcome their fear of a hostile world in two ways: on the one hand, by imagining themselves to possess the powerful attributes of the nature they feared; on the other, by dividing the hostile world into concepts that limited and partitioned its perceived power, transforming it into a mythico-conceptual world over which they can assert control.

That this theory was developed in relation to Heine is of historical and aesthetic importance because it connected the concern with woundedness to the Romantic response to the growth of nationalism and the spread of a bourgeois culture that exercised its power through identity formation. Heine showed how mockery and mimesis could challenge the nonidentities of this identity better than could reason. A passage from Adorno's unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* suggests how seriously he took German Idealism's tendency to celebrate strength, permanence, and compulsion rather than reflecting on woundedness, transience, and play. In discussing how a version of Kantian "strong" subjectivity continued to inform many of the Romantics' notions of culture, rebellion, and reconciliation, Adorno argued that the later Romantics—Heine among them—foregrounded the importance of play and mimeticism in order to defend the "frailty of the empirical individual" in the face of national cultures and the power of modernity to shape empirical selfhood.³⁷ Growing social domination brought new ways of becoming a self and being denied a self, but culture and thought—the defense mechanisms of subjective individualism—were articulated out of a subjective weakness that could not be saved by Kantian rigor or vigor. Late Romanticism recognized mockery, imitation, weakness, and play as the best defense of a humanity demented by demands of strength: "art's purposiveness without purpose . . . represents moments of escape from . . . society's demand for self-preservation and domination" through inversion and expressivity.³⁸ For Adorno, the theory of wounded subjectivity modifies subjective idealism by arguing that universalism is not accessible as a concept or a principle before it is experienced as value, and it is not a value before it is at first a form of *ressentiment*.

If the luminous ethical simplicity of multiculturalism comes from connecting culture, identity, and emancipation, its weakness is that it misrecognizes nonidentity as identity and sees only strength where there is also weakness. It has trouble accounting for its dual commitment to memorializing injustice and trauma and to celebrating community, authenticity, resiliency, agency. Adorno's theory of negative identity has something to contribute here. A theory that

³⁷ AGS 7: 295–6. The German *Hinfalligkeit* suggests contingency, frailty, or invalidity. I read this and other related words as constitutive of the category of "weak subjectivity." Compare to AGS 7: 172.

³⁸ AGS 7: 229.

understands the truth of identity as rooted in incomplete emancipation and wounded subjectivity, and that understands that identity, like culture, is often unwanted and imposed from without, can not only better explain how liberated subjectivity might emerge, but also how inversions of recognition can take place, how identity can breed violence and misunderstanding as well as liberation. Understanding the power of negative identity can, moreover, help narratives of universal emancipation be more attuned to the collocation of mimeticism, domination, and expressive suffering where it is least expected. Though one cannot know how Adorno would have reacted to it, if one followed the logic suggested by the Heine essay, jazz can be seen to harbor traces of a powerful negative identity that is a form of remembrance, self-defense, and critical celebration. Perhaps the worst moment of the jazz essay—Adorno's discussion of the "eccentric clowns"—could be made to testify to the importance of what Alain Locke called jazz's "[self-]protective social mimicry."³⁹ The retrospective analysis of a mimesis enforced by domination and wounded subjectivity allows one to perceive a history of negative identity that would rectify the mistakes that come from thinking that culture, liberation, and truth are wholly given in the form of identity.

³⁹ Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, eds., *The New Negro* (Princeton, 2007), 112.