NEGATIVE DIALECTICS AND POLITICAL IMPROVISATION: THE CONVERGENCE OF PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS AND MUSIC IN ADORNO’S CRITIQUE OF PRAXIS

by

BRIAN RAÑON HOWELL

(Under the direction of O. Bradley Bassler)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I examine the philosophical, aesthetic, and political convictions of Theodor Adorno in order to understand the reasoning for his recalcitrant attitude toward both direct political praxis, as well as improvised music. I argue that the lesson Adorno ultimately draws regarding political possibility contains a blind-spot with respect to developmental praxis and thus is somewhat misconceived. I argue that we can take the musical categories of composition and improvisation and use an understanding of their dialectic to reflect on Adorno’s thoughts about the problem of political praxis. I believe that, contrary to Adorno’s criticism, improvisational music is a legitimate form of music-making which is productive of freedom, and that this legitimacy points to a problem with his larger theory. Focused on the need for immanent critique and the primacy of the object, I believe Adorno overlooks something of importance in the needs of the development and maintenance of basic musical practice. In view of what I claim is the implicitly political quality of improvisation, I argue that there is a potential for thinking about improvisational music as a kind of bridge between the musical and political. I consider whether the parallel between musical and political praxis can be extended far enough to see whether we might be able to make sense of the notion of an improvisational politics.

INDEX WORDS: Adorno, Critical Theory, Improvisation, Negative Dialectic
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my grandfather, Angel Rañon, who is as much a philosopher as any I have ever met.
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Thanks to my family for all their love and encouragement, to my beautiful wife Mindy for always supporting me and for waiting so patiently, to my friends for continuing to show me why I love them, to Daniel, because it is out of our many conversations that this dissertation has been built, and special thanks to Brad Bassler who believed I could do this long before I did and who went beyond the call of duty to let me know. Without him this truly would not have been possible.
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Introduction

While it did not occupy a great deal of his explicit writing, Theodor Adorno’s relationship with improvisational music was a contentious one. His relationship with direct political action—documented in a series of essays, lectures, and interviews published during an intense and public conversation with the increasingly radicalized students of the late 1960’s—was equally contentious. Although it may not be apparent that there is any connection between these two things, it is my belief that they are in fact deeply connected in Adorno’s thought. Furthermore, I think this connection points to a similar but more general connection between politics and music, and that the elaboration of this connection has the ability to provide considerable insight into the problem of human freedom and social organization, a problem which underlies every aspect of Adorno’s thought, as well as the improvisational music that he critiques.

In this dissertation I examine the philosophical, aesthetic, and political convictions of Adorno in order to understand the reasoning for his recalcitrant attitude toward both the “revolutionary” activity that he found himself responding to, as well as the improvised music that he thought was being incorrectly regarded as an advanced form of music. In both cases his criticism takes the form of a critique of pseudo-praxis, whereby he argues that the activity in question fails to maintain the connection to its theoretical aspect. The connection to theory, he argues, is essential for any praxis that deserves to call itself such. In part, it is this specific
relationship between theory and praxis, found both explicitly and implicitly throughout Adorno’s work, which I will seek to put into question.

Understood as a kind of convergence of Socratic negativity, Marxist materialism and Kantian universalism, Adorno’s political praxis is defined by his philosophical theory of negative dialectics. Because of this, he responds to the difficulty of the objective situation and the inadequacy of subjective comprehension to deal with the requirements of understanding by insisting that the only option for political praxis is immanent critique. In the situation that developed with his students in Frankfurt, Adorno was accused of resignation and quietism in the face of what they perceived as a clear need for radical social change. What is interesting is that Adorno’s defense against these accusations was not to deny either the need or the desire for radical change in society, but rather to deny that such a change was a present possibility. He argued that in the face of praxical frustration, activism became a way of making oneself feel as though one was accomplishing something that they were not, and in fact could not be.

According to Adorno’s theory of art, the need for freedom in music can only be achieved by the utmost awareness and thoroughgoing consciousness. Adorno conceives of art similarly to philosophy in the sense that it is also fundamentally defined by the requirements of self-reflection. While the requirement is not for ‘complete’ understanding in either case, an autonomous work of art must represent the greatest understanding possible within the given context. Adorno argues that, given the historical context of late capitalism, this will necessarily be a negative, dialectical and self-critical consciousness. In the case of art, this need often manifests itself as a need for control of material. For Adorno, the production of an autonomous musical work requires the utmost degree of organization and planning, something which can only be achieved through written composition. Whether or not improvisation actually operates
as a form of musical production without prior planning, it is clear that in most cases improvisation in fact does not make use of a formally constructed score.

It is my belief that, contrary to Adorno’s criticism, improvisational music is a legitimate form of music-making which is productive of freedom, and that this legitimacy points to a problem with his larger theory. Focused almost exclusively on the need for immanent critique and the primacy of the object, I believe Adorno overlooks something of importance in the needs of the development and maintenance of basic musical practice; that is, while he is focused on the many ways in which subjects fail to produce truth in art, he does not focus much at all on the subjective details of that failure. My approach in responding to Adorno is not to criticize his assessment of improvisation directly, but instead to look more closely at what is good about improvisation as it is, without forcing it to conform to the theory of musical organization that is implied in his aesthetics. My claim will be that we can see the legitimacy of improvisation as a need to loosen the relationship of control between theory and praxis. In this way, the praxical experimentation so important for improvisation can be given a role in the development of non-reified subjectivity without being cut off by negative critique as unacceptably positive.

I will suggest that, given this new configuration of musical theory and praxis, it seems probable that a similar move can be made to open up a discussion about the validity of political praxis. I argue that if I am correct in thinking that there is a significant structural similarity in Adorno’s critiques of both musical and political ‘pseudo-praxis’, then there is good reason to believe that suspicions regarding the correctness of the former critique will be applicable to the latter as well. I believe that there are philosophical, political and artistic phenomena that are either unaccounted for, unnoticed, or rejected by Adorno in his elaboration and practice of the negative dialectical position, but that nevertheless contain something true and important. My
thesis is that the lack in Adorno’s account can be identified as a set of failures which share the characteristic of paying insufficient attention to the demands of the individual subject in the present.

In view of what I claim is the implicitly political quality of improvisation, I argue that there is a potential for thinking about improvisational music as a kind of bridge between the musical and political spheres. I want to consider whether the parallel between musical and political praxis can be extended far enough to see whether we might be able to make sense of the notion of an *improvisational politics*. ‘Improvisation’ in my view is a broad, fertile concept and practice that carries with it implications for understanding human social relationships, the related demands and freedoms of time, and even the role and needs of space. Ultimately I hope to have shown that we need a theory that remains open to the needs of subjective development; i.e. that both recognizes the legitimacy of musical improvisation and recognizes the unavoidable, and unavoidably improvisational, nature of social change.

The path I take in this dissertation from Adorno’s critical theory to my own account of political improvisation proceeds in the following way. In Chapter One I focus on Adorno’s ideas pertaining to philosophy and try to offer an account of his theory of philosophical praxis that will be sufficient to provide context for the discussion of his political praxis in Chapter Two. Both of these chapters attempt to demonstrate the importance of Socrates, Marx (primarily through the mediating work of Lukács), and Kant for Adorno’s ideas about philosophical and political praxis, and both chapters revolve around an exploration of the dialectic of theory and praxis. However, whereas Chapter One is focused on the theoretical underpinnings of Adorno’s praxis, Chapter Two places emphasis on the decisions he made during his late political interventions and
works backwards to understand the theory that supported them. Chapter Three is concerned primarily with explicating Adorno’s aesthetic theory, identifying the notion of ‘primacy of object’ as the central structuring concept of this theory. This begins with a general inquiry into his ideas on art, narrows to the question of music, and then narrows further to conclude with a detailed look at his critique of jazz and improvisation. In Chapter Four, I first provide an argument which attempts to redeem the practice of musical improvisation, and then I offer an original argument for the possibility of establishing an ‘improvisational’ politics. In this final chapter I try to move beyond a direct confrontation with Adorno’s thought and instead engage increasingly with the problem itself. Adorno’s thought represents an unavoidable counterweight to any consideration of the problem, but is ultimately only one point in the constellation.

It is common for books on Adorno’s works to be prefaced by an apology for attempting to write about Adorno’s work, and, unfortunately, I will not stand as an exception to this rule. After all, one does not want to be accused of forgetting Adorno’s implicit prohibition on simplifying for the sake of understandability. However, there are many good reasons to attempt to provide new and more thorough interpretations of Adorno’s work. It is difficult material that never fails to leave a sensitive reader convinced that it is important work that deserves to be correctly understood and defended against inadequate readings. A large portion of this work is engaged in this activity and this is unavoidable insofar as understanding an idea must precede its application. Nevertheless, consistency of interpretation is not my primary goal and I do not see my efforts here as constituting either a response to any particular interpretation of Adorno or to the field of literature as a whole. Such a work is neither what Adorno would have wanted, nor is it what I think is beneficial from the standpoint of philosophical understanding. Although I will
obviously attempt some critique, in the end I do not disagree with Adorno. This is largely because I do not really know how. It would be too simple to think that we could point to some fundamental mistake he has made which then allows us to posit some new and better theory to replace it. The negative character of his analysis allows it to multiply itself as the occasion demands and, in a way, this is just what is required, namely, that we be unable or unwilling to ignore the persistent possibility of critique. All affirmation is on warning.

My own feeling is that the subject matter I have chosen to write about, both in the case of Adorno and in the case of improvisation, deserved a more informal style than I have managed to provide. Perhaps as evidence of the genuine need for an improvisational praxis, I found it very difficult to shake off the habits of safety and formal argumentation that are standard in academic philosophy. This is a question partly of skill and partly of courage, and both of these are a matter of practice. It is my hope that the theory of improvisation elaborated in the following might provide a means, in one way or another, for addressing that imperfection.
Chapter One: Philosophy – Adorno’s Theory of Praxis

*The freedom of philosophy is nothing but the capacity to lend a voice to its unfreedom.*

- Negative Dialectics

As stated in the Introduction, my ultimate goal in analyzing Adorno’s thought is to come to an understanding of his view of what political practice should be. I believe, and will try to establish in what follows, that his answer to the question of political practice is largely determined by his view of philosophical practice. This being the case, I will here attempt to piece together a characterization of his actual philosophical practice and the principles underlying it. No linear argument or unified account can be given for what Adorno thinks philosophy should be, and he does not provide one himself. Nevertheless, he does address the question both directly and indirectly, especially in his late work, and it is possible to give a relatively thorough, if fragmentary (and as Adorno might say, constellational), account. I will try to present this characterization in such a way that what is most basic and vital about his conception of philosophy can be seen clearly. Also, because the question of philosophical practice relates both internally and externally to the dialectical relation between the concepts of *theory* and *practice* – or even more simply, *thinking* and *doing* – it will be beneficial to examine first this relation in its basic form. However, due to the overlapping nature of philosophical and political theory-practice questions, much of what could be said in this chapter will be postponed until the next. On the other hand, also because of this overlap, the question of the Marxist
influence, while receiving fuller treatment in the next chapter, will begin in this one. Toward the purpose of understanding the basic problem of practice, as well as how philosophy may be thought to help solve it, I would like to begin by considering a parallel between Adorno and Socrates. This will serve as a way of elaborating on the issue of philosophical praxis generally and helping to show what I see as being fundamental to Adorno’s conception of philosophical praxis in particular. This is an unconventional approach to Adorno’s philosophy, but I hope one that is worthwhile.

Adorno as Socratic

Despite the conspicuous absence of the philosophical figure of Socrates in Adorno’s writings, it seems to me that the thought of these two philosophers bears a deep resemblance.\(^1\) This resemblance is grounded in the essentially negative character of their philosophies, so that the Socratic notion of ‘philosophical investigation’ and Adorno’s conception of ‘negative dialectics’ point to fundamentally similar activities.\(^2\) I will begin by looking at the Socratic argument for philosophical investigation.

Although Plato’s early dialogues are notoriously and intentionally lacking in positive theses, they do all share one conclusion toward which much of their content is directed in support, namely, that philosophical investigation is the highest form of human activity. One may look to any of the “Socratic” dialogues to find this more or less implicit claim being argued for.

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1. Although there is more discussion of Plato, there is still very little. Plato may be a more obvious choice for discussion because, after all, he wrote his ideas down and it is primarily through his writings that we know of the life and words of Socrates. One can never be completely sure what belongs to Socrates rather than Plato, but it is not my present interest to sort that out. In any case, it is Socrates (even if only the character in Plato’s early dialogues) that I want to compare with Adorno. It is the example he sets as a philosopher and the implicit argument for philosophical investigation that I am mostly interested in. I am looking solely at the early “Socratic Dialogues” for instances of this.

2. To my knowledge, there has been no published account of the relation between the thought of Adorno and Socrates. This is likely due in part to the absence of much discussion of Socrates in Adorno’s work, and the complete absence of any mention of Adorno in Socrates’ work.
The Socrates of these early dialogues recommends the life of philosophical investigation on the grounds that it is the only way of life in which you can be sure not to harm your soul. The argument as I see it is roughly the following. First, Socrates implies that everyone desires the good for themselves. We can see this assumption at work in his questioning of Meletus in Plato's *Apology* when Socrates asks whether there is “there any man who wants to be harmed?” Meletus, of course, answers that there is not. Although an assumption, the claim that no one intentionally harms themselves seems undeniable and this, I suggest, is why Meletus must agree to it. After all, any claim to the contrary immediately turns back on itself once it is suggested that if you perform an act intentionally then you must have thought it the best action available. However one parses the psychological details, this minimal (and rather slippery) claim is assumed by Socrates to be uncontested, at least tentatively.

Second, we can recognize that, as humans it is not possible to refrain from acting. To my knowledge this is not stated explicitly in the dialogues but is obvious enough and may be assumed – again, at least tentatively.

Third, knowledge of the highest good is difficult and perhaps impossible to acquire. Consequently, knowledge of which actions would be good actions (i.e., those actions which are directed at the highest good) would seem to be equally elusive. Nevertheless, we can see that acting based on false knowledge, that is, knowledge which presumes to know the good, is at least potentially harmful or worse. This is a lesson which (though tentative) we find painfully illustrated in the dialogues which encompass the trial and death of Socrates (and especially *Euthyphro*). As onlookers we are persuaded to recognize Euthyphro as guilty of arguing for his own father’s conviction based on less than solid knowledge of piety and justice; and to recognize

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4 Aristotle begins the Ethics this way.
the accusers of Socrates as guilty of the same. We are presented with a sort of existential moral dilemma. If we want our actions to benefit and not harm ourselves, but we do not have knowledge of what is beneficial, and assuming we must act, what then are we to do in order to avoid harming ourselves? The answer implicit in the dialogues is simply to do what Socrates does – to be a philosopher and search for knowledge of the good. As humans, with our ignorance, our desire to benefit ourselves, and the unavoidability of acting, the best we can do is to recognize our ignorance and proceed to inquire into the nature of the good so as to avoid acting based upon falsely assumed knowledge. By doing so we may not benefit ourselves, but we will not harm ourselves either. What we end up with then can be described as the greatest good for humans. Although it is not the good, it is a kind of positive knowledge that can serve to guide one’s choices.

In anticipation of the parallel with Adorno I propose that what Socrates is engaged in is a kind of negative dialectics. Socrates' philosophical praxis begins with some piece of knowledge held by an interlocutor and often ends with that interlocutor finding himself in possession of a false assumption. This includes Euthyphro's claim about his father’s guilt and its appropriate punishment and also Meletus' accusations against Socrates in the Apology. The interlocutor, hopefully, is forced to recognize that he did not have the knowledge that he believed himself to have. Because we want to do what is beneficial for ourselves and because this is hindered by this ignorance of the need to search for knowledge, it follows that everyone implicitly knows that false knowledge is blameworthy, though few believe that their particular beliefs are wrong.

This hesitancy to question one's own beliefs seems to have an obviously practical motivation rooted in the necessity of action. After all, if every action must aim at an end and every end becomes questionable, in which case all actions consequently become questionable,
then what are we to do? One possibility is to avoid questioning altogether; alternatively, one may take up a life of philosophy. Philosophy on this conception is dialectical in the sense that it forces self-reflexivity in such a way that the philosophizer must confront the truth of his own beliefs and assumptions. This self-reflective confrontation might take place in a single person if that person is “other” enough to serve as his own questioner and is willing to place his ideas under sufficient scrutiny. As we can see in Plato's dialogues it often takes place as conversation between individuals who can offer a nudge into reflection that might not otherwise occur. Due to the shifting nature of human existence, the dialectical method does not claim to have access to singular truths of the kind that positive actions can be based on. This is the sense in which the Socratic dialectic is negative. To remain true to itself it is forced into a praxis which can only question and can never advise. This situation is expressed by Socrates as he explains to the jury why he has abstained from public politics and debate throughout his life. “It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything. This is what has prevented me from taking part in public affairs…."

To describe this state-of-affairs in another way, we might say that it is a question of doing. What does Socrates recommend that we do? What sorts of choices are we to make? As I have argued, Socrates suggests that we live a life of philosophical investigation; apparently one in which we converse and question whenever possible; attempting to root out false knowledge and saving people from themselves. The powerful simplicity of the Socratic claim forces us to think more deeply about whether we have adequate reason for believing that what we are doing is what we should be doing. But being simply more aware of these things is not enough, because, if I’m right about Socrates' argument, any activity except true philosophical questioning

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5 Plato, *Apology*, 31d.
presupposes some kind of commitment to an end, even if temporary. Activities that presuppose such a commitment would include, among other things, attempts to shape public policy and organizing protests against perceived injustices. We can see that for Socrates, philosophy is an activity in which the only end is finding the end (i.e. it is an activity that is its own end). Because of this, philosophy serves as a limiting solution to the problem of practice. Philosophy, according to Socrates is the only human activity that is self-justifying in that it is negative and dialectical and thus requires no assumptions; it is persistent and unrelenting reflection.

Similarly for Adorno, philosophy conceived as ‘negative dialectics’ is an activity without an end other than itself, and as such is the only thing that can be recommended as a solution to a similar problem underlying the relation between theory and praxis. Framed in this way, as a problem of theory and praxis, we might say that the problem is one of when and how to carry the lessons learned from thinking into the sphere of action. At each moment, we can continue to think about how to act or we can put a plan of action into motion to achieve some end. But how do we know that the end we have chosen is an acceptable one and, even more problematically, how do we know that the means we’ve chosen will bring about that end? Given the utter complexity of the world we live in and the difficulty of understanding our place in it, it would seem too much to expect that we could commit to a particular course of action without reservation. And yet the daily living of our lives in such a world, complex or not, requires that we make decisions that set in motion very concrete courses of action. These decisions must be made despite reservations about their consequences. But if a person does not want to do harm (or even wants to make things better and not worse, as perhaps most philosophers and politicians would claim to want), and if acting despite such reservations runs the risk of harm to oneself and others, then the problem seems intractable. As an example of actions that could risk such harm
one may consider extreme cases such as participation in the holocaust or more mundane ones such as voting for an elected politician, though in the case of Hitler’s rise to power these may converge.

In response to this problem I believe Adorno, like Socrates, suggests that the only choice available to such a person is to continue to think and to continue to move toward knowledge of the best end and the means of its realization. Adorno, like Socrates, was insisting on the continuous movement of thought, and this movement is what requires adopting a negative stance. Consider the following passages from his late essay “Why Still Philosophy?”

Philosophy should not with foolish arrogance set about collecting information and then take a position; rather it must unrestrictedly, without recourse to some mental refuge, experience: it must do exactly what is avoided by those who refuse to forsake the maxim that every philosophy must finally produce something positive.6

If philosophy is still necessary, it is so only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy, even if only as thought’s powerless attempt to remain its own master and to convict of untruth, by their own criteria, both a fabricated mythology and a conniving, resigned acquiescence on the other of untruth.7

One can see clearly here the resistance to positivity as resistance to the pressure to “take a position.” This ‘taking a position’ despite reason to do otherwise is the thing that Socrates and Adorno both refuse to do. Their own position is the negative and infinite one of philosophy. In many of his writings Adorno pointed to the rhetoric of positivity that he saw increasing all around him. This rhetoric was strongly urging people to ensure that all critical negativity is ultimately for the sake of some positive gain, because otherwise it is valueless. It is the claim that theory should be entirely subservient to practice.

In the second passage we get a sense of ‘immanent critique’ as the method of negative dialectics, when Adorno claims that philosophy may “convict of untruth, by their own criteria”

those elements responsible for that untruth. This again resembles the negative practice of Socrates insofar as it does not require a position of its own that must compete against another position. Rather it holds a position to that position’s own standard of truth. This is what he means when he writes in *Negative Dialectics* that “Dialectics…is not a philosophical position to be picked out from others on a sample chart…[it] is a challenge from below.”8 Thus, negativity in both philosophies operates by taking up a particular position held by another or otherwise found in the world and subjects it to standards immanent to itself. This is what is meant by ‘immanent critique’. It is not an imposition of ‘the good’ or ‘right’ from the outside; it cannot be that because such an external criterion validated from above is absent. Rather, it is the next best thing and the only thing available, namely, the forcing of self-critique. To adopt a life of negative philosophy is to be in favor of critique.

*Adorno as Marxian*

So far, I have suggested that Adorno be thought of as like Socrates in terms of his overwhelmingly negative philosophical stance. However, one cannot fully understand Adorno’s position on critique without qualifying this comparison in an important way. Whereas Socrates account doesn’t require, or perhaps even allow for, anything other than concern for one’s own well-being or goodness, for Adorno philosophy is understood as critique and is first and foremost directed toward society and the possibility of social change. It may be that Adorno’s concern for the human world, by being the motivation for his negative praxis, acts as an assumed end and thus invalidates his enterprise on the Socratic grounds discussed above. In my own opinion, Adorno is never as clear about his assumptions on this point as he should be. What I am

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suggesting presently is that we can understand his political praxis as a kind of convergence of Socratic negative dialectics and Marxist materialist dialectics. Adorno’s investment in human society leads his negative philosophy to take on Marxist characteristics, and this bears specific political consequences. Here, some discussion of Marx’s theory of social change (and the role of theory in that change) is required.

What is most characteristic of the relationship between theory and practice in bourgeois society, according to Marx, is its determination by what he refers to as the ‘fetishization of the commodity’. In this process, the relations between individuals in society become visible only in terms of some commodity. That is, what was formerly perceived as relations between individuals comes to be mediated by objects, so that former relationships are perceived not as such, but instead as a relationship to between objects. Marx writes:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves… Through this substitution, the products of labor become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. …It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.⁹

He goes on to write that,

Men are henceforth related to each other in their social process of production in a purely atomistic way. Their own relations of production therefore assume a material shape which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action.¹⁰

In this process of estrangement and commodification, one faculty or activity of the worker is separated from the whole and placed in opposition to it. That faculty becomes a commodity that is separate from the worker and that he is able to sell on the market. The commodity relation is dehumanizing and estranging because it separates man from himself, from the product of his labor, and from his species. In short, it makes separate what should be whole. (In contrast to


this, as we will see, it is because Marxian theory recognizes the significance of the whole that it is considered to be superior to bourgeois philosophy and science.) What is perhaps most important about this “fetishization” for understanding its effect on theory is that it is responsible for obscuring the accurate awareness or knowledge of human relations within the realm of commodity production. Coinciding historically with the development of commodity production and thus also exchange, this fetishism is also tied up with the division of use-value and exchange-value in labor. In addition to possessing a qualitative use-value for individuals, objects which become commodities take on exchange-value relative to other objects which allows them to be exchanged according to a standard of equivalence. As a way of subjectively making some sense out of the new social relation of production and exchange based on abstracted value (abstracted from qualitative use-value), the commodity as a material object comes to be imbued with a ‘life of its own’. This ‘life’ allows the commodity to appear as though it functions independently of the social relations that initially bring it into contact with other commodities. In this form it appears that the commodity has its exchange value as a natural property of itself rather than as a product of labor in relation to other products. This illusory independence (of products of labor as commodities) becomes the sole intermediary between individuals and becomes more and more difficult to see through, the more abstract the relations of production and exchange become.

In The German Ideology, Marx presents his well known critique of German idealist philosophy and of Hegel’s philosophy in particular.

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. …As soon as this active
life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists.  

In other words, there exists, in all philosophy prior to (and other than) historical materialism, a failure to recognize the dialectical relationship between man and the material world he lives in. That is to say that man is in fact not actually separate from that material world. On the one hand the ‘empirical’ materialists that Marx is critiquing are being accused of collecting “dead facts” and putting these forward as what history is composed of. History on this picture becomes a mechanical series of events in which one event causes several others which continue back into history and up to the present moment. On the other hand, the idealist philosophers attempted to establish a dialectical relationship between man and the world he lives in by collapsing that world into the subjectivity of the man. What both of these forms fail to recognize is the one-sidedness of their conceptions. It is only upon the recognition that man does in fact inhabit a material world but one that is not static, one that is in continuous communication with the subjective individual, that one begins to have a picture of the whole. Thus, we can begin to see the close relationship between Marx’s larger critique of bourgeois society and its alienating character and the influence of fetishization on theory.

In bourgeois society every relation is capitalist. Thus, all of the relations among individuals and between individuals and the world around them will be capitalist relations. In Capital, Marx describes the transition in capitalism from manufacture to industry and the effect it has on the worker. He writes:

…the character of independence from and estrangement towards the worker, which the capitalist mode of production gives to the conditions of labor and the product of labor, develops into a complete and total antagonism with the advent of machinery.  

and,

11 Karl Marx, The German Ideology, Marx/Engels Internet Archive http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm (April 8, 2011). (Written: Fall 1845 to mid-1846; First Published: 1932 (in full)).
12 Marx, Capital, 558.
Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity.\textsuperscript{13}

The situation Marx is describing is one in which the division of labor in industry has developed to such an extent that the estrangement of labor has reached its most intense antagonism thus far. As division of labor increasingly moves into the factory and obtains more artificial authority over the worker, the individual worker’s activity becomes increasingly specialized as does his interaction with those workers around him. At the same time the direct connection between him and the final product of his labor becomes weaker and weaker. Thus, the relation of individuals to the world and to other humans becomes increasingly objectified/fetishized and divided for the sake of efficiency in production.

It is this increasing alienation of the worker and fetishization of his relationships that Marx is claiming needs to change if human beings are to live a fully human life. This change will come about as a result of the inherent contradictions in capitalism and the development of the proletariat in relation to the development in the mode of production. As capitalist industry finds more efficient means of production and is forced to use processes which more thoroughly exhaust the capacities of the laborer, the laborer finds it increasingly difficult to believe that this system, of which he is a part, is beneficial to him. Thus, an awareness of one’s actual position relative to the whole is brought about by material reasons. It is in this awareness of the need for change that theory develops its potentially active role and simultaneously points us toward the necessarily impotent status of theory as bourgeois philosophy.

In elaboration of this perceived impotence of theory, consider Marx’s famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach. This thesis, which claims that in the past “the philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it,” implies a definite relation between philosophy

\textsuperscript{13} Marx, \textit{Capital}, 548.
and social practice wherein philosophy is an activity directed towards thinking about the world.\textsuperscript{14} As a purely contemplative activity that is seen as requiring objectivity and detachment from the thing being examined, philosophy relinquishes its causal power for the sake of understanding. In order to see the world objectively, philosophy cannot change the world because change would require the philosopher to re-involve himself in the very thing that he has detached himself from. As a result of Marx’s call to change, philosophy comes to be understood as an activity whose time is in the past. The time for thinking about human society has passed and the time for making changes to improve that society has arrived. According to this picture, theory becomes, at best, wholly subservient to material concerns, or possibly merely an insistence on the reality of an illusion, i.e. on the importance of something (that is, theory) which has been revealed to have no causal power. The contemplative philosopher who is curious about nature merely for the sake of knowledge and truth itself is a bourgeois distortion of a real human being. Real change leading to communist society will come not primarily from critical thinking about reality but from a revolutionary proletarian class whose material situation is such that intellectual understanding is rendered irrelevant. In this movement the philosopher has an ambiguous and, at best, limited role in the coming revolution.

In response to these dismissals and devaluations of the role that theory plays in the continuing development of human society, Adorno emphatically, though not without reservation, defends the importance of philosophical thinking. As I will detail below, he understands the fact that the proletariat did not become the subject-object of history (i.e. the revolutionary class) to mean that the objective situation must have been misunderstood in some way and thus, there

\textsuperscript{14} Karl Marx, \textit{Theses on Feuerbach}, Marx/Engels Internet Archive http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm (April 8, 2011). (Written: by Marx in the Spring of 1845, but slightly edited by Engels; First Published: As an appendix to \textit{Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy} in 1888).
must be thinking left to do. This would mean that philosophy has not yet become obsolete. But again, despite this turn away from optimism concerning the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, one cannot understand Adorno’s position on philosophy (or art and politics, for that matter) without taking into account certain Marxian aspects fundamental to his outlook.

For Georg Lukács—the philosopher who served as the most direct Marxist influence for the development of Adorno’s thinking\textsuperscript{15}—understanding the relation between subject and object is the key to understanding the historical development of consciousness and its potential for revolutionary transformation. In his essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukács discusses the character of contemplation under historically determinate conditions by framing the problem in terms of the relation of Subject to Object. He writes,

> It must be clearly understood that every contemplative stance and thus every kind of ‘pure thought’ that must undertake the task of knowing an object outside itself raises the problem of subjectivity and objectivity. The object of thought (as something outside) becomes something alien to the subject. This raises the problem of whether thought corresponds to the object! The ‘purer’ the cognitive character of thought becomes and the more ‘critical’ thought is, the more vast and impassable does the abyss appear that yawns between the ‘subjective’ mode of thought and the objectivity of the (existing) object.\textsuperscript{16}

What Lukács is describing here is what he takes to be the basic problem of knowledge that bourgeois philosophy creates for itself, in which there is an irresolvable duality of subject and object. In terms of creating real change in the world we may formulate this fact in the following way. The paradigmatic relation between theory and practice for the individual in a bourgeois context is one in which the agent determines an appropriate course of action in thought (hypothetically or categorically) and then attempts to carry out that plan as close to ideally as possible. Thus, the better the initial understanding of the objective situation in which the actions

\textsuperscript{15} In a letter to Alban Berg, Adorno wrote of Lukács that “intellectually he had influenced me more than almost anyone.” See Stefan Müller-Doohm, \textit{Adorno: A Biography}, trans Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 94.

are to take place, the more closely the practical results will resemble the theorized plan. But as Lukács suggests, this creates a paradoxical situation in which the more ‘pure’ the thought about the objective world, the greater the ‘distance’ between subject and object and thus the less chance there seems to be of ever applying the results of such thought to the objective world for practical purposes. One fails to be able to understand sufficiently one’s active place in that world.

According to Lukács, the history of the development of Western philosophy is the history of the duality of subject and object. Where the subject is representative of the philosophical or scientific observer, the object is the thing which that subject observes and contemplates. As the distance between subject and object increases, the more contemplative, abstract, and speculative the relationship between subject and object becomes and the less assured can the subject be in his or her analysis; as the distance decreases, the subject becomes, at least in principle, more empirically certain of his analysis. The ultimate goal for a theorist who seeks truth of the object of their knowledge, ‘the world’, is the impracticable one of complete coincidence between subject and object. In this case there would be no room for error. Unfortunately, according to Lukács, classical philosophy, which had come the closest to realizing this goal, was necessarily constrained by the limits imposed on it by its own method. The philosopher whose consciousness was formed in a bourgeois context within bourgeois limits would necessarily fail to be able to escape the confines of that situation in which duality is an essential component. If the problem that Lukács seeks to address is rooted in the separation of subject and object, then only when subject and object are reconciled will the problem of social antagonism find resolution. Perhaps the easiest way to see what Lukács thinks about this reconciliation in relation to the proletarian class is to look at what he says about consciousness as it would be
transformed by the proletarian revolution. He writes that “...thought and existence are not identical in the sense that they ‘correspond’ to each other, or ‘reflect’ each other, that they ‘run parallel’ to each other or ‘coincide’ with each other (all expressions that conceal a rigid duality). Their identity is that they are aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process.”

He goes on to write that only once the individual stages of the process of the dialectical evolution of the proletarian class have been made explicit “would the statement that the proletariat is the identical subject-object of the history of society become truly concrete.”

What he is insisting on here is the ‘total’ nature of what is being referred to as the “identical subject-object.” To see the identity of the thinking subject and the object of thought that we spoke of above as merely coinciding or ‘reflecting’ each other, would be to fail to understand, dialectically, the truly historical nature of the fully developed proletariat. That is, if the theorist and society are identical in this way then, according to Lukács, they remain reified objects in a fundamental way and, as such, can never truly become unified. It is only if they are aspects of a historical process that this static reified form of knowledge and subject/object relationship can be overcome. Thus, we see that for genuine social change to occur and for fetishization or reification and alienated production to be eliminated, the total unification of subject and object as a process is of fundamental importance for both Marx and Lukács. What this final unification in process looks like remains obscured, and necessarily so. Nevertheless it provides us with a point of reference for understanding the possibilities for social change in the present and the role of theory in that change.

Both Marx and Lukács admit that this possibility—that is, of the kind of qualitative social change that would bring about such reconciliation—is dependent on the individuals who are

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17 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 204.
18 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 204.
subject to social oppression developing a revolutionary class consciousness. Such consciousness would consist of an awareness of the contingency of the current social system and the will to take steps to overthrow it, and this in turn, apparently depends on the communist theorist to serve as a facilitator of this development. The difficulty is that, given the separation inherent in bourgeois society, how can a communist theorist stuck in history (such as Marx or Lukács) hope to provide the proletariat with an understanding of their situation that is not hopelessly entrenched in that status quo, and restricted by the bourgeois “tools” available at that moment? After all, Lukács had claimed that rationalized thought as calculation loses its ability to critique the world that it is a part of; and furthermore, that the true relation between individuals as dependent on one another in every way remains hidden from the subject who cannot comprehend the concept of community, except as the collection of discrete individuals who have no necessary connection or obligation to one another. Nevertheless, despite the apparent damage done by this process of reification Lukács believed it could be overcome in the development of the class that ceased to be essentially formed by this system precisely because it was a product of it. Because the exchange society, despite its best efforts, cannot account for the interests of its laboring class, it leaves the door open to revolutionary activity on the part of that class. According to Lukács, the potential for revolutionary activity is supposed to result from the unique ability, on the part of the proletariat, to think dialectically about the relation between subject and object; that is, its members are able to see themselves as something more than individuals in a deterministic world that is not of their own making—they can see themselves as a class. Each class will necessarily have particular interests associated with its historical position and in relation to the other classes that it finds itself opposed to. For the bourgeoisie, its interests will reflect a need to extract surplus value from the working class. Thus, according to Marx and

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19 For instance, in Kant, moral obligation is never really to the other person but to oneself as a rational being.
Lukács, a certain degree of “false consciousness” will be associated with the bourgeois standpoint for the sake of its own survival. According to Lukács, “it is wholly within the class interests of the bourgeoisie to separate the individual spheres of society from one another and to fragment the existence of men correspondingly.”

He goes on to write that,

the only effective superiority of the proletariat, its only decisive weapon is its ability to see the social totality as a concrete historical totality; to see the reified forms as processes between men; to see the immanent meaning of history that only appears negatively in the contradictions of abstract forms, to raise its positive side to consciousness and to put it into practice.

Thus, what separates the proletariat from the bourgeoisie is that its particular class interests do not include the necessity of having a false conception of reality. The only tool that the proletariat has available for advancing its class interests over those of the bourgeoisie is its orientation towards totality.

One manifestation of this advantageous “tool” resulting from its essential opposition to the interests of the bourgeois class, is that the proletarian class consciousness has the potential to emerge as a ‘we’ rather than an ‘I’ or a collection of individuals (a collection of I’s). Without the acute interest in maintaining the perspective of the autonomous individual the proletariat is free to become something else. In other words, although the proletariat has not yet achieved the unification of subject and object, it is the first class, solely because of its necessary historical position, to be able to recognize, consciously, its revolutionary potential. As suggested earlier, theory, for the bourgeoisie, was impotent to effect real social change as a result of its presupposed distance from its object. Now we can begin to see the way in which Lukács is suggesting that ‘theory’ for the proletariat will become active and productive. Because the proletarian individual is not tied to a consciousness in which theory and practice are necessarily

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20 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 196.
21 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 197.
distinct entities, reified as a duality, the individual has the potential to see himself as part of a historical process and thus, in some sense, to stop seeing himself as an individual.

For Adorno too, the questions of practice and revolution are rooted in the development of the relation between subject and object. He is also very much concerned with the state of subjective experience under capitalist conditions. Regarding the parallel relationship between forms of society and forms of consciousness, Adorno is in considerable agreement with Lukács. Adorno agrees that the rationalization and reification of society causes individuals to see the current world in which economic exchange is the primary interaction as natural, eternal, and objectively the case; he agrees that the individual comes to regard the world as governed by quantitative laws rather than qualitative ones; and he agrees that the subject is compelled to deny what is particular or unique to her thought (or in Adorno’s terms, deny what is non-identical) for the sake of consistency. So, it is apparent that Adorno was engaged in this conversation about the historical sources of reification and about what its solution must be. Where he departs from Marx and Lukács is with in their claim that these problems of rationalization and reification are tied up with the question of class.

_Dialectical Turn_

For Lukács, reification prevents the bourgeois subject from being capable of attaining a truly revolutionary standpoint. For Adorno as well, reification prevents the subject from attaining a critical consciousness. However, he formulates the problem less in terms of revolutionary potential and more in terms of the objective possibility of full subjective experience. Furthermore, for Adorno this inability exists for individuals regardless of class. Consider his remarks in a passage from a 1969 radio lecture which critiques the notion of ‘free
time’ as indicative of a form of pseudo-activity (a concept that will receive greater attention in the next chapter). Here it is possible to see at once both the dire assessment of the potential for free-thinking under the dominance of the culture industry, but also a degree of hope regarding the ability of individuals to break free from its hegemony.

The critic of ideology who turns his attention to the culture industry, if he assumes that the standards of the culture industry are the encrusted ones of old-time entertainment and low art, will tend toward the view that the culture industry concretely and utterly dominates and controls both the conscious and the unconscious of the people at whom it is directed…And there is reason to speculate that production regulates consumption in the process of mental life just as much as it does in the process of material life, especially where the former has so closely approximated the latter as it has in the culture industry. Thus one might want to claim that the culture industry and its consumer are perfectly matched to each other. But since in the meantime the culture industry has become total, a phenomenon of the eternal sameness from which it promises to distract people temporarily, it is doubtful that the culture industry and the consciousness of its consumers make an absolutely symmetric equation.\(^{22}\)

Because reification is not a ‘class problem’, it does not admit of a class solution. In other words, it is not the case that there is a social class that, in virtue of its being that class, will be able to escape the reifying effects of rationalized society. It should be emphasized that in focusing on the freedom of the subject, Adorno does not see himself as adopting some form of idealism (á la Kant or Hegel) because he recognizes and incorporates the social determination of the subject. What he insists on is that freedom for anyone requires that thinking about the relation between subject and object remain dialectical. The subject is neither entirely determined nor entirely free; it both shapes the object and is shaped by it. While, in the quote above, he does give some sense that there might still be a way out of this trap, it is nevertheless clear that he sees the effect of the culture industry as being experienced by society as a whole, with members of the working class quite likely in the position of being more susceptible to its deadening charm.

We may formulate this movement by Adorno away from the revolutionary advocacy of Lukács’ theory another way, that is, in terms of an extension of the dialectic of reification

itself. For Lukács, reification of consciousness is a problem resulting from the development of bourgeois society and that is manifest in bourgeois philosophy. Resistance to reification comes in the form of the unified practice of the proletarian class that will overcome the subject-object/theory-practice divide. Adorno acknowledges the separation of theory and practice inherent to bourgeois society but insists that the resistance to reification must be pushed further into the realm of practice than Lukács and those like him were willing to do. One of the several places where he addressed this problem directly is during a 1966 lecture on negative dialectics given to a politically active group of students in Frankfurt.

The separation of theory and practice is itself an expression of reified consciousness. And it is the task of philosophy to dismantle the rigidity, the dogmatic and irreconcilable character of this separation. …the possibility of a valid practice presupposes the full and undiminished awareness of the blockage of practice. We can see that the accusation of reified consciousness is here being directed, not at bourgeois individuals that exist as ‘other’ to the revolutionary force, but at the revolutionary force itself.

Adorno is suggesting that those who would draw a firm distinction between the need for thinking and the need for action are themselves guilty of less-than-free thought. Given the complexity of the contemporary mechanisms of social change it cannot be the case that such a distinction is capable of accurately reflecting any such situation. To attempt to fix the relation between thought and action in such a non-dialectical way undermines the efforts of emancipation.

Adorno suggests a turn toward philosophy: philosophy not as some tool to be applied from outside, but as the very activity of de-reification. Reified thinking is the problem, and the only

23 Something of this shift can be seen in Adorno’s own development. His late work falls much more on the side of negativity and of theory as practice rather than the practice of critique more generally conceived. He marks this change himself in Minima Moralia, the writing of which falls during and after the war, during his exile, and really, in between what I am referring to as his earlier and late periods. See Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life, trans E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1978), 73-75.

solution can be non-reified thinking, namely philosophy. In this case the reified object is thought about practice itself.

This is what he is getting at when he suggests that the only solution to the “blockage of practice” that would allow for valid practice, that is for practice that is practical, is an awareness of the blockage. He goes on to say what it is that is blocking practice:

If we measure a thought immediately by its possible realization, the productive force of thinking will be shackled as a result. The only thought that can be made practical is the thought that is not restricted in advance by the practice to which it is directly applied. So dialectical, in my view, is the relation between theory and practice. 

Practice becomes blocked and unrealizable when it ceases to think about itself and about the possibilities for its own success or failure. What Adorno is insisting on here by relating practice back to thought in this way, is that practice without thinking is blind and for that reason cannot be effective simply because it is not beholden to a particular end. Practical action only makes sense when it hopes to achieve something in particular and the effort to achieve a particular end only makes sense if one is willing to think completely about the means of achieving that end. 

This obviously requires freedom of thought and Adorno suggests that thought is only free and thus productive if it is permitted to operate independently of its potential for productivity. In other words, every thought will not be productive and this fact must not be ignored by making thought subservient to practical demands and placing it under the threat of elimination if it fails to be useful. In this way reified thinking about practice can only be overcome by non-reified thinking about practice, specifically by the practitioners themselves. Practitioners must be willing and capable of seeing the obstacles that stand in their way; they must be self-reflective.

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26 Though he doesn’t mention it, this strongly parallels Kant’s definition of a hypothetical imperative. “[Hypothetical imperatives] represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to attain something else which one wills (or which it is possible that one might will).” Immanuel Kant and Allen W Wood (ed.), *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 31. To carry out a means to a self willed end is imperative if we are rational. It would be contradictory to will against our will; to will against ourselves.
This may be confusing because there are two apparently contradictory suggestions here: to make practice beholden to ends and to make sure that practice remains free of the demands placed on it by ends. However, Adorno takes these two suggestions to be the same. The paradoxical claim is that in order to remain practical (i.e. beholden to its ends), legitimate practice must refuse to be governed by the criteria of immediate success imposed by those who insist on the forward movement of praxis. To reified praxis, legitimate practice will seem impractical because it does not take on the appearance of action.

A component of this dialectic of theory and practice becomes visible here as the dialectic of control, but this also takes on a paradoxical formulation in the sense that to have control requires understanding its limitations. When Adorno demands fully self-reflective practice he is claiming that true practice depends on its idea being fully thought out and in control of itself. Consider the following passage from Adorno’s posthumously published essay “On Subject and Object” as an application of this dialectical insight to philosophical practice. He writes that

The primacy of the object means…that subject for its part is object in a qualitatively different, more radical sense than object, because object cannot be known except through consciousness, hence is also subject…. Potentially, though not actually, objectivity can be conceived without a subject; but not likewise object without subjectivity.27

Here the emphasis on the ‘primacy of the object’ is intended as a critique both of Kantian transcendental philosophy and of naïve realism. It is between these two traditions that Adorno saw the individual consciousness as caught. On the one hand is a tradition of idealism which seeks to place emphasis entirely on a subject which unavoidably structures its own reality and thus cannot get beyond its own subjectivity. On the other is an ever-increasing positivist tendency which accepts the individual as no more than one object (or collection) among others and sees understanding the world as simply a matter of coming to see what is actually there, that

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is, of overcoming sensuous fallibility. These two positions relative to one another represent
dialectical poles as well in the sense that in attempting to capture the whole by understanding it
primarily in terms of either subject or object, both fail to recognize their interdependence and
thus fail to recognize that as a result they do not actually grasp the whole of reality. What this
means is not that philosophy ought to strive systematically toward knowledge of the whole of
reality, but rather that it should come to a full awareness of its own limitations, that is, its
inability to grasp the whole. The insistence on retaining a dialectical view of the relationship
between subject and object is not an attempt to grasp the whole of reality but minimally and
negatively to know as well as possible where one stands, in a historical and epistemological
sense. Consider the following passages from *Negative Dialectics*:

[Subject and object] are resultant categories of reflection, formulas for an irreconcilability; they
are not positive, primary states of fact but negative throughout, expressing nothing but
nonidentity. Even so, the difference between subject and object cannot be simply negated. They
are neither an ultimate duality nor a screen hiding ultimate unity.”

In truth, the subject is never quite the subject, and the object never quite the object; and yet the
two are not pieced out of any third that transcends them. The third would be no less deceptive….
The duality of subject and object must be critically maintained against the thought’s inherent
claim to be total. The division, which makes the object the alien thing to be mastered and
appropriates it, is indeed subjective, the result of orderly preparation; but no critique of its
subjective origin will reunify the parts, once they have split in reality.

What we can see here in terms of the theory-practice dialectic is that the attempt to control
undermines the ability for thought to control itself. Attempt to control the object results in a
distorted understanding of the actual relationship between subject and object and this lack of
understanding indicates a lack of real control over oneself. Recall that the ability to change the
world according to your own idea presupposes an understanding of the mechanism of change in
the world, that is, it requires understanding, among other things, how the subject interacts with
and has causal power over the object; it requires a correct theory of practice. Thus, without a

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Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 175.
correct understanding no willed change is possible. To hide from thinking is to allow oneself to remain under the force of not only fear but also the thought of another. To act simply because ‘something must be done’ serves as a “mental refuge” only in the sense that one takes shelter from the pain of reality within a convenient external fabrication. This is reified thought.

Given what has been said about Adorno’s redirecting focus reflectively back toward practice itself, we might think that the solution is simply for those seeking change to first recognize that they do not have a correct or full understanding and then to seek out and find that understanding; having done so the path has been cleared to a reengagement in revolutionary practice. However, for Adorno, we simply cannot expect to find such an answer that will allow us to move forward in this way. It is because there is no reasonable hope for revolution that the task of de-reification falls back to philosophy with its persistent and non-instrumental orientation toward objectivity.

*Hope of Change Given Up*

There are at least three distinct factors that can be mentioned as causes of Adorno’s turn toward negative theory and away from strategy-oriented political activity – the extension of the critique of reification, the failure of proletarian revolution to take place as predicted, and his own experience of the events of and resulting from World War II.

Although Adorno's thought retains many basic Marxian insights and attempts to extend the critique of reification, the result of this extension is an inability to advocate class revolution. His resistance to such active attempts at changing political conditions stems primarily from this Marxian extension of the critique of reification in its recognition of the totalizing forces of the culture industry. Attempts to organize for the sake of taking political power require a focus on
tactics ('how' questions) at the expense of theory (which would continue to reflect on the 'what' and 'why' questions). Such a focus is problematic, as we’ve already said, because it fails to respect the ‘Socratic’ imperative to grasp one’s epistemic shortcomings, but also the degree to which the actors are an integral part of the problem they are trying to solve. The notion of the increasing objectification of social relations, often formulated as fetishization or reification, poses a problem that is not easily resolved. The more fetishized society becomes, the more urgent the need for radical change would seem to be and thus, the more such change seems impossible due to the loss of autonomy in the subjects responsible for recognizing and bringing about change. Therefore, any attempt to address the ills of society from the perspective of this problem would seem to need to address this paradoxical relationship. In other words, if all those people affected negatively by this objectifying process are by that very effect convinced that the world-as-it-is is permanent and thus legitimate, then who could be the force and impetus of change? How will they recognize that change is necessary and what will be the means for bringing about that change? The answers given by Adorno to these questions are indirect at best, but it is clear that this problem, which may be stated as a problem regarding the reification of the very subjects which are meant to be combating reification, is one that has no apparent solution.

As discussed, Adorno responds to the failure of Marx’s thesis predicting communist revolution and the end-of-theory by calling for a return to theory. Those interested in social change according to Marxian principles should not continue to pretend that revolution is ‘just around the corner’. Likewise, Adorno’s belief that political praxis must turn away from tactics and toward negative theory also has much to do with his experience of the Second World War (both the events of the war and of his exile in the United States) as a massive failure of the enlightenment project and the abandonment of its cultural values, of which he believed pre-war
Germany to be the primary agent. Adorno’s feeling in general was that the world after the wars was becoming an increasingly ideological and unimaginative place, prone to thoughtless repetition and political heteronomy. Thus, while it seems to me that the Socratic impulse existed in his philosophy prior to this, it is equally clear that failure of both Marxism and progressive philosophy to keep their promises (on the basis of which so much had been sacrificed) turned this impulse into an unavoidable imperative.

Consider the following statement made in a 1959 interview when asked about the means of combating the latent anxieties in post-war Germany (and elsewhere) and also the danger of a resurgence of fascism:

that people be brought to the point in themselves, through self-reflection, of gaining insight into what they can do [with respect to 'being rational']...this seems to me certainly to be the most important task for education..., rationality not in the sense of a rationalistic insistence on facts, but rationality in the sense of people being led to self-reflection and thereby being prevented from becoming blind victims of this instinctual impulse....the irrationality, which I consider a very serious danger, ...is the instinctual impulses and the affects that are repressed...and that teem about in the darkness and emerge again in distorted, twisted, altered form as aggression, as projection, as displacement, all those things we are so familiar with, and wreak havoc.\footnote{Theodor W. Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’,” in \textit{Critical models: interventions and catchwords}, trans Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 299. This interview followed his lecture “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” which also appears in the volume \textit{Critical Models}.}

I suggest that we may see this response as stated in terms which parallel the self-reflectiveness that I have compared to Socratic praxis. Here, the self-reflectiveness that Adorno is endorsing is both 'negatively dialectical' and historical. It is negatively dialectical in the sense that the practitioner's goal is to become aware of her relative location in the sphere of knowledge. This is, in other words, to come to the point at which you know that you do not know. It is historical in the sense that the sphere of knowledge at issue is not so vaguely general as it is in Plato's Socratic dialogues. Instead it is knowledge of the world and history and of one's place in them that will allow for the kind of self-reflection that can prevent further catastrophes of the kind
experienced in the last century. It is always unclear in Adorno’s philosophy to what extent he actually thinks such self-reflective practice can have any practical consequences. There are places in his writing and lectures where he seems truly hopeful that a conscious effort to face up to the past, and resist the order that does not desire such reflection, will serve more than a symbolic function. What must be understood is that although such hope seems to turn philosophy into a politically instrumental activity, Adorno’s paradoxical insistence is that theory can only be even potentially effective to the extent that it remains unconcerned with its effect.

Adorno’s critique of student activity bears the mark of this conflicted hope and insistence on self-reflection. In his resistance to tactically-oriented political activity he criticized the student protests and revolutionary activity of the late sixties, many participants of which had looked to him and his work as a source of guidance in developing their anti-capitalist revolutionary strategies. As a result of his analysis of the reification of administered society he felt that the avenues of possibility for free spontaneous human activity had been narrowed and closed off to a point where the situation begins to look hopeless. Revolutionary activity modeled on the old methods of protest, direct action, and violence, and even educational campaigns of awareness are doomed to failure when faced with the totalizing power of administered society. A simple look at the history and longevity of actual revolutionary praxis is enough to see that such attempts are simply not productive of lasting meaningful change. Not only do such individuals find themselves practically unsuccessful, but they do so under the assumption that they are doing all that they can. Given such an assumption, little will be done to correct their view regarding the social situation. The idea is that one must first recognize that there is something to be learned before undertaking to learn it, and (and this is crucial for Adorno) under the assumption that something must be done, it is unlikely that ‘doing nothing’ will occur as an
appropriate course of action. It may be that the goal is simply not accomplished, and this may not seem so bad; but in failing to see that the right end has not been grasped, these individuals (who, because of their unique ability to perceive the need for change, may actually be the best hope for it) do not engage in any activity that would actually be beneficial.

Considered from this perspective, it may also be that attempts to create revolutionary conditions are not as harmless as this. As suggested, such attempts are by their nature instrumentalizing and by attempting to control events so that they may be aimed in a more positive direction, they run the risk of becoming the totalitarian forms of society they are attempting to combat. The ability to decide what the future brings requires control of the material that the future is made up of, and in the case of politics that material is human. In thinking about these issues Adorno is always cognizant of events that marked the twentieth century. From his point of view, the attempts at communist revolution and the horrors of the Second World War, in particular, marked massive failures of Western civilization to make good on its long held promises of enlightenment and freedom. With Soviet communism and National Socialism the world witnessed the culmination of the hopes of western civilization degenerate into twisted attempts to bring about utopian ideals by whatever means necessary. This fact effectively closed off the possibility of advocating any instrumentalizing praxis for the sake of some supposed greater end in the “always near” future. Both attempted to control the organization of human life and did so in truly terrible ways. To make matters worse, it is inevitable that the traces of these events will linger for a long time after and in ways that are not always apparent.
Negative Dialectics

It seems that history has forced us to fall back to a negative stance as the only potential way of moving forward again. In this respect, one of the basic strategies of negative dialectics that Adorno frequently returns to is to expose a phenomenon or concept claiming to be self-sufficient and immediate as a socially mediated, historical result. Consider a passage from “Why still philosophy?” in which Adorno explains the reasoning for this particular strategy by elaborating on present philosophy’s negative imperative:

After everything, the only responsible philosophy is one that no longer imagines it had the Absolute at its command; indeed philosophy must forbid the thought of it in order not to betray that thought, and at the same time it must not bargain away anything of the emphatic concept of truth. This contradiction is philosophy’s element. It defines philosophy as negative.  

The “after everything” calls up the entire history of philosophy and is here directed especially at Hegel who, for Adorno, represents the final authentic, but unsuccessful, attempt to put forth a philosophy of totality which would claim to be the unfolding of history, of reality itself, and as such, in possession of absolute truth. Such a conceit is the supposed command of the “Absolute” which Adorno thinks must simultaneously be given up and yet somehow maintained. Indeed, it is the giving up of the claim to comprehend totality which he believes allows philosophy to maintain itself as the keeper of “truth.” Philosophy claimed to understand the world and its development in its totality and it did so in terms of impending enlightenment and freedom. How then could philosophy have failed to foresee the massive failure of this project that the holocaust represented?

This paradoxical situation confronting philosophy in the present is what Adorno believes forces philosophy to be “negative.” Furthermore we can recognize this as a return to negativity insofar as we can recognize the Socratic underpinnings, and it is a new form of negativity

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because the situation is now different: The negative that Adorno speaks of is necessitated, he claims, because of its historical location (i.e., what has come to pass since the time of Socrates). To further clarify this claim we might add the following thought. One might try to claim that the situation hasn’t really changed in the sense that these things wouldn’t have happened in the first place if people had been living lives of philosophical investigation. On this view, it is not that there was something that we could do before but now cannot, but rather that we never could do it and now we can see the particular consequences of acting on false knowledge. I believe that such a view somewhat misses the point of addressing the reifying force of the culture industry on those individuals who would live such life. What Adorno is concerned about are the structural reasons underlying the inability to think freely and experience fully. Late capitalist society operates by neutralizing the distinction between what is and what could be, effectively cutting off the possibility of resistance to the given world that we find ourselves in. Structured by an identity thinking which creates the tendency in individuals to relate to their world in terms of fixed, externally determined categories provide no alternatives to the world as it is recognized. Thought is instrumentalized for the sake of efficiency in production (and consumption) but with the consequence that people fail to be able to think freely/autonomously about the possibilities for living and about their relationship to society and others. Consciousness is diminished and as a result is without genuine freedom because it is in possession of a false relationship to the world of which it is an integral part.

In the face of the demand that philosophy surrender the ‘absolute’ combined with this neutralization of the distinction between the given and the possible, Adorno thinks that it is crucial that the traditional philosophical distinction between appearance and essence be maintained, in particular as it is connected to the ability to see the difference between what is and
what might be the case. By not being satisfied with a façade, speculative philosophy remains, despite its apparently anachronistic and positive character, an important part of non-identity thinking. On Adorno’s view, to *deny* the distinction between appearance and essence, that is, between our perception of things and their underlying reality, is itself ideological because it leads us to accept things as they appear. While philosophy has been used to create meaning, it must now be used in a critical form to destroy the semblance of meaning.

Such a resistance to appearance is also what Adorno is pointing to when he claims in his lectures on negative dialectics that “a definition of philosophy other than as the intellectual power of resistance simply does not exist.” In other words, because philosophy is the ability to recognize the other, it is therefore the power of resistance. Resistance to anything presupposes that there is something to be resisted. Whatever this is it requires the concept of that thing being other than oneself, because by definition there is nothing in the self to rebel against. The self, insofar as it is the self, is unified and not other. Even in cases where one resists oneself, the self must be thought of as multiple. Thus, philosophy as the self-reflective ability to separate is the source of all resistance. As indicated by his defense of philosophical speculation, the resistance that Adorno is primarily concerned with is resistance to what exists, such that what philosophy allows for is the ability to reflect on one’s situation in such a way that non-present possibilities become available to consciousness.

This lack of *freedom in thought* which leads to the impossibility of other forms of freedom is at the root of Adorno’s critique of reified consciousness and ultimately the problem of social change he tried to address. In a late lecture titled “Philosophy and Teachers,” Adorno made the following claim:

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Freedom is not an ideal…but rather its possibility varies as a function of the historical moment. In the present moment the economic pressure upon most people is still so unbearable that it destroys all self-consciousness and critical reflection: it is no longer the material needs of former times but more the feeling of overall impotence within society as a whole, a universal dependence that no longer makes individual self-determination possible.  

Here we get an indication of the way that the cause of the unfreedom is in thought and how philosophical critique may help in alleviating it. According to Adorno, self-consciousness and critical reflection in individuals are “destroyed” by the economic conditions in which those individuals find themselves. By suggesting economic conditions as a cause we get something of a movement away from Socrates and toward Marx and Lukács. The destruction of critical reflection is an essential component of the analysis of reified consciousness. And yet his analysis remains somewhat more concerned with thought as a causally effective category than Marx. By claiming that it is a lack of reflection that the “economic pressure” is responsible for creating, we get something distinct from a straightforward Marxian analysis. Furthermore, he clarifies that what he means by “economic pressure” is not the radical poverty and exploitation that Marx predicted, but rather “the feeling of overall impotence in society” and a “universal dependence.” In both cases, Adorno is focusing on the lack of freedom of thought as the source of trouble; thinking, contrary to what Marx suggested by placing it in the category of superstructure, remains for Adorno a relevant mediator of change. Given that for Adorno the problem of social change is rooted in consciousness, that is, in the inability to think correctly about one’s relation to society, and because philosophy is a precondition for all resistance, it follows that the answer must at least begin with the attempt to think adequately, that is, the solution must begin with philosophy defined as “the intellectual power of resistance,” as self-

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reflectiveness. Indeed it is my claim that for Adorno the solution to the problem of social change not only begins with philosophy but also effectively ends with it.

In this way the similar concepts of immanent critique and determinate negation come into the picture as tools for intellectual resistance. In a late essay “Why Still Philosophy” Adorno describes the role of immanent critique in dialectical philosophy:

Dialectic is not a third standpoint but rather the attempt, by means of an immanent critique, to develop philosophical standpoints beyond themselves and beyond the despotism of a thinking based on standpoints. …In a world that has been thoroughly permeated by the structures of the social order, a world that so overpowers every individual that scarcely any option remains but to accept it on its own terms, such naïveté reproduces itself incessantly and disastrously… Reified consciousness is perfectly naïve and, as reification, also perfectly unnaïve. Philosophy must dissolve the semblance of the obvious as well as the semblance of the obscure. 34

Here immanent critique is presented as a tool or method of dialectical philosophy that attempts to create space for autonomous thought. It does this by critiquing the prevailing forms of thought in such a way that the position under attack is shown to undermine itself. This form of critique allows for the retention of negativity by eliminating the need to counter the prevailing position with a positive position of one’s own. In this passage Adorno is insisting that dialectical philosophy operate by forcing particular thought to confront its object in such a way that it cannot be maintained in any kind of stable formation, that is, as a “standpoint.” Immanent critique as a method is the attempt to undermine philosophical method and to reveal the non-identical character of thinking.

Similarly, the notion of ‘determinate negation’ points toward the possibility of discovering the facets of the object that have been smoothed over by the reifying power of abstract conceptuality. As the commentator Deborah Cook puts it, “Adorno not only maintains that reified reality harbours a better potential, he describes how this potential may be retrieved through determinate negation in order to provide a critical purchase on a world where life has

been damaged to such an extent that it has become a reified and lifeless thing.”

By negating what is determinate, i.e. what has been solidified by the concept for the purpose of epistemic control and organization, critical philosophy has the ability to put thought back into motion and undo some of the “damage” that has been done by identity thinking. Speaking again about the notion that dialectics is not a philosophy of standpoints, Adorno says in *Negative Dialectics* that

> The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. …Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. …Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.”

Adorno claimed of the mode of thinking characterized by determinate negation that it “imposes the obligation to reflect ceaselessly on oneself.” And so it should be pointed out that philosophy must be careful to apply its methods of immanent critique to its own critical practices; theory, as the vehicle for self-reflection must be willing and capable of applying its critique to itself. The self-critique of philosophy is not necessarily to be understood in the sense that we are able to get a clear picture of the construction of our own thoughts, but self-reflection at least in the ability of the philosopher to critique the philosophical framework that he is operating within. Just as Adorno’s critique of praxis focused on the failure of the practitioners to thoroughly interrogate the obstacles to their success, his notion of self-critical philosophy demands that it do everything it can to understand its own limitations. Much of Adorno’s philosophical practice is directed toward this end. Indeed it was with this in mind that he wrote the following near the conclusion of *Negative Dialectics*:

> …dialectics…being at once the impression and the critique of the universal delusive context, it must now turn even against itself. The critique of every self-absolutizing particular is a critique of the shadow which absoluteness casts upon the critique; it is a critique of the fact that critique

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itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept. It destroys the claim of identity by testing and honoring it; therefore, it can reach no farther than that claim. The claim is a magic circle that stamps critique with the appearance of absolute knowledge. It is up to the self-reflection of critique to extinguish that claim, to extinguish it in the very negation of negation that will not become a positing.

Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to break out of the context from within.\textsuperscript{58}

The “universal delusive context” that Adorno refers to here is the psychological tendency to regard existing particulars (knowledge claims, relations, and institutions) as present in an absolute form as wholes, that is, as things not in states of progress or transition. This tendency toward “self-absolutizing” falls even to dialectical critique insofar as the ability to criticize another seems to presuppose certainty and confidence in one’s own standpoint, the “magic circle.” What Adorno is arguing is that in the case of negative dialectics the ability to critique comes not from a confidence in its own claim but paradoxically from a principled lack of confidence in itself. It is precisely because it consists of unending self-critique, the “negation of negation,” that he believes dialectics acquires legitimacy as critique. Put in terms of the psychological notion of “delusion” that he puts to so much use in his critique of false praxis, he claims that dialectics, like all other existing forms of consciousness, cannot escape its own delusion, but has an advantage insofar as it manages to be aware of it, just as Socrates knows what he doesn’t know.

When Adorno points to the ‘concept’ in the passage above as the unavoidable medium of critique, he is again engaged in the self-critical practice of identifying philosophy’s limitations. This comes as a response to those philosophers who have attempted in their own self-critiques of philosophy to dispense with the ‘concept’ as the basic component of philosophical thought.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{38} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 406.
\textsuperscript{39} Such as Martin Heidegger.
Adorno discussed the relationship between philosophy and concepts again in his lectures on negative dialectics:

The organ of philosophy is the concept, and there can be no derogation from this; and, at the same time, the concept is the wall between philosophy and that yearning which it may not relinquish. As the container of whatever existing thing it is concerned with, the concept negates that yearning; and philosophy can neither circumvent that negation nor submit to it – that too is the squaring of the circle.40

What he is insisting on here is that use of the concept is both unavoidable for philosophy and highly restrictive. For dialectical philosophy to be aware of this, means to be aware that the awareness cannot after all free it from that bondage. Any philosophy worthy of the name should be able to withstand self-critical scrutiny and Adorno’s claim is that indeed no non-dialectical philosophy will be able to. The yearning that philosophy “may not relinquish,” that is a part of what philosophy is, is the yearning for complete freedom of thought and in particular to be unconfined by the limitations of conceptual thought. According to Adorno’s theory of non-identity, conceptual thought, because it operates by drawing lines and making distinctions, will always leave out some portion of truth. This is the “squaring of the circle,” that philosophy would be guilty of if it failed to recognize the concept as simultaneously problematic and unavoidable. Thus, the choice that philosophy has to make is not really between ‘truth’ and ‘something less than truth,’ but rather between delusion and self-awareness. Given the intractability of the situation, a constant struggle for self-awareness is the best that philosophy and knowledge can hope for.

In the end, despite his claim that philosophy is the precondition of resistance, Adorno insists that it must also be aware that it is just as unlikely to bring about change or eliminate reification as the pseudo-activity he is criticizing, and so if philosophy is to be aware of its

40 Adorno, Lectures on negative dialectics, 94-95.
limitations, then it must be aware of this. Just prior to the above quote regarding dialectics as a critique of ‘standpoints’ in Negative Dialectics, he writes that

No theory today escapes the marketplace. Each one is offered as a possibility among competing opinions; all are put up for choice; all are swallowed. There are no blinders for thought to don against this, and the self-righteous conviction that my own theory is spared that fate will surely deteriorate into self-advertising. But neither need dialectics be muted by such rebuke…

So, according to Adorno, the apparent impotence of philosophy is still no reason for it to surrender its critical efforts. Indeed, to do so would itself be indicative of some positive standpoint. Expressing a similar sentiment in his lectures on negative dialectics he told his students

The fact that I do express [my own ideas] means that I have put as much self-reflection into them as I am capable of. But it would make matters all too simple for my critics if they could just join this discussion from outside with the demand that ‘…if he thinks negativity is such an important matter then he ought really to say nothing at all’. I can answer such critics by saying only that they should be so lucky! …I believe that precisely this aspect of positivity…which acts as a corollary to negativity, is conjoined with the principle of negativity because it resists being fixed once and for all in an abstract, static manner.

Again, we see that the impotence which we become aware of as a result of reflection itself explains the need for perpetual reflection in the form of negative dialectics. In other words, the inability of philosophy to bring about freedom, both in the case of political activity and in philosophical thinking, actually serves to explain the constant movement of thought that he believes is necessary and that is inherent to negative dialectics. This movement of thought in the form of perpetual self-reflectiveness and critique, which implies a stasis of political activity, is really all that can be recommended. Like sharks and relationships, when thought stops moving forward it dies. Of course, the question may asked, whether or not thought is even capable of moving? If not, then the necessity of that movement for the life of thought is beside the point. It seems to me that this is a question which Adorno does not address clearly.

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41 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 4.
42 Adorno, Lectures on negative dialectics, 26.
Perhaps one more quote will be tolerated in which Adorno expresses this paradoxical necessity of dialectical philosophy, though here in darker more historical terms. He explains the task that he thinks philosophy is capable of taking on by invoking the parallel relationship between art and philosophy.

…what is right for art is just as right for philosophy, whose truth content converges with that of art, by virtue of the technical procedures of art diverging from those of philosophy. The undiminished persistence of suffering, fear, and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded. After having missed its opportunity philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world—which could be paradise here and now—can become hell itself tomorrow. Such knowledge would indeed truly be philosophy.43

The continued existence of philosophy at this historical juncture – that is, post-holocaust and witnessing the continued breakdown of enlightenment ideals – requires that it understand why its ideas were not and have not been realized and why this happened in the most radical way possible. Furthermore, this understanding may be all that philosophy is capable of in the face of such radical failure. However, it may also be all that humanity is capable of and it is thus that philosophy gains its central importance. Adorno continues to claim that, as the ‘movement of thought’, negative dialectics is capable of protecting the hope of freedom and the collective memory of it. Even if critique is not successful at changing the objective situation (as Adorno clearly does not think it will be), it serves to preserve the possibility of a better world. In view of his relatively dismal estimation of the modern enterprise of academic philosophy, the role Adorno identifies for philosophy is one conceived more basically as critique, claiming that if philosophy still has a legitimately constructive place in the present, this must be so “only in the way it has been from time immemorial: as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy,… It is incumbent upon philosophy,…to provide a refuge for freedom.”44

44 Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy,” 10
serves as “resistance to the expanding heteronomy” by being protective of autonomous thought.

He goes on to write that

> It is incumbent upon philosophy…to provide a refuge for freedom. …if the…heteronomies are the untruth and if this can be convincingly demonstrated, then this…registers a trace of the hope that unfreedom and oppression…nonetheless may not have the last word.45

The heteronomy, oppression and unfreedom that he is concerned about here are tied up with what he sees as the growing tendency for individuals to think in a very limited and reductive way about their relationship to the world around them. What philosophy can do is to point out alternatives to things-as-they-are. By demonstrating the problem inherent in the prevailing (i.e. heteronomous) mode of thought or existence through immanent critique, the possibility of another way of doing things is opened up. If the status quo turns out to be somehow the wrong-state-of-things, then that implies a need to be addressed one way or another. By persistently looking for problems in what exists, it refuses to let the world forget that something better may be possible. What’s required for the freedom of thought, for autonomy, is the ability to see things as they really are. As we have seen, this ability to see reality includes the dialectical awareness of the situation which prevents such awareness from being directly possible. Without recognizing the dialectical relationship between subject and object you are beholden to a misconception and controlled by it. Furthermore, insofar as social and political change requires understanding the reality of the mechanisms of change, such a misunderstanding may contribute to preventing the possibility of any expected or controlled change. On this picture, correct knowledge of the world is a precondition of changing it. Thus, if freedom of thought is a precondition of correct knowledge then it is also a precondition of change and thus of the greater individual and social freedom that would be brought about by that change.

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To once again frame the activity of critical philosophy in terms of a dialectic of control we can see Adorno advocating self-reflection as a way of recognizing dialectically exactly how much control one actually has over the material that is his object. In this way it is like Socrates' response to the problem of human knowledge to the extent that we can reformulate the problem in terms of recognizing one's own ignorance. Think of Socrates' attempts to demonstrate to his interlocutors that they do not know what they think they do. This error is of the utmost importance because it is the well-being of their soul which is at stake. Acting based on false knowledge is risky business and although Adorno would not frame the problem in terms of harm to the soul, he nevertheless diagnoses the failure in a very similar way. From the standpoint of 'negative dialectics', self-reflection is the simultaneous activity and goal which serves as stand-in for a goal which cannot be realistically hoped for. And yet, Adorno insists that that unachievable goal must be kept in sight despite itself. Along these lines, he suggests, in *Negative Dialectics*, a definition for the titular concept not unlike the ones we have seen already, but which points to the connection of its quality of movement to what he sees as its capacity for preserving the hope of freedom: “It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope.”

What is emphasized here quite nicely is the need for the continuous movement of thought. Each of the various methods or facets of negative dialectical praxis – immanent critique, determinate negation, playfulness, etc. – is directed toward creating and maintaining this movement which refuses to accept a reality that exists as less than completely free. But again, this cannot be simply movement for the sake of movement—as Adorno claimed was the case in the political praxis that he critiqued—rather it must be the movement of thought which is precisely thought reflecting on itself. As we have seen, it is this form of movement that he believes is relevant to the production of freedom.

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What Adorno is looking to promote is a radical autonomy of thought and action; a refusal to commit. In this way it is ensured both that the political practitioners do nothing to intentionally harm the chances for real freedom and that they are prepared to accept the means of real freedom if and when they become available. Although Adorno has elaborated some very specific problems along with possible answers, we can see that in each case the philosophical practice is really guided by the same basic call to reflection. In each case the practice is focused precisely on destroying positive claims or minimizing their destructive potential. Adorno, like Socrates, recognized the profound dangers associated with thinking that one knows what one does not know. Neither philosophical theory seems willing to allow the fixing of ultimate ends for any reason. For Socrates, philosophical investigation and the continual questioning of individual beliefs maintains the movement of thought. For Adorno, determinate negation and immanent critique perform a very similar function by taking an artificially fixed belief and returning it to motion.

Although I have emphasized the somewhat anachronistic philosophical parallel between Adorno and Socrates, the parallel itself is not my primary interest. What I hope it illustrates above all is the radical, basic, and fundamentally theoretical nature of Adorno’s philosophical practice. As already discussed, Adorno incorporates an historical element into this self-recognition which Socrates it seems, could not have seen the need for. It is the subject, acting out of fear, anger, hatred and other forms of irrational ignorance, who needs the benefit of an education which directs his attention bravely toward the past, to understand the future, rather than trying to bury it for the sake of unity and progress. Adorno was a sophisticated analyst of society and a complicated philosophical writer and speaker, and much of what he had to say remains and will continue to remain opaque and worthy of interpretive effort; and although this
difficultness is clearly intentional, I think his involvement with the active world remains motivated by a fairly simply but powerful critical impulse.
Chapter Two: Politics – Adorno’s Praxis of Theory

Providing an account of Adorno’s politics is a complicated matter. In any aspect of his thought, it would be misguided to attempt to give a singular, unified account. In the case of his political thought this is especially the case. The open-ended, ambiguous, and sometimes seemingly contradictory expressions that one finds in his explicit discussions of politics are likely called for by the ideas themselves. Furthermore, it is probably also the case that because many of these political ideas come out of actual political interventions, they have a contingent or tentatively practical nature which resists total theorization. As we will see, for instance, his views on education as a political means retain such an ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory, character. Nevertheless, it should be said that it is not only his ideas coming out of practical dialogue that have this character. Indeed, Adorno’s most composed writings—political or otherwise—resist simplification, though in that case it is by design.

My goal in this chapter is to identify and elaborate what I see as the philosophical tendency toward negative dialectic which consistently guided his political decisions. Thus, I am not attempting to give a thorough overview of his life-long political education or a comprehensive account of his political thinking. Rather I am specifically interested in his late political interventions and the theory that supported them. There are two persistent types of criticism of Adorno’s politics: on the one hand that it was really non-existent, that his philosophy had no politics and that he had nothing to say about the possibilities for action, and on the other hand that it was reactionary. One of the tasks of this chapter will be to argue that neither of these
accusations is borne out by a close examination of his actual lectures and essays. Although I will argue in Chapter Four that something is missing from his politics, I think it is important to recognize that Adorno, despite the particular ambiguities, did indeed have very clear ideas about the nature of political activity and that these ideas were far from reactionary. In the previous chapter I attempted to give a sense of the philosophical context in which Adorno’s thinking about politics took place. In the present chapter I will continue this exposition by looking more closely into the way in which that thought guided the specific choices he made in the political sphere.

The political interventions that I am specifically interested in here are primarily interactions with the student activists and revolutionaries in Frankfurt in the late 1950s and the 1960s and also, more generally, his activity as a public intellectual during that same period. At this point I will begin by reviewing and extending the account I gave in Chapter One of his specific departure from the theory of Marx and Lukács, though here with an eye more toward the political aspects and the way that this came to the fore in the period at issue. As discussed before, Adorno’s focus on subject-object dialectic, his use of dialectical method in general, as well as the framework for his critique of instrumental reason can all be traced to a large degree to the influence of Lukács’ early works. Without understanding the basic framework of Lukács’ theory, it would be difficult to understand Adorno’s response to it.

Adorno’s late politics were unavoidably defined by two things: on one hand by the demands for “praxis” that were made on him by his students toward the end of his life, and on the other, by his experience of the atrocities of the Second World War. I believe that any

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47 In this I am not alone. In recent years there have been several responsible attempts to provide a sympathetic and coherent account of Adorno’s political theory, (cf. Hammer, Adorno and the Political). My account in this chapter will overlap to some extent with those attempts but will focus to a much greater extent on the explicit dialectic of theory and praxis in Adorno’s late writings and on the negative aspects of his political praxis.
adequate understanding of his politics must address his responses to these events, and may as well begin with them. At the same time, it is important to recognize that, despite the undeniable influence of these specific experiences, Adorno’s political thought remains deeply shaped not only by principled Marxist theory but to an almost equal extent by the progressive enlightenment thought of Kant. This Kantian influence is an aspect of Adorno’s late politics that is too often overlooked, and so I will attempt to draw out this connection as well. However, it seems to me implicit from his various texts that, for Adorno, the difference between the revolutionary theory of Marx and the progressive universalism of Kant is not so great as may be thought. Finally, I will argue that his particular integration of these theories leads, in the end, back to the same negative philosophical praxis that I compared with that of Socrates in the last chapter. When one considers that Socrates, like Adorno, was also accused by his contemporaries of political resignation, I think this connection bears an even greater plausibility than it might have otherwise.

*Influence of Marx and Lukács*

The relationship between the thought of Lukács and Adorno is complex and cannot be given full treatment here. We can, however, begin to understand its importance for Adorno’s politics by recalling from Chapter One the importance for Lukács of the basic Marxist categories of commodity, consciousness, history, and also the dialectical antinomies of theory-praxis and subject-object. Having done this, some account may be given of how these become the basic concepts of Adorno’s social critique while at the same time being critiqued and transformed by his theory of negative dialectics.
Recall that, for Marx, the fundamental social problem to be overcome is alienation of labor and its manifestation in the exploitation of the worker. The exploitation of the worker is analyzed by the theory of the commodity in that the creation of surplus value, which is the product and symptom of that exploitation, is only made possible by the presence of exchange value in the commodity. According to Marx, the commodity form is characterized by its ability to be exchanged (not simply used or consumed) and the possibility of exchange requires the capacity for objects to be identical in some respect. Such identity between two things to be exchanged requires a reduction of each to labor-time, which is a quantifiable attribute. The exploitation of the worker comes as a result of the difference between the exchange-value of labor and the exchange-value of the product of that labor, or, in other words, the difference between what the worker is paid for his labor and what the capitalist can get for the product of that labor. This difference is surplus-value, the profit made by the capitalist, which, according to Marx, can only have come from the labor of the worker. The notion of commodity, or the process of commodification, points to the way in which use-value gets subordinated to exchange-value for the sake of a system which has as its goal the creation of surplus-value.

Commodification occurs when social relations and processes, which have a use-value that is concrete and non-identical with anything else, are solidified into quantifiable things, which can then be exchanged for things of equivalent quantity. Thus, this movement (or more accurately, this ceasing of movement) can also be thought of as a process of abstraction by which the concrete, irreducibly particular is transformed into something categorizable and identifiable and thus exchangeable. For Marx, this process of commodification is what makes possible the exploitation of the worker.
However, the possibility of overcoming that exploitation is framed not so much in terms of the destruction of commodification, but primarily as a result of objective conditions leading to the elimination of private property. The proletariat, as the exploited class, will be the class to bring about social change when the status quo becomes unbearable and thus consciousness-changing—specifically, class-consciousness creating. Marx’s theory of revolution is one in which the inherent antagonisms of capitalist society lead to a final and inevitable crisis which has the effect, through the objective activity of the proletarian class, of eliminating private property and along with it the alienating commodity form, social antagonism and exploitation.

For the purposes of understanding Adorno’s appropriation of Marx through Lukács and his subsequent critique of both, it may be said that Lukács essentially accepts Marx’s theory of society as outlined above, but with a shift in emphasis. Lukács retains from Marx both the idea that the overcoming of capitalism is a historical necessity and also the importance of class for that change. What is different in Lukács is an increased focus on consciousness and on the commodity form as the central category for analyzing social problems. According to him, capitalist society has come to be defined by the ubiquity of the fetishizing commodity form which has managed to disfigure, as reification, everything in that society including, importantly, the consciousness of the proletariat. This reification forms consciousness in such a way that the actual relationships between people and parts of society are perceived not as fluid processes but as permanent things. This was the case in Marx as well, but in Lukács it became the focus. In this way, the exploitative relationship between the classes is seen as legitimate due to its eternal character and thus also its unavoidability. Thus, for Lukács, the goal becomes overcoming the effects of commodification. As was effectively the case in Marx, here the proletariat is explicitly represented as the class which is, or has the potential to be, the unified subject-object of history.
and for that reason serves as the agent of historical change. Because of the proletariat’s unique position in society—that is, in possession of a concrete, objective (i.e., practical, not theoretical) interest in change, acquired from contradictory experience—it is capable of overcoming the subjectivizing effects of reification and form itself into conscious collectivity, that is, into a self-aware revolutionary class.

Adorno, for the most part, seems to retain the commodity form as the primary component in his analysis of society. He makes widespread and important use of the nearly synonymous notions of alienation, fetishization and reification, instrumentalization, rationalization and abstraction. Indeed, in this assertion of identity he recognizes the abstracting character of the commodity which both Marx and Lukács sought to critique. As we have seen already, Adorno’s critique of identity-thinking is his version of the critique of instrumental reason, which seeks to expose the forms of consciousness that make capitalism (along with its damaging effects) possible. However, in his particular carrying-on of the critique of capitalism and the question of social change (and the subject-object dialectic along with it) Adorno rejects certain central claims of Marx’s and Lukács’ Marxism. In particular, as we will see, he is critical of the role of class and specifically the idea that the proletariat will serve as the identical subject-object. In addition, there exists the more practical, and trenchant, problem of assuming that the reified proletariat will be capable of actually using its reification to overcome it and develop class-consciousness. From Adorno’s point of view, the reified consciousness of the individual prevents precisely this possibility. Setting Adorno apart from Lukács even further is his critique of the notions of historical necessity and the end of history, implied by the predicted elimination of antagonism and unification of subject and object. Although Adorno is committed to the recognition of social determination insofar as it can be gleaned from a historical analysis, he
argues that, especially after the experiences of the two major world wars of the twentieth-century, any claim to possess or foresee totality in any form is extremely problematic and is self-defeating (if not indeed politically malevolent).

All of this, however, raises the question of how Adorno is able to conceive of the need and ability for change given that he seems to have rejected the possibility that there is a class (or group of any kind for that matter) which can be identified as exploited and will be willing and capable of bringing about the change in question. As we have seen, and will continue to see in this chapter in the specific context of politics, Adorno retains the general Marxist goal of freedom as well as the critiques of reification and false ideology that stem from that. He maintains the belief that the problems of late capitalist society are caused primarily by the antagonisms inherent in capitalism itself. But, in contrast to Marx’s theory of change, he introduces a component of negativity which fundamentally changes the nature of the theory-praxis relation in his version of the project. As in the cases of philosophy and aesthetics (as we will see in Chapter Three), truth-content and autonomy become the central concept in politics as well.

Truth-content for Adorno serves as the negative, non-determinate end of all emancipatory politics and, as such, is resistant to any attempt to provide revolutionary activity with anything approaching practical instruction or encouragement. So, while Adorno apparently claimed relatively late in his life that he “always wanted to try to produce a theory that would be faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin…,” it is the added stipulation that this must be done only “…while not lagging behind the achievements of the most advanced culture” that points to the precise location of his Marxist commitments.48 The emphasis is clearly on the emancipation of thought.

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as a minimal requirement and precondition of general human emancipation by political (or any other) means.

To better see the various points of transition in Adorno’s thought from the foundational Marxist elements to his partial critique of those claims, I believe it will be helpful to look at the late text “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” which questions the continued relevance of a certain understanding of Marxism. This lecture demonstrates, perhaps more than any of his other texts, early or late, a continued commitment to certain fundamental aspects of Marxist critique. An articulation of this attempt to place his own ideas in relation to Marx’s materialist theory of revolution will make it easier to see the points at which his thinking diverges from Marxist conclusions. In this text he attempts to retain what he sees as the core of Marx’s theory, paradoxically, by giving an explanation of how the actual development of society has failed to conform to the account, and by pointing out ways in which Marx should have maintained a more dialectical point of view.

Perhaps one of the most clearly present continuities between Adorno’s political theory and preceding forms of Marxism is the goal of the unity of individual and social interest. In this respect, Adorno retains the desire for people to have control over their social situation, such that it is no longer the case that “their lives befall them like fate.” However, Adorno’s take on the problem is somewhat shifted. He claimed in the April 1968 lecture,

> It is not the case that social existence directly creates class consciousness. [Precisely] Because of their integration into society, the masses have no more control of their social destiny today than they possessed 120 years ago. In consequence, they not only have lost any sense of class solidarity but also fail to grasp fully that they are the objects and not the subjects of the social process that as subjects they nevertheless sustain.

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49 The text “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” was initially given as the keynote lecture to the Conference of the German Sociologists in Frankfurt in April 1968.


Here we see Adorno directly confronting the question of revolution posed by Marx (and picked up by Lukács). According to Marx, the qualitative leap (i.e. revolution) to a new form of production was to take place as a result of the appearance of revolutionary class consciousness. That class consciousness was to come about as a result of the increasingly poor conditions of the working class forcing them to recognize their real interest in the dissolution of the old order. Insofar as class consciousness is a necessary condition for the change, its absence will prevent that change even if, objectively speaking, the class itself is present. This then is the postulated occurrence that allows Adorno to retain the core of materialism as a theory which takes individuals not as pure subjects but as social objects with a subjective aspect, but with the recognition that it is not possible any longer to think that revolution is immanent. Although the working class is not conscious of itself as such, it still bears the essential character of that class, namely that its relation to the means of production is one in which its members have no control. The means of production remain in the hands of a few and the rest are left to live in a world created through their own productive energy, but determined from outside. This is the problem of separation (or alienation) that Marx identified early on and that remains at the heart of critical theory.

While Adorno retains the notion that oppression has a historical development and a historical origin, he argues that it had changed form since the time of Marx’s assessment. This oppression in the form of the lack of control over one’s social situation became total in such a way that the radicalization of the working class as opposed to society would not take place. This totalization is manifest as the “integration” that he pointed to in the previous passage, about which he also says that “Class was defined by the relation of its members to the means of production, not by their consciousness. Plausible explanations for the absence of class
consciousness are scarcely lacking.” Workers were not becoming more destitute but instead were being integrated into bourgeois society. This was a post-industrial development but does not mean that class doesn’t exist. It only means that class-consciousness doesn’t exist. He goes on to add that this integration of the working class actually includes the other classes as well, such that the integration, which has the effect of removing social agency, is not so much of the proletariat into the bourgeois class, but of all into the bourgeois commodity system:

Human beings continue to be subject to domination by the economic process. Its objects have long since ceased to be just the masses; they now include those in charge and their agents. The latter…have largely been reduced to functions of their own apparatus of production. This is the sense, he thinks, in which late-capitalist/industrial society has become totalizing. There is nothing and nobody that its demands do not thoroughly penetrate. The nearly total lack of control over one’s social life identified above as being the core problem to be solved, has also spread to include capitalist leaders. In this way the system has detached itself from all:

… [the ancient social oppression] has become anonymous. If the old pauperization theory has turned out not to be literally true, it has done so in the no less alarming sense that unfreedom, dependency on an apparatus that has escaped the control of those who use it, has spread out universally over mankind.

Marx’s theory of the “pauperization” of the working class has been undermined by this more general loss of control. Furthermore, it is not only a question of the breadth of this external administration as alienation: the feeling of helplessness extends so deeply into the proletarian subject that it is not unlikely he would sooner commit suicide than revolt.

Later in the same lecture Adorno again formulates the change that has taken place in society since Marx’s analysis, but now in terms of forces and relations of production. He claims that we no longer live in a predominantly capitalist society with respect to the forces of

52 Adorno, *After Auschwitz?*, 114.
55 Adorno’s term.
production. This is in the sense that, everywhere it is industrial labor that has become the model of society and the distinction between capitalism, communism, fascism, etc. has become secondary. However, society does remain capitalist with respect to the relations of production in the sense that

People are still what they were in Marx’s analysis in the middle of the nineteenth century: appendages of the machine, not just literally workers who have to adapt themselves to the nature of the machines they use, but far beyond that, figuratively, workers who are compelled right down to their most intimate impulses to subordinate themselves to the mechanisms of society and to adopt specific social roles without reservation. Production takes place today, as then, for the sake of profit. …People are now totally controlled.”

So, again, Marx’s theory remains correct insofar as there is still an alienated working class which is subordinated to a process which is external to them. Although they are the producers, their production takes place for the sake of profit, which does not belong to them and thus is not the communally profitable product that is the goal of Marx’s theory of social change. Adorno thus maintains Marx’s goal and the status of society in relation to that goal, but does not think that the working class will become self-conscious. In actuality, the members of this class and all other classes have become less self-conscious through the integrating effect of the culture industry.

It is important that Adorno sees, as underlying this change, an increasing inability to recognize the difference between what the reality is and what it could be. It is in this way that the process of reification in society takes place in the relations of production (and not in the forces).

…for all its dynamism and its growth in production, contemporary society displays certain static tendencies. These belong to the relations of production. Those have ceased to be just property relations; they now also include relations ranging from those of the administration on up to those of the state... In that their rationalization resembles technical rationality, the rationality of the forces of production, they have undoubtedly become more flexible. This creates the impression that the universal interest is to preserve the status quo and that the only ideal is full employment, not liberation from heteronomous labor.57

56 Adorno, After Auschwitz?, 117.
57 Adorno, After Auschwitz?, 119.
So again, Adorno is pointing to an expansion of the process of reification, from the acceptance of unequal property relations that Marx had identified, to every other aspect of contemporary society. The ‘administered society’ that Adorno refers to frequently in many of his texts thus represents the political manifestation of this expansion. The problem of exploitation has acquired a somewhat more complicated and paradoxical nature in that, as society becomes more technically rationalized and better capable of providing for people’s material needs it has the contrary effect of cutting off their ability to see their lives in any other terms. Certainly, Marx was concerned with this problem, of individuals recognizing the difference between quantitative and qualitative change, but he remained hopeful that qualitative change was possible. Indeed, this problem was his motivation for developing a theory which identified a material antagonism that would create an awareness of qualitative difference in the working class. For Adorno however, it seems that while we may not be able to rule out the possibility of such awareness, it is so unlikely to come about given the development of society that nothing should be permitted to rest upon it.

Adorno goes on to describe in clear terms what he sees as the role of the culture industry in defusing the revolutionary potential of the working class.

To achieve the predominance of the forces of production would have called for the spontaneous action of those people who were interested in changing social relations, and by now their numbers have surpassed many times those of the industrial proletariat. However, objective interest and subjective spontaneity go in completely different directions. Spontaneity dried up under the disproportionate weight of the given. …If the organization of society, whether by accident or design, uses the culture industry, the consciousness industry and the monopolistic control of opinion to bar the way to the most basic knowledge and experience of the most dangerous processes and the most essential critical ideas, and if, going far beyond that, society paralyzes people’s ability to imagine the world in concrete terms as being anything other than it appears to be, then the fixed and manipulated state of mind becomes a real force, too.58

In this formulation we see the recognition of individual spontaneity as being something required for the creation of collective change; this seems to be Adorno’s attempt to dialectically re-

58 Adorno, After Aushwitz?, 119-20.
establish subjectivity as having objective material force. The problem is one of fostering spontaneity, as the subjective capacity for acting autonomously. Thus, if it is true that industrial society works better without individual spontaneity, that “people lose the qualities that they can no longer use and that only hamper them” and “the core of their individuality has begun to decay” then the problem seems intractable. In effect, spontaneity becomes something like a useless appendage for the individual. When the expression of one’s spontaneity is constantly running up against a wall, it tends to create more unhappiness than if it were absent altogether. In concrete terms—in the presence of such massive and complex structures which seem to represent a world that is beyond our judgment and certainly beyond our immediate control, the individual cannot help but be separated from a sense of agency in the world that he constitutes.

Late Political Interventions and the Critique of Praxis

It is this overtly political aspect of his philosophy, directed toward a critique of capitalist society and rooted in Marx’s theory of social change, which was so appealing to the radicalized students of the 1960s. Its critique of instrumentalization and reification became a large part of the theoretical motivation for the various forms of direct political action that they were experimenting with. Espen Hammer nicely summarizes the general character of the student movement of the 1960s, during which time Adorno was teaching at the Institute for Social Research which had recently returned to Frankfurt.

Although united by a strong anti-authoritarian impulse, a renewed interest in sexual, social and political experimentation, and a hostility towards the war in Vietnam, the student movement, viewed as a worldwide phenomenon, was rather diverse. While the American scene concurring with the rise of the civil-rights movement, combined a strong social and political pluralism with a pronounced orientation towards bohemian living, the French was more explicitly revolutionary, aiming, if necessary with violence, at replacing the centralized state apparatus with a more democratic, and in some cases anarchistic, social formation. Both in San Francisco and Paris, the

59 Adorno, After Auschwitz?, 123.
creation, liberation, and cultivation of new desires went hand in hand with a strong critique of consumerism… Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the German student movement was the way in which the rejection of Germany’s Nazi past shaped its political outlook. The German students rebelled [also against]…the continuities they perceived between fascism and contemporary culture…”  

At this time Adorno had come to hold a prominent place amidst the radical political culture in Frankfurt. His critical-theoretical engagement with the inheritance of National Socialism and the authoritarian personality, as well as his more general critique of the culture industry, were influential in the rise of political activism in Germany after the war. When Adorno refused to join in solidarity with the increasingly direct political activities of the German student movement, some of those students responded by staging small protests against Adorno intended to intimidate and show that he could not be counted on to stand behind his ideas. These included leaflets announcing that ‘Adorno as an institution is dead’ circulated during his lectures, the interruption of a lecture on Goethe in Berlin in 1967 with heckles and the accusation that he was merely a “classicist,” and, perhaps most infamously, the so called “breast action” (Busenaktion) in 1969 when three female students (as members of a larger planned action) “invaded the lecturer’s podium, sprinkled rose and tulip petals over [his] head, attempted to plant lipstick kisses on his cheeks, exposed their naked breasts to him, and provoked him with erotic pantomimes.”

Many of these students were influenced by the theories of Adorno and the other members of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Marcuse, et al.) and, despite the seemingly negative

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61 See Richter’s introduction to the interview with Adorno in Theodor W. Adorno, “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower?: A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno,” ed Gerhard Richter. Monatshefte 94, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 11-13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30161947 (accessed January 2, 2010). Also Chapter 19 of Müller-Doohm. It may be added that it is likely that when Adorno critiques those students directly around him, he also has in mind the larger milieu pointed to by Hammer above. This may have included, more specifically, the Viennese actionists (who might be said to have been to art what the RAF was to politics) and what would have been the beginnings of the Red Army Faction (also known as the Baader-Meinhoff gang). Indeed, the infamous bombing of a department store in Frankfurt by the founders of the Red Army Faction occurred in April 1968 only a few days before Adorno was to give an address at the Frankfurt Sociologists’ Conference. (see Müller-Doohm, Adorno, 443.; this address was titled ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society’ and is discussed in the next chapter.)
orientation of those theorists, were tracing the lineage of their arguments back to Marx’s famous call to action of the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach. In this way, the argument being given for the experiments in radical or revolutionary political action may be said to have been based on a perceived call by Marx (and understood to be implicit in any Marxist position) to move \textit{from theory to praxis}. Marx’s thesis is generally interpreted to mean that the time has come for philosophy to stop trying to understand the world and to begin using that understanding to make the world better; or, perhaps, that the time has come to cease being merely a spectating subject in the world of another and to instead take some decisive action toward making that world your own. This is apparently the meaning that generally underlay the German student movement during those years. Thus, it came as some surprise to many of these individuals when Adorno seemingly turned his back on them by refusing to support their attempts to bring about qualitative change through intervention (sometimes violent or destructive) in and against the state political structure. As the students expressed this frustration both verbally and through forms of physical protest, the question of Adorno’s views on the relation between political theory and praxis become the object of ongoing debate, with Adorno himself repeatedly interjecting publicly and expressing his concerns privately to his friends. Largely because of his confrontation with these students, the notion of \textit{praxis} was pushed to the forefront of his philosophical activity. What exactly is meant by ‘praxis’ is a difficult question, and this difficulty is inseparable from the way that the debate between Adorno and his interlocutors played out. But given its centrality to what became Adorno’s late politics I will have to attempt to untie that knot. At this point, however, it is perhaps enough to point out that it functions, in any case, as the dialectical counter-term of theory. Toward the purpose of both defining

\footnote{\textit{“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” -Thesis XI.” Marx, \textit{Theses on Feuerbach}, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm.}}
Adorno’s concept of praxis and identifying what he takes to be its proper place in political life, it would be best to begin by seeing how it is informally used in the context of his debate with the students.

Taken as a whole, Adorno’s response to this question of student political activity is complicated, but regarding its rootedness in Marx’s apparent call to action, Adorno may be said to have pursued two opposing possibilities. First, scattered through his work is the suggestion that Marx actually may not have thought that the time had come for a movement to praxis, or that he may not have understood the need for praxis as a call to particular forms of action in any straightforward sense. This is a difficult claim, not least because it seems clearly both true and false. Marx, especially in his late writings, did not, in fact, make any clear suggestions. On the other hand, there are, for instance, the quite specific directives and predictions of the Manifesto and the statement of popular intention in the opening to *Capital*.\(^6^3\) We will come back in what follows to some passages from Adorno’s writing which include the idea that Marx remained theoretical. The second kind of response that Adorno gives to the question about ‘Marxist’ praxis is the suggestion that, even if Marx did call for such change, there are historical and rational reasons to think that the only acceptable action in the present is to remain engaged in theoretical activity; or, at least, that the particular forms of action suggested are not legitimate, which, in the absence of an alternative, amounts to the same thing. This response may be thought of as the crux of Adorno’s ‘critique of praxis’ and, as mentioned, represents a considerable part of his energies as a public intellectual in Frankfurt in the 1960s.

To give an account of this ‘critique of praxis’ I will begin by looking first at two documents of his involvement during this period: an interview that he gave to *Der Spiegel*

\(^6^3\) In a letter to the publisher which appears as the preface to the French Edition of Capital, Marx writes “I applaud your idea of publishing the translation of Capital as a serial. In this form the book will be more accessible to the working class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else.” Marx, *Capital*, 104.
following some personal conflicts with student activists, and a brief essay in which he defends himself against the accusation of resignation that had been leveled against him by these student activists when he failed to support their actions in solidarity. After that I will look at an epistolary exchange with Herbert Marcuse on the question of the legitimacy of these student actions. Through these more informal texts a rough dialectic of political theory and praxis will emerge that I will fill out with a discussion of his final posthumous writing explicitly on this subject.

In 1969 with the events of May 1968 in Paris still clearly in view and immediately following the disruption of his lecture by the three female students, Adorno was interviewed by the news-magazine Der Spiegel about these events and his position on the translation of his theoretical work into political praxis. Noticeably combative, the interviewer’s questions tend toward the issue of the compatibility of Adorno’s political recalcitrance with his critical Marxist position. Consider the following answer from Adorno to represent the basic outlines of a persistent and more thorough critique of praxis.

When asked directly about the matter of agreement between his own political ideas and those of the student protesters he answers that he

…could not have foreseen that people would try to implement [my theoretical model] with Molotov cocktails. …It is not as if I had turned away from praxis only recently; my thinking always has stood in a rather indirect relationship to praxis. My thinking has perhaps had practical consequences in that some of its motifs have entered consciousness… Ever since the first bedlam was organized against me in 1967 in Berlin, certain student groups have time and again attempted to force me into solidarity, demanding practical actions of me. I have refused.

When the point is pushed and he is asked whether the fact that critical theory does not want “to keep conditions as they are” necessarily implies the legitimacy of actions which attempt to bring about change, his reply suggests recognition of the need for qualitative change, but implies a

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64 “Who’s Afraid of the Ivory Tower” was originally published in Der Spiegel May 1969; an English translation was also re-published in the journal Encounter in 1969.
principled separation of the theoretical possibility of such change and its practical actualization.

He claims that he cannot accept the presupposition that if you change little things then everything will be better and adds, in defense of the need to separate theory from praxis,

I attempt to put into words what I see and what I think. But I cannot predicate this on what will be done with it or what will become of it. …I believe that a theory is much more capable of having practical consequences owing to the strength of its own objectivity than if it had subjected itself to praxis from the start. Today’s unfortunate relationship between theory and praxis consists precisely in the fact that theory is subjected to a practical pre-censorship.”

Again, responding to a question about the influence of his ideas on the student actions and his feeling about his own need to take responsibility for that, he continues to insist on what he sees as the need to understand the complexity of the theory-praxis relation:

…I think that one often conceives the connection between theory and praxis too reductively. …In response to the question “What is to be done?,“ I usually can only answer “I do not know.” I can only analyze relentlessly what is. …Historically, there have been countless instances in which precisely those works that pursued purely theoretical intentions altered consciousness and, by extension, societal reality.

These responses point clearly toward the idea that theoretical activity continues to be of the utmost importance even, and especially, when it is of no directly instrumental use to political practice. Furthermore, Adorno insists that those who are engaged in it should defend it against the external pressures of praxis, which would prefer to silence any theorist who refuses to say how his ideas may be applied to concrete situations. The theory-praxis relation that is implied seems also to suggest that those individuals who are presently engaged in praxis would do better to spend more time engaged in the theoretical analysis of objective social reality, which he sees as more likely to result in qualitative change, even if indirectly, than dead-ended praxis. Indeed, he is not shy about conveying his sense that the praxis that is being pushed on him is motivated not by a desire for meaningful change, but by a kind of deluded, secret despair.

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When asked about whether he understands the students’ choice to use the ideas of critical theory to defend violence, he answers that it is indeed comprehensible, but as a reaction to despair (and not apparently as a connection between critical theory and praxis):

I believe that their actionism can essentially be traced back to despair, because people sense how little power they actually have to change society. But I am equally convinced that these actions are predestined to fail; this also proved to be the case during the May revolt in France. ...I cannot fault someone living in our world today for feeling despairing, pessimistic, and negative. Those who compulsively shout down their objective despair with the noisy optimism of immediate action in order to lighten their psychological burden are much more deluded [than those who recognize their despair].

This is an important set of ideas regarding the need to resist the urge to let oneself overlook what is difficult, in part because it comes up importantly in his recommendation for philosophical and musical praxis and also because it leads back to the praxical tension with Lukács. It is in response to Adorno’s ‘valorizing despair as a politically productive category’ (as Richter puts it in a footnote to the interview) that Lukács responds in the introduction to his *Theory of the Novel* that Adorno and others were living in the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’. The criticism is that despair (as the terrifying possibility of nothingness, of silence) only serves to make one feel grateful for the luxuries that one has. But Adorno does not in fact seem very grateful. Rather, Adorno seems to be using despair as a way of maintaining a critical state of mind. Such a critical stance is all that he feels is possible in the present, given that revolutionary political action is not an option because of its inability to achieve its ends. It is this that he criticizes the ‘actionists’ for undermining with their false optimism. They are guilty of ‘pseudo-activity,’ as he calls it elsewhere, which is the raising of political activity to an ideal such that it becomes ideology detached from what it is meant to bring about. The motivation for engaging in such ‘pseudo-

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70 Gerhard Richter provides the following note to his use of the word ‘actionism’ in the cited translation: “I have rendered Adorno’s term ‘Aktionismus’ as the somewhat strange-sounding English term ‘actionism’ in order to preserve in the neologism his critical emphasis on the ideological dimension of a belief that favors action and intervention at all cost and with dogmatic fervor.” (Adorno, “Ivory Tower,” 21 n21)
activity’ is in large part the desire for psychological comfort and is thus a form of delusion – precisely what the actionists claimed to be trying to disassemble. Adorno implies that what really made the (increasingly physical) disruptions against him problematic was precisely this deluded motivation. In response to a question, he answered that he did not think the actions were intended to shake up his theory because he doesn’t believe they had anything to do with the actual content of his theory. Instead it was a form of publicity waged by those who “suffer from the fear of being forgotten.” The fact that tactics have taken priority over discussion and thought is an indication that they aren’t really doing what they claim to be doing, namely trying to bring about real change.

Around the same time in early 1969, Adorno published an essay titled “Resignation” repeating this critique of praxis and responding again specifically to the accusation that his insistence on theory is a mere retreat, motivated by weakness rather than principle. The problem that he claims his critics think they have identified is one of de facto participation—the assertion being, that by only critiquing conditions and not attempting to change them with action, one is in fact acting to maintain the status quo. Adorno responds here, as in the interview, by turning their criticism back on them with the suggestion that they choose to insist on “praxis” precisely because of the impossibility of genuine praxis, and thus their insistence is really a form of delusion, a kind of defense mechanism. He claims that unlike in Marx, where the call to revolution was inspired by a real possibility of action, the actionist “clings to action for the sake of the impossibility of action.” As a repressed drive coming out, it is the opposite of what it claims to be. However, he does claim here that even in Marx the call to action probably involved

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73 Adorno, “Resignation,” 290.
repression. Marx’s position should have remained more dialectical, self-reflective and “critical” – just as, Adorno points out, Marx himself had emphasized in 1844. Pseudo-activity is defined by Adorno in this essay more precisely as “action that overdoes and aggravates itself for the sake of its own publicity, without admitting to itself to what extent it serves as a substitute satisfaction, elevating itself into an end in itself.” As a defense mechanism, it gets angry at truth because it stands to be exposed by it and confronted with itself. In this way Adorno, insisting on dialectical reflection, is providing an immanent critique of praxis. When it is already determined who is right, discussion degenerates into tactics. Only real discussion/thinking whose results are not pre-determined could succeed in freeing. It’s the difference between ramming an impenetrable door repeatedly, to at least feel like you’re doing something, or continuing to think about the reasons for the door being locked and what the actual possibilities are for its being opened, violently or otherwise. Thinking about the door, Adorno insists, is not at all resigning oneself to the room that it secures. Indeed, it is the precondition for its opposite. Before attempting to give a more definite conception of praxis, let us look at one additional document of the exchange between Adorno and the ‘actionist’ students.

From February until August 1969, shortly before Adorno’s death, he and Herbert Marcuse exchanged a series of somber letters arguing over the legitimacy of the student activities that were taking place in Frankfurt at the time (including the occupation of the Frankfurt Institute) and the proper response to them. The two thinkers had a great deal in common theoretically, but Marcuse’s relationship with students at Berkeley in California had developed much differently than Adorno’s in Frankfurt, with Marcuse taking a much more encouraging approach.

74 Adorno, “Resignation,” 291.
Again, for Adorno, due to the nature of political praxis as instrumental activity, the question of its legitimation depends on its potential for success. Political praxis that does not make every available effort to understand its objective situation for the sake of bringing about the change it seeks is not truly praxis – it is pseudo-praxis. Both Adorno and Marcuse appear to agree on this understanding of the concept. Their disagreement then, about the legitimacy of the student rebellion, is most explicitly based on a disagreement, not about the requirements of political praxis, but about the objective conditions that it is faced with. In addition, although less clearly so, the disagreement seems to involve a difference in understanding regarding the specific goal of the student activity. In this case, discussion about the legitimacy of particular activities become asserting in turn that ‘praxis is blocked’ and that ‘praxis is not blocked,’ Adorno arrives at the following elucidation of his claim.

I would have to deny everything that I think and know about the objective tendency if I wanted to believe that the student protest movement in Germany had even the tiniest prospect of effecting a social intervention. Because, however, it cannot do that its effect is questionable in two respects. Firstly, inasmuch as it inflames an undiminished fascist potential in Germany, without even caring about it. Secondly, insofar as it breeds in itself tendencies which—and here too we must differ—directly converge with fascism. I name as symptomatic of this the technique of calling for a discussion, only to then make one impossible; the barbaric inhumanity of a mode of behaviour that is regressive and even confuses regression with revolution; the blind primacy of action; the formalism which is indifferent to the content and shape of that against which one revolts, namely our theory. … Dialectics means, amongst other things, that ends are not indifferent to means; what is going on here drastically demonstrates, right down to the smallest details, such as the bureaucratic clinging to agendas, ‘binding decisions’, countless committees and suchlike, the features of just such a technocratization that they claim they want to oppose, and which we actually oppose. I take much more seriously than you the danger of the student movement flipping over into fascism.  

Although Adorno does not here provide a great deal of support for the claim that praxis is blocked other than an appeal to his own general experience, he does make it quite clear that he

holds out little hope for at least the German student movement if not the rest as well. \textsuperscript{76} Given this fact, his analysis turns toward a critique of the dangers of delusion and repression. He points out the qualities of the student movement that he sees as representing fascist tendencies. What each of these qualities – disingenuous interest in discussion, regression, formalism, etc. – seemingly have in common is an underlying irrationality that is fundamentally opposed to the form of social freedom that the student movement apparently has as its goal. His claim that the students are “indifferent to the content and shape” of theory indicates that he sees their position as tending towards the ideological insofar as it sees all theory as the same and refuses to recognize that theory is a form of praxis just the same as their own practical activities.

In these comments, we can also see Adorno’s concern for the possibility that the radical actions of the students, apart from the internal contradictions of their own movement, could trigger a reaction from the “undiminished fascist potential” remaining in post-war Germany. This alone is perhaps not enough to completely undermine their efforts, especially in view of Adorno’s own attempts to distance his theoretical activity from the consequences it produces. His point, however, is that given what he sees as the actionists inability to produce the social change that they want to, they have a responsibility to consider the terrible dangers associated with the German situation during that period.

Marcuse, for his part, attempts to give evidence for the successes of the student movement. For instance, he claims that they have intervened successfully as a “catalyst for the internal collapse of the system of domination” by promoting political consciousness and an increasing opposition to American imperialism.\textsuperscript{77} Adorno concedes that the student movement does have some merit insofar as “it has interrupted the smooth transition to the totally

\textsuperscript{76} The lack of argumentative support pointed to should at least be attributed to the fact that this is after all a letter to his friend and is not intended as public critique.

\textsuperscript{77} Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 133.
administered world,” but implies in doing so that the transition is taking place nonetheless and thus that the sought after qualitative change remains unrealized and apparently unrealizable. Responding to Adorno’s insistence that theory should not be instrumentalized, Marcuse also suggests that “there are situations, moments, in which theory is pushed on further by praxis—situations and moments in which theory that is kept separate from praxis becomes untrue to itself.” Essentially, this serves as a reminder that the relation between theory and praxis is a dialectical one and that theory as the effort to understand must always desire to learn from its application if possible. Agreeing with the notion that the relation is a dialectical one and that there may be moments in which praxis aids theory, Adorno’s response is nevertheless that “such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow.”

He is here again responding to the specific qualities that he claims to recognize in the activities of those student activists that he is confronted with. Praxis may be legitimate and may benefit theory if it remains in conversation with theory and genuinely seeks to bring about its end by understanding objective conditions. But the particular praxis of the students, he thinks, is totally detached from theory. This is, again, the accusation that the actions of the student protesters display fascist tendencies. Adorno cites specifically: his impression that the student leader Krahl organized the disruption of his lecture merely for the sake of publicity, the fact that the students yelled at the professors “that we should shut our traps and say nothing about what happened,” and the fact that they demanded that he publicly criticize himself for not supporting their efforts. In such behavior, Adorno claims to recognize “something of that thoughtless violence that once

78 Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 127.
79 Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 124.
belonged to fascism.” Rather than seeking the genuine discussion that they claimed to be looking for, he believed they simply used him and his colleagues as instruments for their own grabs at power. This is a strong claim, and whether it is true, is obviously difficult to discern, but what is perhaps more important is its implication of the need for genuine discussion.

So, while Marcuse believes that the students are self-aware, Adorno clearly does not. In this respect Adorno’s critique goes in both directions. He believes that those who can be shown to be deluded lack the spontaneity necessary to bring about meaningful qualitative change. Likewise, if change is objectively not possible, then students who claim to be able to bring about change cannot possibly be self-aware. Furthermore, where Marcuse focuses on what he takes to be the legitimate (because progressive) ends and objectives of the students, Adorno argues that the end dictates what means are acceptable and claims to recognize unacceptable means being used by the students (including blind violence and a struggle for power).

In this way, through Adorno’s imminent ‘critique of praxis,’ we begin to get a picture of what he sees as the dialectical boundaries of theory and praxis. Implied are the basic outlines of an understanding that informs nearly every response that he gives to these questions, at the heart of which is the following idea: Theory is itself a form of praxis which may have practical consequences but is not instrumental. In order to make sense of this, it will be helpful to distinguish between the related notions of ‘praxis’, ‘practice’ and ‘activity’, each of which gets used in overlapping senses but can be separated as distinct participants in the dialogue about praxis.

Praxis, it seems, can be tentatively defined as an ‘activity’ that is circumscribed in some way by a specific end or purpose. In this case, activity simply means any doing or movement at all. Everything humans do constitutes an activity and all activity has consequences, some

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80 Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 128.
intended and some not. Roughly speaking, activity with intentional consequences can be thought of as instrumental or practical (or simply “practice”), and activity without intended consequences can be thought of as theoretical (or simply “theory”). Thus, practice and theory seem typically to be distinguished by their opposing orientation toward instrumentality, with the former characterized as a type of instrumental activity which effects change, and the latter as a type of activity characterized by thinking toward truth or objectivity. So, praxis must be seen as a sub-category of activity: where the concept activity is being applied to any movement, praxis is only applied to movement which is unified (however loosely) by some purpose (however vague), such that we can refer to ‘philosophical praxis’, ‘political praxis’, and ‘artistic praxis’ as distinct forms. But, in this case, what can be said to be the relationship between ‘praxis’, ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ as types of activity? Judging by Adorno’s use we can also say that praxis is, in a sense, the dialectical movement between thinking and doing, that is, between theoretical and practical activities. Praxis, according to Adorno, is the connection between thought and action, such that when we talk about a particular form of praxis, such as political praxis, we are in reality talking about a particular relationship between theory and practice. Consider the implication in Adorno’s critique of praxis that, by detaching from theory, activity is in reality severing the connection to its end. It is in this way that he thinks activity becomes ‘pseudo-activity’ (or ‘false praxis’), i.e. activity which is not really what it claims to be, namely an activity moving toward some end. I don’t mean to suggest that Adorno thinks every conceivable activity needs to have a corresponding theory or even needs an explicit thought. (For example, going to the market.) However, I do think it is unclear where he would have us draw the line between activities which demand a theoretical grounding and those which do not. Perhaps we can simply say for now that Adorno’s use of the notion of ‘pseudo-activity’ describes the situation that occurs when activity
in general is severed from theory in general. As such, this situation could include activities like going to the market, but only in the sense that they are part of a larger problem. For Adorno, praxis, as the dialectical movement between theory and practice, can move in both directions. To the extent that we can understand theory as the dialectical opposite of practice we can understand this to allowance to require the stipulation that the movement must begin with theory, because theory, as the critical aspect, is solely capable of providing both the goal and any analysis of means. Given this understanding of praxis, it is possible to see that while ‘activity’ is, strictly speaking, a broader concept than either ‘praxis’ or ‘practice,’ it is often used as shorthand for both. Likewise, ‘praxis’ is used as shorthand for ‘practical activity’ because, dialectically speaking, it represents a movement toward practice and away from theory. Each of these concepts is defined dialectically in relation to the others, and so I do not mean to overdetermine their use. Indeed, it is due to their resistance to identification that they gain the analytic potential they have. Nevertheless, what Adorno insists on is that we be willing to distinguish between practical activity that remains in conversation with theory, and practical activity which has become false by taking activity itself as its final end, that is, activity for activity’s sake. This having been said, the issue of legitimating praxis depends on the particular kind of praxis in question, such that, for instance, true philosophical praxis will be different than true political praxis. Given what we have seen so far, I would suggest, very tentatively, that the difference between political and philosophical praxis is parallel to the difference between practical activity and theoretical activity, respectively, so that philosophical praxis is oriented more toward its theoretical aspect while political praxis is oriented more toward its practical aspect.
In stressing that theory is a form of praxis which may have practical consequences but is not instrumental, Adorno is directly confronting what he sees as the misunderstanding that the accusations against his politics have been based on, namely that theory without praxis is a form of resignation, adopted out of self-interest and fear. The idea that ‘theory is a form of praxis’ is the claim that thinking is doing, and thus, so is the public expression of that thought. The further idea that ‘theoretical praxis has practical consequences’ can be understood (at least in part) as a connection between the public expression of thought and its indirect effects on society through the mediation of the consciousness of those individuals who make up society and who themselves were affected by that expression. According to Adorno, “purely theoretical” thought exists for its own sake, independently of, and thus unaffected by, the prospect of any particular consequence of its activity. So, while such autonomous thought may be practical insofar as it does actually have effects, its very being depends on its independence from the pressures of instrumentality. Furthermore, Adorno stresses that the potential for theory to be practical in this way depends largely on “the strength of its own objectivity,” that is, on the extent to which it is directed successfully toward understanding rather than the particular demands of political praxis. Again, the idea is that theory can have practical consequences (although this will not necessarily be the case) and it can even hope to bring about certain consequences, but that insofar as theory is autonomous (i.e. insofar as theory is theory in the emphatic sense), that hope must be effectively blind and the consequences theory seeks cannot be specific.

At this point, I would like to look more closely at one more text on this subject in order to give a more complete—though certainly not totally unified—account of Adorno’s ideas about the theory-practice relationship. The issues that come out of Adorno’s dialogue with those who
considered themselves activists and revolutionaries should be compared with those in
“Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” a late unpublished text devoted to the subject of theory and
praxis and which represents his most sustained inquiry into the question. Although the essay was
not published during his life it was clearly written during his troubles with the students in the
1960’s. He alludes to it in his exchange with Marcuse claiming that it represents his ideas on the
subject, and many of the particular issues that came up in his struggle with the students receive
attention therein. 81

The question of theory and praxis is fundamentally a problem of knowledge; it is the
relationship between thinking and doing. If understanding through theoretical reflection must
precede its application in the concrete world and that understanding must be complete, then how
are we to understand the world and ourselves well enough to know what the best course of action
is at any given moment? In the previous chapter we saw that, according to Lukács, bourgeois
consciousness fails to be able to answer this question in any adequate way because it takes for
granted an epistemological framework that relies on correspondence between subject and object
for true knowledge. According to such a conception, only when thinking is complete can doing
begin; but as soon as the subject begins to act (assuming this stage would ever come about) the
objective situation has changed. The purity of theory prevents it from grasping what is
fundamentally ‘other’ to it. Theory and praxis remain irredeemably separated by the
impossibility of the subject, due precisely to the character of his subjectivity, ever capturing
complete objectivity. While Adorno does not accept the Lukácsian hope for the reconciliation of
subject and object in a new proletarian consciousness, he nevertheless recognizes the problem
that necessarily attends to this radical separation and points to the need for the persistence of
dialectical thought:

81 See Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 127.
A consciousness of theory and praxis must be produced that neither divides the two such that theory becomes powerless and praxis becomes arbitrary, nor refracts theory through the archbourgeois primacy of practical reason... Thinking is a doing, theory a form of praxis; already the ideology of the purity of thinking deceives about this. Thinking has a double character: it is immanently determined and rigorous....

Just before this passage in the essay, Adorno identifies the potential separations of theory and praxis as actual stages of the historical development of that relationship. The question of theory and praxis is socially conditioned and thus their separation parallels the trajectory of social history in which there is a corresponding separation in subject and object. He suggests that with the separation of subject and object in the Cartesian doctrine, theory and practice in the bourgeois period were seen as irreconcilable. Given theory’s new form (as the pure practical reason that defined the concept of the bourgeois subject), the individual subject became incapable of using theory to produce any real change in the immanent object which he is, by definition, autonomous from. “The subject, thrown back upon itself, divided from its Other by an abyss, is supposedly incapable of action.” Parallel to this subject-object divide, praxis also became pure in its own way. As pure immanence, praxis does not have recourse to rationality and is left simply with the capacity for blind domination.

Adorno goes on to push this separation of theory and praxis back even further into history—to the division between physical and intellectual labor in the bourgeois period. It was during this period that the divergence between thinking and doing was first reflected upon as such, that is, as a divergence, so that, in Adorno’s words “The crisis of praxis was experienced as: not knowing what should be done.” During the transitional period of the renaissance, the medieval hierarchy, with its practical guidelines broke down leaving enlightenment thought, represented in figures like Kant, to fill the void rationally and formally. In this shift Adorno

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84 Adorno, “Marginalia,” 261.
claims to recognize an important progressive theoretical element. He points out that in enlightenment terms this process of dissolution of norms represented the beginning of the “emancipation of autonomous reason,” which granted the individual subject freedom to become self-determined in accord with right. Although this “inability to engage in praxis was…a weakness from the very beginning…” (insofar as formal imperatives are seemingly impossible to apply to particulars), to the extent that it served as an inhibition of praxis generally, it also brought about a self-reflection that functions in the particular as a resistance to thoughtless praxis. He writes that “self reflection…signifies the interruption of action blindly directed outward; non-naiveté as the transition to the humane.”

However, to return to the passage in the previous paragraph, Adorno is suggesting that this divide between theory and praxis should not be maintained—perhaps despite the potentially progressive, inhibiting qualities of a theory fixated on its own purity. Indeed, as a historical formation in process, this is probably not possible anyway. Insofar as the separation leads theory to be impotent and praxis to be blind, it is not something that can be defended in any unqualified sense.

Adorno’s response to the persistence of this reified and inaccurate understanding of theory and praxis is to insist on the dialectical character of the relation. Although thought, represented as ‘pure’, may seem totally autonomous and detached from the world of immanence, it is not. Rather, as he says, it has a “double character.” Thought is at once determined, always as a determinate form of activity in the material world, carried out by material subjects, and, in an important way, also non-determined, as an activity that has the ability to reflect upon itself and make principled decisions. He writes that “Whereas theory cannot be extracted from the entire societal process, it also maintains an independence within this process…”

85 Adorno, “Marginalia,” 262.
simultaneously autonomous from, but not independent of, society. In the next chapter we will see that Adorno claims the same double-character for the work of art. In the present case, the recommendation for those engaged in either theory or praxis would seem to be to keep in mind that it is impossible not to be engaged in both simultaneously, but that they are distinct as well. He writes, “The relationship between theory and practice, after both have once distanced themselves from each other, is that of qualitative reversal, not transition, and surely not subordination. They stand in a polar relationship.”\(^87\) Theory and praxis, standing in dialectical relation, remain constantly in tension with one another.

It is clear that, for Adorno, a legitimate politics must have an appropriate understanding of theory and praxis and thus will be dialectical. This is certainly unsurprising. But how does such a dialectical position manifest itself in practice? As we saw in the last chapter, the insistence on dialectics is a call to infinite reflection and demands a negative, critical praxis. Without the privilege of a positive system dialectics must operate by immanent critique, and thus can only demonstrate what is not the case. In the sphere of politics, negative dialectics contributes to the understanding of a legitimate theory-praxis relation, not by showing what must be the case, but by demonstrating what is problematic with particular understandings. In “Marginalia” and elsewhere, Adorno makes numerous claims as to what theory is and is not, and what praxis should and should not be. It is clear, however, that he believes his reasons for these opinions to be entirely negative. Adorno was clear that he did not believe himself to have given, or to be giving, any positive practical advice. He sought only to critique those who thought themselves capable of doing so. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that this process is always motivated by the desire or need for understanding and, in Adorno’s case (if we take him at his word), as it was for Marx, this understanding is for the sake of creating social freedom.

\(^87\) Adorno, “Marginalia,” 277.
Let us return, now in the context of “Marginalia,” to Adorno’s immanent critique of theory and praxis in hopes of gaining a more thorough understanding of what a legitimate negative dialectical political praxis might be, or, at least, what it cannot be.

Discoverable in Adorno’s critique is a structure of legitimation for political praxis which operates with several overlapping criteria. Each of these criteria is rooted in the ability and willingness to contribute to the understanding of social freedom. Any legitimate political praxis aimed at freedom, in addition to seeking to contribute to understanding, must also be self-reflective and non-repressive, must consider the whole, and, to the extent that it claims to be practical, must recognize that its value derives solely from its ability to bring about its expressed end. For this reason, such self-proclaimed praxis is only “true” if it at least seeks to bring about its end. These conditions, considered by Adorno in light of the “polarity” of theory and praxis, support more specific negative imperatives which begin to show how any dialectical critique of particular political activity must proceed.

In the third section of “Marginalia,” Adorno claims that, “Theory speaks for what is not narrow-minded. Despite all of its unfreedom, theory is the guarantor of freedom in the midst of unfreedom.” What is implied here is that praxis does not “speak” for “what is not narrow-minded.” “What is not narrow-minded” refers here to truth and understanding and what exists for the sake of it. In particular, Adorno believes knowledge of freedom is maintained in the present only by theory and not by praxis. When the free movement of praxis, that is, from theory to its application in practice, is blocked and cannot be brought about (as he believed was the case) theory as praxis is all that remains able to serve as the medium for the experience and knowledge of real freedom (by individuals). As ‘thought which does not intervene’, theory is clearly limited in its ability to bring about social freedom, and yet, it is necessary for carrying

88 Adorno, “Marginalia,” 263.
forward the awareness of that goal and of goals in general, something without which praxis is useless. It is precisely because of its autonomy (that is, its separation from the instrumental sphere) that theory remains free to carry out this task. Adorno is claiming that although theory has great practical limitations which can be frustrating to those seeking change, it must be recognized that it alone (i.e. theory as self-reflection)—because it is the possibility for autonomy, and more importantly is the condition for recognizing when thought and action are not autonomous—is capable of remaining free in the face of heteronomous forces and thus protects the memory of what freedoms are possible.

Thinking about these conditions for understanding, Adorno identifies a problematic tendency of his radical students to become involved in a kind of rhetoric of immediacy which purports to be engaged in unified theory-praxis. He responds to this by suggesting that a belief in the unmediated unity of theory and praxis cannot possibly be true and that, as such, holding such a belief prevents the self-reflection which would contribute to the kind of freedom which it clearly aspires to. His claim was that

Just as the division of subject and object cannot be revoked immediately by a decree of thought, so too an immediate unity of theory and praxis is hardly possible: it would imitate the false identity of subject and object and would perpetuate the principle of domination that posits identity and that true praxis must oppose.\footnote{Adorno, “Marginalia,” 265.}

Here Adorno is critiquing any praxis which would claim to be able to dispense with autonomous theory. From his point of view, student activists were frustrated with the feeling of helplessness that comes along with increasingly mediated political and social life, and because of this called for direct action as an antidote. From such a perspective, thinking, an activity which demands patience and time for pre-action reflection, appears merely as a way of maintaining the mediation that they see as being the problem. On this view, such mediation is merely a form of stalling that

\footnote{Adorno, “Marginalia,” 265.}
serves only those who want to maintain the status quo. According to the students, what is needed instead is to think and act simultaneously, and to do so right away. While Adorno is certainly sympathetic to the desire for such unity, his point is that it is simply not present in the student actions and that, ironically, the belief that one is in possession of unmediated theory and praxis places one in an even more mediated position than if one recognized the mediation that could not be overcome. This is what he means when he says in the quote above that the belief in immediacy would “perpetuate the principle of domination that posits identity and that true praxis must oppose.” True praxis, which seeks to bring about its ends, must be aware of what is and is not possible. Otherwise it is pseudo-praxis whose only function is the self-preservation that comes about through anxiety relieving delusion. And while such relief may serve to produce short-term happiness, it in no way brings about the understanding necessary for the qualitative social change that the activists claim as their end. The actual unity of theory and praxis is something that is conditioned objectively and is historically changing, and so, while Adorno doesn’t give any positive suggestion for how to encourage this unity, he does give the negative limitation, that any true praxis (that is, any praxis that aspires to be more than a blind, half-accurate moment in history) must at least be self-reflectively aware of the division. To posit identity, as he claims the actionists do, is reductive in the attempt to find a shortcut. Given the requirements of negativity and the unprecedented difficulty of the objective situation, everything short of continuous theoretical activity is, in effect, a shortcut and may be suspected of being positive ideology.

A manifestation of this claim to political immediacy can perhaps be found foremost in the notion of ‘collectivity’. Adorno writes in “Marginalia” that,

…if praxis obscures its own present impossibility with the opiate of collectivity, it becomes in its turn ideology. …The individual must cede himself to the collective; as recompense for his jumping into the melting pot, he is promised the grace of being chosen, of belonging. Weak and
fearful people feel strong when they hold hands while running. …inculcated into adepts with a hundred techniques for exerting moral pressure, is the idea that by abandoning one’s own reason and judgment one is blessed with a higher, that is, collective reason.\textsuperscript{90}

It is unclear whether he has some specific calls to collectivity in mind here, but he is at least directing the force of this toward those young Marxists who he felt were pressuring him, as well as many others, into solidarity with their cause. The concept of collectivity, standing in dialectical opposition to that of individuality, can be seen as the solution that was being called for to the problem of mediation, or alienation, between individuals, in the society which they ostensibly compose. Adorno’s response to such calls for collective action parallels his response to the more general claim to social immediacy; specifically, that, at least in the forms which he was critiquing, collectivism exists essentially as a salve for the difficulty of individuality.

To suggest that praxis “obscures its own present impossibility” implies the impotence which calls for negativity. What remains clear is that the self-reflective political actor, whose goal is genuine understanding of the society to be improved, must make every effort to be aware of how, and the extent to which, that knowledge is mediated. Given the social character of the political change that one is seeking knowledge of, this must necessarily take the form of an awareness of mediation between individuals. ‘Pretending’ that collectivity exists in a way that it clearly does not only prevents the understanding of relations which would be capable of contributing to the creation of an actual collectivity. The idea is that when ‘collectivity’ is proclaimed despite what is actually the persisting fragmentation of the interests of those individuals who make it up, it becomes ideology and thus, insofar as it does exist, can only be maintained through external force of one kind or another. Such heteronomy is what Adorno has in mind when, in the above quote, he points to the “moral pressure” which he believes goes hand in hand with the loss of individual spontaneity and autonomous reason. The collectivity that

\textsuperscript{90} Adorno, “Marginalia,” 276.
Adorno believes is part of a legitimate politics and a political end, can only be a collectivity made of autonomous individuals capable of being self-determined. Unfortunately, it would seem that the first step to this is to be aware of the fact that, in the present, no such unity of individuals exists, nor is it even presently possible.

For Adorno, the awareness of subjective impotence also has, as a condition for self-reflection and true praxis, the need to consider totality. In “Marginalia” he writes:

The primacy of the object must be respected by praxis … To the extent that subject is for its part something mediated, praxis rightly understood is what the object wants… But not by the subject adapting itself, which would merely reinforce the heteronomous objectivity. The neediness of the object is mediated via the total societal system; for that reason it can be determined critically only by theory. Praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail, and praxis, in keeping with its own concept, would like to succeed. False praxis is no praxis.⁹¹

True praxis—again, because it seeks to achieve its end—must take its instructions from that end. Thus, we see that praxis inescapably requires an understanding of the world, and because that cannot realistically be acquired through the immediacy of subject and object, praxis requires theory to help it along with that understanding. In this way we can say that theory just is the separation that is needed—by subject from its object—to achieve knowledge of that object. Theory helps the subject become aware of its own mediation through the separation that is required by self-reflection. It is theory and not praxis that is capable of thinking the whole and thus of reflecting on one’s relative location within that whole.

Although praxis is defined by its instrumentality, it is not free to bring about its goal by any means. Understanding praxis dialectically requires understanding the actual relationship between means and end. Some means are ruled out as being in direct contradiction with the goal at hand. Adorno writes that “…the practical goal, which includes the liberation from all narrow-

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mindedness, is not indifferent to the means intended to achieve it…”92 The alternative, he claims, is that praxis becomes an activity in which any means are acceptable for reaching the end. But such an instrumental position fails to recognize precisely that the choice of means is not simply a practical-empirical matter. The underlying claim being argued for here is that praxis must be directed at an object and that *theory* is the only means by which the subject can get through mediation to reach an understanding of the need of the object (including, for instance, the identification of structures of commodification and repression). Once again, Adorno is somewhat implicitly identifying “praxis” with instrumental, change-directed activity.93 As such, it must do everything within its capability to achieve the end which it has chosen. He seems to be assuming that the end is ‘autonomy of the subject’, and that because of the complexity of achieving it, theory is necessary for fulfilling praxis’ own requirement of attempting to succeed. Anything less than a total effort is false praxis; it is pseudo-activity. It is perhaps worth mentioning that this is really quite like Kant’s ethical distinction between the two kinds of reason (pure and instrumental) and their corresponding imperatives (categorical and hypothetical). What Adorno is here describing is parallel to a hypothetical imperative which is demanded by rational subjectivity. For Kant this is the non-moral imperative because it is not pure and can be attached to any end, good or bad. Adorno presumably does not recognize the possibility of the Kantian moral imperative except in a very minimal sense as what is required for individual autonomy, or perhaps it is possible to say that he agrees with the philosophical basis for such an imperative but denies that it is possible to determine particular actions from the nature of reason. Instead, he uses the negatively limiting hypothetical imperative to give an

93 Recall from the earlier discussion Adorno often uses ‘praxis’ as shorthand for instrumental or ‘practical’ activity (which may or may not have a reified character). This is to be contrasted with his discussions of *genuine* praxis, which, as I suggested, can be more fully understood to be a form of practical activity that remains in dialectical conversation with theory.
immanent critique of praxis. In this way I would suggest that Adorno’s philosophical praxis again becomes more like that of Socrates in the way detailed in the preceding chapter.

This idea, that true praxis has value only to the extent that it brings about its end (and thus is only rational if it seeks to bring about its end), is one that Adorno labors on at length. A large part of what he is trying to understand in these late critiques of praxis is the motivation for the attribution of autonomous value to praxis—an activity which, as we have seen, he himself perceives as necessary, but as having only instrumental value. Articulating one form of this false-attribution and its possible motivation, he writes that “where experience is blocked or altogether absent, praxis is damaged and therefore longed for, distorted, and desperately overvalued. Thus what is called the problem of praxis is interwoven with the problem of knowledge.”

Undamaged praxis is what then? He is claiming that people are motivated to attribute inherent value to praxis because they have no immediate experience of real praxis. When people lose pragmatic control over their world—something Adorno believed had happened in late capitalist society in a much deeper and total sense than ever before—they lose the experience of being involved in the process of deliberation, choice, and the carrying out of decisions that shape the social realm they inhabit. In a way which is structurally similar to a kind of false-nostalgia for a better time before one’s own, the result is a gross overvaluing of practical activity. Adorno’s suggestion is that it be kept in its proper relation to theory; not necessarily as subordinate to theory, but simply as incapable of playing the role that theory does. Making this point even more explicitly political, he goes on to add the following:

…immediate action, which always evokes taking a swing, is incomparably closer to oppression than the thought that catches its breath. The Archimedean point—how might a nonrepressive praxis be possible, how might one steer between the alternatives of spontaneity and organization—this point, if it exists at all, cannot be found other than through theory. If the

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concept is tossed aside, then traits, such as a unilateral solidarity degenerating into terror, will become manifest.\footnote{Adorno, “Marginalia,” 274.}

Thus, to Adorno’s eyes, the desire to act immediately and with commitment is a very dangerous political problem because it is fundamentally irrational and unable to place checks on itself. Because theory is not built into the activity as having an overriding value, any individual who has questions about what is taking place will find that their dissent is not necessarily legitimated from within the activity. If the praxis is to be open and non-repressive, then theory, as the critical element, simply cannot be left out.

Frequently, Adorno describes the call to praxis, not as a need for some specific activity tied to a goal, but as a general need for action itself. The underlying idea seems to be that when current social conditions are unacceptable it is always better to do ‘something rather than nothing’. In this way, according to Adorno, pseudo-praxis seems to have more in common with the survival instinct than with the specifically human potential for freedom. It is a manifestation both of the instinctual drive to always stay one step ahead of starvation (like an “industrious ant” unconsciously compelled to always keep moving), as well as the subjective psychological need to protect oneself from the reality of one’s impotence. In the latter sense, Adorno writes

\begin{quote}
Just as personalization offers false consolation for the fact that within the anonymous apparatus the individual does not count anymore, so pseudo-activity deceives about the debilitation of a praxis presupposing a free and autonomous agent that no longer exists. ...As a reflex reaction to the administered world pseudo-activity reproduces that world in itself.\footnote{Adorno, “Marginalia,” 270.}
\end{quote}

It is easier for the individual to adjust himself to the world around him than to resist it. Constantly coming up against a world which does not go along with your wishes is painful and damaging to one’s mental and physical health, and in this sense, pseudo-activity is the outward manifestation of a survival instinct.
The feeling of needing to try to do something rather than nothing can be explained in another way. Adorno’s analysis of late capitalism is such that the problem which calls for negative dialectics in the first place, the loss of praxical certainty, is exacerbated by the increased loss of individual spontaneity and reflection. By placing too much responsibility and credit on the shoulders of individual subjects (the motivation being impotence, i.e. ‘we can’t see how to create revolution by understanding society as a totality so we are going to just do what we can’) rather than on the object, the subject becomes fetishized as an all-important force. This transformation only further prevents the subject from understanding the social totality and his role in it which, despite its lack of primacy, nevertheless remains integral. This process of the “deformation” of spontaneity which manifests as fetishized individualism is, in the Lukácsian terms that Adorno adopts, a form of social reification. He writes,

The transition to a praxis without theory is motivated by the objective impotence of theory and exponentially increases that impotence through the isolation and fetishization of the subjective element of historical movement, spontaneity. The deformation of spontaneity should be seen as a reaction to the administered world. But by frantically closing its eyes to the totality and by behaving as though it stems immediately from people, spontaneity falls into line with the objective tendency of progressive dehumanization.…  

When the subject becomes fetishized, he believes that he stands alone as an instance of freedom, fully in control of his decisions and truly unique from other personalities. Hammer describes Adorno’s view of the process by which this social-subjective reification happens in the following way:

In a society in which human relationships are largely dominated by the objectivating logic of exchange, the communal practices by which rational linkages between concepts are made possible get reified. Such a reification is most appropriately seen as a process of abstraction: the individual speaker’s complicated dependence on the community, the numerous ways in which one needs to inherit and exemplify one’s own participation in communal practices for meaning and normativity to be possible, become hyposatized and eventually represented as an abstract structure, detached from its interconnection with the lived engagement of concrete individuals striving to make sense in specific situations.

97 Adorno, “Marginalia,” 266.
98 Hammer, Adorno and the Political, 151.
According to Adorno, even (and perhaps especially) those who believe they are resisting the totalizing forces of capitalist society are guilty of possessing such a reified consciousness. A particularly interesting example of this is Adorno’s brief, but significant, immanent critique of the praxis known as do-it-yourself. This describes a movement, which like the protest activities he is discussing, was a new formation of political activity at the time but has persisted into the present, especially in groups which identify themselves as anarchist. As a form of political praxis which tries to undermine reliance on the capitalist economy by placing emphasis on the productive abilities of individuals in local communities, Adorno’s critique of do-it-yourself is to point out that such production has long been done better by industrial society. In this way Adorno is showing his commitment to a Marxist view of social freedom which holds that qualitative change can only come about as world-historical change and that this rests on the technological elimination of scarcity. This is something which, as we have seen, that Adorno thought was presently possible if not for its being cut off by the interests of the culture industry. He claims that the activities dictated by this model are undertaken “only in order to inspire in the unfree individuals, paralyzed by their spontaneity, the assurance that everything depends on them.”

However, Adorno does acknowledge that there is a role for a do-it-yourself attitude in the political sphere insofar as the society that traps people just is those people. The thing to do is to be self-reflective about the degree of spontaneity available. According to Adorno, do-it-yourself, with its trust in the significance of the limited action of small groups, has a tendency to absolutize spontaneity. This in turn only serves the interests of administration by channeling that spontaneity safely into forms of pseudo-activity. Recognizing the natural connection between the do-it-yourself “ethic” and anarchist politics, Adorno writes that “[Anarchism’s] return is that

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of a ghost. The impatience with theory that manifests itself in its return does not advance thought beyond itself. By forgetting thought, the impatience falls back below it.”\(^{100}\) Referring to what he saw as the increasingly anarchist form of the student movement\(^{101}\), Adorno dismisses anarchism as a form of pseudo-activity characterized primarily by impatience (with theory) and thus as a reaction. The implicit recommendation is for thought to be constantly advanced.

Although Adorno’s critique of *do-it-yourself* is not extensive, it is characteristic of his political perspective in a way that is helpful for understanding its limitations. I will have more to say about these limitations in Chapter Four, but the political perspective represented is one in which the immanent critique is valued as praxis above all else. As I will argue, the effect is that little to no effort is made to recognize or develop an understanding of the parts of the activity in question that can be regarded as having, at the very least, a legitimate motivation and possibly also some genuinely dialectical praxis. While this should not be seen in any way as devaluing the importance of critique (even when it is not “constructive”\(^{102}\)), the possibility that Adorno’s resistance to providing such positive commentary was even partially motivated simply by a fear of its misuse opens it up to potential criticism. In any case, his response to what he sees as the reification of social relations is to recommend that spontaneity

…attach itself to the vulnerable places of rigidified reality, where the ruptures caused by the pressure of rigidification appear externally; it should not thrash about indiscriminately, abstractly, without any consideration of the contents of what is often attacked merely for the sake of publicity.\(^{103}\)

\(^{100}\) Adorno, “Resignation,” 292.

\(^{101}\) It seems to me likely that he has in mind specifically the critique that Marx gave of anarchism during one of the historical periods in which it strongly competed with socialism for popular support among the left. This, in conjunction with what he sees as its new emptiness, is probably the sense in which its return is “that of a ghost.”

\(^{102}\) See Adorno’s recurring critique of the pressure to be positive. For instance, he writes in his essay “Critique” that “One continually finds the word *critique*, if it is tolerated at all, accompanied by the word *constructive*. The insinuation is that only someone can practice critique who can propose something better than what is being criticized… By making the positive a condition for it, critique is tamed from the very beginning and loses its vehemence.” (Theodor W. Adorno, “Critique,” in *Critical models: interventions and catchwords*, trans Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 287.)

\(^{103}\) Adorno, “Marginalia,” 266.
Given his remarks in other places on the disruptions of his lectures by what he considered praxis-oriented students\textsuperscript{104}, it is clear that he is here again criticizing what he saw as “indiscriminate” or undialectical praxis, as well as the lack of interest in discussion. Such discussion would be a form of the theory that we have seen is the prerequisite for serious praxis. His belief was that the students were only interested in him and his lectures as a source of publicity for their specific goals, and if they had stopped to listen and engage in the discussion that they claimed they wanted, they would have seen that he was interested in the same thing that they were claiming to be. The recommendation then, in addition to a need for discussion and a prohibition on blind action, is to remain constantly focused on mediation, as this is the only hope for individuals to retain the spontaneity that is necessary for understanding the objective situation. By focusing on one’s own ‘mediatedness’, it may be possible to remain separate from some forms of heteronomy that would succeed in their control simply by the individual not paying sufficient attention to them. We can also understand the recommendation here as claiming that genuine praxis is the only real way to fight false praxis and that true praxis, as we have seen, can only be negative dialectics.

\textit{Moments of hope for spontaneous praxis and Adorno’s actual intervention}

Before moving any further, the preceding account should be qualified. Despite what we have seen as his defiant insistence on negative theory as nearly the only acceptable form of political praxis, there are some apparent exceptions to be found, both in his thought and in the reality that his actual practice as an individual departed somewhat from this insistence on political abstinence.

\textsuperscript{104} See Adorno-Marcuse letters especially.
Regarding Adorno’s own apparently positive political activity, perhaps the most significant period occurs upon his return to Frankfurt in the early 1950s. It was during this time that Adorno, not totally unwillingly, took on the role of public academic. In the late 1960’s he signed petitions, spoke at demonstrations (for example against the “Emergency Laws” in 1968), and took place in conversations about political theory and praxis. These conversations took place both on the radio and also more informally with the German Socialist Student Group (SDS) about theory and practice and the role of violence in political activity. In the course of the interview with Der Spiegel discussed above, Adorno points out that he also tried to reform criminal law. In that same interview he also suggests that some of the actions by the students were defensible, including their setting in motion university reform (generally, a demand for the democratization of the academic system in the Federal Republic), their forcing of the investigation into the police murder of Benno Ohnesorg (which he himself encouraged publicly in the introduction to his seminar on aesthetics and said he believed wouldn’t have happened otherwise), and their demonstration against the Emergency Laws. In his interviews about political activity, Adorno even expresses some hope for the presence of spontaneity and consciousness in active students, claiming at one point to recognize in the younger generation of his time some “traces of a countervailing trend” to the decaying of individuality and spontaneity, and citing as instances of this trend: “resistance to blind conformism, the freedom to choose

105 See Hammer, Adorno and the Political, 22.
106 Hammer suggests that, in the case of his public call for an impartial investigation in the shooting of Ohnesorg, “the goal, clearly, of such an investigation would be, through the consequent introduction of more effective regulation, to abolish certain authoritarian practices in the police force,” and that this stands in contrast to “the common perception of his work at the time as advocating mainly subjective change in education and psychology…” (Hammer, Adorno and the Political, 21.) I would disagree somewhat with this assessment in two ways. I do not believe that in this case the call for investigation represents as pronounced a support for reformism as Hammer suggests. Rather, the emphasis to me seems to be much more on impartiality as a rhetorical response to the angry students. But, on the other hand, I also disagree with Hammer to the extent that his comment implies that Adorno’s suggestions for educational praxis do not represent anything out of the ordinary. If he took the possibility of change through education seriously then that would indeed represent a significant departure from his negative critical praxis. As I will claim, however, I do not believe that he does take that possibility very seriously.
rational goals, revulsion from the world’s deceptions and illusions, the recollection of the possibility of change.”

Most intriguingly and, as I will argue shortly, most importantly, Adorno seems to cross the line into a more-than-theoretical praxis when he discusses the potential he sees in early education for creating lasting qualitative change. In answering a follow-up question to his 1960 lecture “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” he explains a reference to the “self-alienation of society” by describing what he terms “the problem of democracy”:

…because of the preponderance of innumerable societal processes over the particular individuals, people in their societal role are not identical with what they are as immediate, living people. Democracy, according to its very idea, promises people that they themselves would make decisions about their world. But democracy actually prevents them from this “deciding for oneself about the world.”

This problem is parallel with the one that I have been referring to thus far as the loss of spontaneity and which Adorno has been suggesting can only be resisted with negative dialectical critique and self-reflection. Discussing what he refers to as the “pedagogical-psychological” question of self-alienation, he argues that one of a child’s first experiences of alienation is when they enter school and claims that the child, torn from family, feels the “coldness of a world with which he or she is not identical.” This, he claims, is also where the first expressions of racial hatred occur. A reason for this is that there is a tendency for people to “pass onto others whatever has happened to them….”

The experience of coldness, anxiety, collective pressure, gets put onto others for the sake of individual psychological comfort. He proposes that the solution to this problem is a practical-empirical task for educators to undertake, claiming that,

I would at least construe as a problem…whether, if possible, precisely in the first years of school forms might not be developed that would prevent this oppression of the individual, and moreover of every individual, by the collective. Perhaps thereby at a very crucial place genetically in the

108 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 296.
109 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 296.
development of the child one could counteract the emergence of racial prejudices. …here one could really come to grips with it in manageably small groups…

He adds that his intention in making this suggestion is merely to “toss these thoughts into the debate…as a first practical application of the problem of alienation.” This is interesting for a couple of reasons. Adorno continues to insist that his praxical contribution remains theoretical and that he is at a remove from the actual application of such ideas, and yet it is nevertheless the case that the suggestion, as such, has a positive character, unlike the criticism advocated and carried in most of his other texts. He may not be engaged in the application, but he has provided a strategy to be tested. The goal is apparently to overcome the alienation experienced by children as a result of impersonal and isolating educational practices, and the strategy for accomplishing this is to find a way of making education less prone to a pitting of the individual against the collective. Interestingly, his suggestion does not assume that public education is itself inherently atomizing, and thus that it should be avoided, but rather that more attention should be paid to the social interactions that take place there and to the conditions which perpetuate oppressive relations. Adorno suggests that if such an effort were successful, students would have a better chance of becoming adults with a decreased sense of alienation and a greater sense of being social beings.

Is it possible to make sense of these atypical elements as a part of, or stemming from, Adorno’s critical-theoretical principles? The answer is yes and no. No, because, to some extent we should not try to put too much pressure on these particular instances of more direct political engagement as indicative of some hidden or contradictory political ‘optimism’. In the case of his comments about student activities and his own minimal efforts to show support for them, it

110 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 296-97.
111 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 296-97.
seems that they really don’t add up to a very strong practical statement. In the end, such optimism regarding the possibilities for change seems to be the exception. When considering Adorno’s overall theory and his most rigorous formulations, the insistence on negativity remains overwhelming. Despite his willingness to participate in discussion and show support for what he perceived to be calls for greater democracy and despite his sympathy for the general goal of creating a freer and more just society, Adorno consistently refused to provide a way of translating theory into concrete, change-directed praxis. We could perhaps see his claim, that it is good to bring “attention to processes of dumbing down, which are prevalent in our present society,” as a reason for defending this kind praxis; and his claim, in response to the general suggestion that his theoretical stance is anti-praxical and reactionary, that “I in no way close myself off to practical consequences as long as they are transparent to me,” as the beginning of an explanation for why he defends the particular instances that he does.  

But in both of these cases we can still only say that Adorno is expressing a willingness to defend, or engage in, instances of practice that can successfully and transparently generate greater understanding and social self-reflection.

In another late interview on the subject of theory and praxis, Adorno was asked: “Within the system underlying your observations, where is there room for individual responsibility? To what extent are the societal processes and conditions so overwhelming that for the individual there remains no possibility whatsoever to make one’s own decisions and to act with personal responsibility?” His answer is that, although the individual’s responsibility is not inalienable and is indeed curtailed by this process, nonetheless I think that if people finally are able really to see through their entanglement in the objective conditions,…the consciousness that raises itself above this compulsion by seeing

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113 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 297.
through it at the same time also produces the potential that can be used to resist it. I would say… [that] autonomy and self-responsibility today essentially consists altogether in the resistance of people, in that they try to see through these mechanisms and that they themselves yet somehow rebel against these mechanisms. Morality has transformed itself nowadays into the resistance against this blind force, against this predominance of the merely existent, under which in fact we all must suffer today. This is of course very abstract and unsatisfying, and is no fanfare at all, for how far this resistance goes, that’s another story.114

To keep track, the recommendation here is to try to see through one’s conditionedness for the sake of producing a potential to resist it. Adorno does not say how it will be resisted, although he could simply mean that one should try to be autonomous and not compelled by external conditions, insofar as that is possible. When he admits that they remain “abstract,” Adorno is expressing his awareness that his words sound more praxically radical than they in fact are. This effect occurs again when, shortly after this, he adds that “We are not only spectators looking upon this predominance of the institutional and the objective that confronts us; rather it is after all constituted out of us,…In this doubledness, that we are subject and object of this society, surely lies precisely also the possibility of perhaps changing it.”115 This again, despite its emancipatory overtones doesn’t really intend to answer the question of how to connect the individual action to real collective change. It is an important political recognition to see that society ‘just is us’, but that alone doesn’t answer the question of what to do.

This is also true of Adorno’s recommendations for an educational solution. In the end, he remains highly doubtful as to its ability to create any meaningful lasting change. Recall the quote from this interview, cited in the previous section, which ended with the rather hopeful sounding claim: “Perhaps thereby at a very crucial place genetically in the development of the child one could counteract the emergence of racial prejudices. …here one could really come to grips with it in manageably small groups…” If we look at what comes after the ellipses, at what

114 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 297.
115 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 298.
I left out of the original quote, we get something with quite a different tone: “…whereas of course the socially dictated alienation within society at large, in which we live, cannot be overcome through any kind of educational work.”\footnote{Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 297.} This comment, combined with his previous pessimism regarding the possibility of spontaneity in individuals living under late capitalist conditions, would seem to countermand any real hope for educational reform. In this light, education begins to look more like a form of ‘damage-control’ than any genuine transformational praxis. This tone can be detected also in a suggestion he makes in his lecture and essay “Critique” while discussing the conditions of developing social administration in Germany:

One of the most important conditions for changing the structure of public opinion in Germany would be if the facts I’ve indicated here [about the mechanism of the neutralization of critique and its importance] became generally conscious, for instance, were treated in civics education, and thereby would lose some of their disastrously blind power."\footnote{Adorno, “Critique,” 285.}

Again, while the fact that he is making a suggestion for practice is a departure from his expressed devotion exclusively to theory, the intended effect does not represent a praxical movement from his critical theory of society to its application in the realm of instrumental political practice. Rather, he seems only to hope that the public might become more self-conscious of the degree to which they are unfree. Nevertheless, when considering his pedagogical attitude more generally there remains something more to be said, and so I will have to return to the subject below.

Suffice it to say at this point that Adorno’s formulation of the pedagogical solution indicates an interesting recognition of the need and possibility for change in small groups that should not be overlooked in any serious investigation of social change.
Public Critique

Returning to the above question about the compatibility of Adorno’s practical interventions and his critical theory, we can answer ‘yes’ in the following way. If we take a broader view of Adorno’s ‘positive’ intervention, we can see it as part of a larger conception of the public intellectual engaged in thoroughgoing critique that was, for Adorno, a central aspect of his philosophical life. The movement from theoretical negativity to critique represents a seemingly small, but significant departure from the infinite reflection of Socratic praxis. When Plato portrays Socrates as abstaining from all public speaking prior to being put on trial and recounts him saying at the trial that he had never engaged in politics, we can see that for Socrates the activity of philosophy is something which can only take place at the level of individual conversation, and only between those who are genuinely interested in understanding and willing to accept the possibility of their own ignorance. In accepting the importance of the public academic—a critic who fulfills the function of the gadfly from a greater remove—Adorno is adding something to this conception of theory, at least to the extent that it operates in the political sphere. It seems to me that this addition places him, at least in terms of politics, in closer proximity to Kant in some very interesting and important ways. Like Kant, Adorno’s defense of public criticism, or ‘discussion’, is structured by the idea that individual autonomy is at the heart of collective social freedom; and like Kant, he argues that rationality is not reducible to instrumental reason. It should be said that, to some extent, this similarity between the political theory of Adorno and Kant can probably be attributed simply to their closer temporal proximity (than Adorno to Socrates), that is, to the greater similarity of the objective conditions they were faced with analyzing. Certainly the increasingly global and anonymous character of those social

\[118^{118}\] This is not to forget that he claims to be some kind of Marxist. The Marxist element will be re-accounted for in the strange mix shortly. Both Kant and Marx get their share of explicit credit in Adorno’s writings.
conditions played a role in the transition of the concept of the critical ‘gadfly’ to a more public role to the extent that this is the only level at which the gadfly’s actions make sense in such a world. Nevertheless, attempting to discern a shared underlying theory of critique is helpful for thinking about Adorno’s own philosophical motivations.

In order to understand the importance of critique in Kant, and I believe Adorno as well, something must be said about the role of rationality. Adorno’s manifestation of critique necessarily departs from that of Kant to the extent that Adorno provides no explicit, comprehensive theory of agency or rationality. Despite this important difference, there remains a large degree of overlap. Consider the following criticism in “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” of Max Weber’s theory of rationality, as a window into Adorno’s working conception of rationality. Adorno argues that Weber misdiagnoses the problem of irrationality as being caused by a separation of means from ends. For Weber, he claims, rationality is equivalent to ‘instrumental reason’. Because of this, Weber regards ends as being external to rationality and, as such, left open to what can only be an arbitrary, irrational decision-making process which, according to Adorno, is open to “dark implications.” He believes the problem with this is that the exclusion of the possibility of rational ends is itself arbitrary and fails to recognize the way in which rationality is able to function as more than a consequentialist tool for bringing about consciously chosen ends (whatever they may be). Both he and Weber agree that rationality likely came into being as an instrument of self-preservation, and thus, neither is under the illusion that the faculty of reason is a manifestation of godliness. Nevertheless, it is Adorno’s opinion that rationality’s universal aspect allowed it to extend beyond the individual and that this “emancipated ratio…from the contingency of individually posed ends.” He writes that,

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In its immanent, intellectual universality, the subject of ratio pursuing its self-preservation is itself an actual universal, society – in its full logic, humanity. The preservation of humanity is inexorably inscribed within the meaning of rationality: it has its end in a reasonable organization of society, otherwise it would bring its own movement to an authoritarian standstill. Humanity is organized rationally solely to the extent that it preserves its societalized subjects according to their unfettered potentialities.\textsuperscript{120}

For Adorno, the problem of means becoming reified as ends-in-themselves is caused not merely by their detachment from any end, but rather by the instrumentalization of reason itself. Instead, one must recognize that our use of rationality is, in a sense, its own end and that end is equivalent to humanity itself. Instrumental rationality cannot be either the primary or sole form of rationality because this would undermine itself by allowing for the choosing of ends which lead to, or are equivalent to, the destruction of humanity.

[Weber’s analysis] unmasks itself, unsound and self-contradictory, in its indifference toward the obvious madness. Ratio should not be anything less than self-preservation, namely that of the species, upon which the survival of each individually literally depends. Through self-preservation the species indeed gains the potential for that self-reflection that could finally transcend the self-preservation to which it was reduced by being restricted simply to a means.\textsuperscript{121}

“Self-preservation” here refers to preservation of the autonomous self. As with Kant, to really exist is to exist as an autonomous subject with agency, and thus self-preservation takes on a higher form in human rationality—i.e. autonomy. What is usually discussed as moral agency becomes, in Adorno’s framework, the capacity for spontaneous activity. This concept, although loosely formulated, seems to be intended to correspond to the capacity for independent thought. The ability to think independently requires, in turn, the capacity for self-reflection, especially on the degree to which one is and is not able to be and think independently. In terms of the connection between rationality and self-preservation, the assumption appears to be that the destruction of humanity cannot be a rational end because reason and humanity are one and the same. To put it another way: If, in response to Weber’s theory of rationality, we should like to

\textsuperscript{120} Adorno, “Marginalia,” 272-73.
\textsuperscript{121} Adorno, “Marginalia,” 273.
know how we are to understand what is wrong with the conscious choosing of destructive, repressive, or totalitarian ends, it seems that Adorno’s answer is that this can be understood only by accepting the possibility of rational ends (of truth and objectivity—that there is something that would be objectively better for society).

The following passage, which occurs in a rare footnote by Adorno in “Marginalia,” may help further clarify the issue.

The concept of the traitor comes from the eternal reserves of collective repression, whatever its coloration may be. …The concept of morality demands autonomy, which is, however, not tolerated by those who always have morality on the tip of their tongue [i.e. those who make the accusation of ‘traitor’]. In truth it is the one who sins against his own autonomy who deserves to be called a traitor.”

Here the focus on rational humanity as the source of value comes out. To choose irrationality and repression is to choose to give up the very thing (autonomy) that makes you capable of engaging in the collective project in the first place; it is to turn away from the thing that makes you the same as other humans in favor of something that simply cannot be understood by anyone outside a small social circle. In other words, the goal seems to be universal society in some form and the insight, translated from Kant into the language of negative dialectics, is that such a society is really identical with the full development of autonomous individuals. In order for such subjectivity to be possible, people must become capable of acting simply for the sake of their own rational development. Socially speaking, this will only take place through open discussion and political critique.

When asked about the possibility for confronting the heteronomous pressures faced in contemporary society Adorno answered that, it is true that “one cannot simply overcome very strong irrational forces by rational means.” I.e. you cannot simply convince someone not to believe what they have very strong irrational reasons to believe. However, the solution is not to

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fight irrationality by irrational (propagandistic) means. Instead, the solution must be to “turn toward the subject” and this must precisely mean not to fetishize the subject.

…it is crucial to be rational, not in the superficial sense …but instead that people be brought to the point in themselves, through self-reflection, of gaining insight into what they can do in this respect. …that is, rationality not in the sense of a rationalistic insistence on facts, but rationality in the sense of people being led to self-reflection and thereby being prevented from becoming blind victims of this instinctual impulse.”

So, again, the only real recommendation here is to be self-reflective of one’s conditionedness and perhaps also to try to foster such self-reflection in others.

In his 1969 essay “Critique,” Adorno explicitly invokes Kant’s notion of political maturity to argue for the importance of critique in the political sphere. He writes that,

Critique and the prerequisite of democracy, political maturity, belong together. Politically mature is the person who speaks for himself, because he has thought for himself and is not merely repeating someone else; he stands free of any guardian. This is demonstrated in the power to resist established opinions and, one and the same, also to resist existing institutions, to resist everything that is merely posited, that justifies itself with its existence. Such resistance, as the ability to distinguish between what is known and what is accepted merely by convention or under the constraint of authority, is one with critique…”

What comes out especially clearly here is the connection Adorno perceives between “political maturity,” “critique” and spontaneity. Although he is not explicitly using the concept of ‘spontaneity’, we can see that in his use of political maturity he is primarily concerned with what I understand spontaneity to be—namely, the ability for individuals to think and act independently, without, and indeed often against, external guidance or coercion. This, again, is important as a precondition for a society without domination. In this regard, at least, Adorno is merely reformulating Kant’s ideas from his late political essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” which begins with the well-known formulation “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause

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123 Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 299.
lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without confidence from another.”125 Where Adorno sees himself as departing from Kant’s politics is in his own desire to insist more rigorously on the negative formation of critique, claiming that “the influence of Kant’s main work was due to its negative results,” but that he hesitated in his negativity.126 For Adorno, what is socially valuable in Kant was not his hope for (and prediction of) universal society, or his formulation of a moral theory which could be applied to the practical world. Rather, it was the destruction of the certainty contained in the theories that had come before his own. In any case, looking at what Kant says about the requirements of real discussion and public critique, combined with the signposts provided by Adorno, will give some idea of how discussion must be structured in order to help bring about political maturity and ultimately contribute to social freedom.

In “What is Enlightenment?” Kant writes that “Nothing is required for this enlightenment [of the public], however, except freedom; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters.”127 Later in the essay, after explaining the difference between private and public uses of reason and claiming that the restriction of the former actually advances freedom, Kant writes that “when things are considered in broad perspective, a strange, unexpected pattern in human affairs reveals itself, one in which almost everything is paradoxical. A greater degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people’s spiritual freedom; yet the former established impassable boundaries for the latter; conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom provides enough room for all fully to expand their abilities.”128

Kant places this argument for the expansion of discussion in conjunction with the restriction of

127 Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 42.
128 Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 45.
civil freedom within the larger argument for a historical framework which predicts the eventual opening up of even the realm of civil freedom, but only once individuals have brought themselves to a level of moral maturity that they can be trusted to act dutifully without “external guidance” (to put it in Kant’s words). What is implied about discussion in his theory of progressive enlightenment is that genuine self-determination, what he calls “spiritual freedom,” can only be the result of an open and democratic process of critique within society. While he claims that some external control is an essential tool in guiding this process, he is clear that in the end humans will only be freed from unfreedom through their own collective work. To be sure, Adorno is not advocating the kind of restriction of civil freedom that Kant thought was necessary and, of course, the Marxist aspect of his thought is bound to resist the idealist notion that continued human immaturity is the result of lazy thinking. Nevertheless, Adorno’s invocation of this idea of “political maturity” suggests sober agreement with the idea that without open public critique true social freedom is not possible. His frequent complaints about those who insist on ‘constructive criticism’ and a positive attitude, bear close resemblance to Kant’s own: “But on all sides I hear: “Do not argue! The officer says, ‘Do not argue, drill!’ The taxman says, ‘Do not argue, pay!’ The pastor says, ‘Do not argue, believe!’”\(^\text{129}\) Furthermore, Adorno frequently expresses, in his critique of pseudo-praxis (as well as in his musical criticism as we will see), a dialectical notion of freedom whereby lesser, more superficial freedoms must be exchanged for deeper ones.

This understanding of discussion is the basis for his immanent critique of those students who disrupted his lectures and accused him of resignation while demanding that he engage in discussion with them. To Adorno, this demand appeared as nothing more than pseudo-discussion. Like praxis that does not remain tied to its end, discussion in which either side is not

\(^{129}\text{Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” 42.}\)
open to being convinced is not really discussion. (Interestingly, in an un-explicated act of self-criticism, Adorno states that ‘discussion’ “like the public sphere, is an entirely bourgeois category.”) He claims that what is being struggled against is “instrumentalism that fetishizes means because its form of praxis cannot suffer reflection upon its ends.” However, by treating others, even opponents, as instruments for achieving some chosen purpose, the actionists are engaging in the very fetishizing of means that they claim to be fighting against. And, again, Adorno is working from the critique of instrumentalization which finds problematic the unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility of rational humanistic ends. The appropriate response would be to maintain self-reflection about the end and about how to achieve that end; something which discussion could possibly facilitate, but only if it remains open. In “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” Adorno addresses these specific concerns in particularly frustrated form:

…everywhere discussion is called for... But discussion...has been ruined by tactics. What discussions could possibly produce, namely, decisions reached from a greater objectivity...does not interest those who automatically, and in completely inappropriate situations, call for discussions. Each of the hegemonic cliques has prepared in advance the results it desires. ...No one wants to learn, experience, insofar as experience is still possible at all. The opponent in a discussion becomes a functional component of the current plan: reified by the reified consciousness... Behind this ploy lies an authoritarian principle: the dissenter must adopt the group’s opinion. ...With all this, actionism acquiesces to the trend it intends or pretends to struggle against: the bourgeois instrumentalism that fetishizes means because its form of praxis cannot suffer reflection upon its ends.”

Adorno is insisting that if discussion is to have any chance of accomplishing what it hopes to, then it must remain open to whatever ends turn out to be true. Discussion is the process of, not only working through the possibilities for bringing about particular ends, but perhaps even more so, truly reflecting on what the ends themselves are. It is implied by his concern (just as it was by Socrates’ unwillingness to make assumptions) that success can be harmful if the end arrived at is the wrong one. Reflection must continue even when the end seems obviously good because

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131 Adorno, “Marginalia,” 269.
it is so difficult to discern when the thought responsible for that determination is truly independent.

Putting the call to autonomous critique back in a Marxist context—albeit with the qualification that the possibilities for real change seem closed-off—Adorno suggests in “Resignation” what his model for radical political praxis really is. He writes that “…the uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither signs over his consciousness nor lets himself be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give in.” Marxist political praxis ideally seeks to shift focus away from the actions of the individual subject and toward understanding the total nature of objective change. However, for Adorno, when faced with the reifying conditions of late capitalist society that he has identified, there is a necessary shift in the praxical focus to what might be called the urgent retention of individual autonomy. As we have seen, despite the primary importance of the object for his theory of change, society remains constituted by subjects who are only capable of even recognizing the need for change to the degree to which they are spontaneous and self-reflective. It is this capacity for self-reflection and uninhibited thought which Adorno believes carries the potential for genuine social freedom and that will continue to carry it as long as that social possibility is unavailable. In an inspired expression of this idea at the end of this essay, written at the end of his life, he writes,

The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it…objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part a comportment, a form of praxis, it is more akin to transformative praxis than a comportment that is compliant for the sake of praxis. Prior to all particular content, thinking is actually the force of resistance… For thinking has the element of the universal. What once was thought cogently must be thought elsewhere, by others: this confidence accompanies even the most solitary and powerless thought. …The happiness that dawns in the eye of the thinking person is the happiness of humanity. The universal tendency of oppression is opposed to thought as such. Thought is happiness, even where it defines unhappiness: by enunciating it. By this alone happiness reaches into the universal unhappiness. Whoever does not let it atrophy has not resigned.  

133 Adorno, “Resignation,” 292.
134 Adorno, “Resignation,” 293.
Thus, once again (though now in a Marxist context), it seems the only responsible thing to do in the present (if you want to be free and autonomous and to resist the forces of oppression) is to think and critique (i.e. think publicly). Because of the impossible situation faced by individual understanding, anything else is doomed to self-deception. Furthermore, we also see in this passage, although it is expressed here in terms of happiness, Adorno’s continuation of the Kantian idea that the ends of universal and particular action are the same; the universal social end is inextricably united with the existence of individual rational autonomy; understood properly, social freedom and individual freedom are one and the same.

Through the concept of utopia we approach the threshold between politics and art in Adorno’s thought. When he writes in “Marginalia” that “art is the critique of praxis as unfreedom,” he is pointing to the way in which it functions as an intermediary between those spheres.135 Art, because it is a form of anti-instrumental activity, presents a demonstrative critique of instrumental praxis and makes visible its limitations. In doing so it serves as both a concrete reminder of the difference between conditions as-they-exist and conditions as-they-could-be, as well as the realm within which the most spontaneous subjectivity possible within a given context will be able to take place. This is the sense in which Adorno believes art has a utopian function. With respect to the student actionists that he is addressing in the above quote, this function of art is meant to point out that art too is a form of praxis, and that the political praxis that they are engaged in can only hope (and pretend) to accomplish what artistic praxis actually does accomplish by other means. In other words, when it is placed in contrast with the utopian in art, political activists operating under late-capitalist conditions should not be able to take their activity as seriously as they often do. Elaborating this connection more fully will be at the center of the next chapter.

At the end of the interview with which this chapter began, Adorno, when asked whether he would regard “the analysis of societal conditions as the most meaningful and necessary aspect of your activities in the Federal Republic?,” answers: “Yes, and also to immerse myself in very specific individual phenomena. I am not in the least ashamed to say very publicly that I am working on a major book on aesthetics.” This ‘big book on aesthetics’ was *Aesthetic Theory* and was only published, unfinished, following his death three months after the interview. Why this activity of aesthetic reflection that he points to should have served as a privileged form of practice within the conditions that Adorno found himself in will also be one of the basic questions that the following chapter seeks to answer.

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Chapter Three: Art – The Theory and Praxis of Adorno’s Aesthetics

The preceding two chapters concluded with the suggestion that philosophy, understood as negative dialectics, is incapable of advising activity within the political sphere. In this chapter I will argue that Adorno conceives of art, similarly to philosophy, in the respect that it is also fundamentally defined by the requirements of self-reflection. As a social product and a form of knowledge, art inherits the questions and problems of both the political and philosophical spheres. In pointing to the connection between philosophy and art as fundamentally self-reflective activities, I am preparing the ground necessary for asking the question of whether art diverges from philosophy by being either socially transformative, or at least capable of providing some form of guidance to political activity. I will begin to give the answer in this chapter by looking from the perspective of art to politics, and then complete the answer in Chapter Four by looking from politics back to art.

Although in Adorno’s view art is a social product and has emancipatory dimensions, he is clear that he believes it is not socially transformative in any straightforward sense. Whether or not it is capable of providing guidance to political activity depends on how one understands the notion of ‘guidance’. Adorno’s aesthetics views legitimate art as striving towards ever greater freedom and indeed, the quality of artworks may be judged according to the degree to which they succeed in that effort. In Adorno’s judgment the most successful works in recent artistic history have managed to remain autonomous from the forces of the culture industry. In music, this typically translated to his preference for the innovators of modern compositional art-music, often
making use of the traditional musical materials. Both explicitly political art and improvisational
music (including jazz and more radical forms) make claims to being emancipatory in
fundamental ways as well as technically innovative. Nevertheless, neither form succeeds in
escaping the scorn of Adorno’s judgment. I am interested in the connection between artistic
production and the possibility of social freedom, and in the next chapter I will try to show how a
re-evaluation of improvisational music can help to recognize a more direct connection between
art and politics. Toward this end, the present chapter will also need to give an account of
Adorno’s own less-than-positive attitude toward, on the one hand, politically committed art and
improvisation, on the other, and of the legitimation structure that underlies those evaluations.

It is important to point out that these possibilities are here framed within the dialectic of
theory and praxis outlined in the previous chapter, and that I am interested in the relation
between the possibilities for thinking and for doing. When one considers that what Adorno was
doing in his aesthetic texts (and what I am doing here) was theorizing about the relation between
artistic theory and practice and doing so as a form of praxis (philosophical and possibly artistic),
it must be realized that the question is not uncomplicated. His major text on art, *Aesthetic
Theory*, is indeed both an ‘aesthetic theory’ and a ‘theory of aesthetics’. It is both a critique of
particular works of art, artists, and movements, and also a text about how we should think about
art and indeed, whether we should do so at all. This task is carried out artistically and
rhetorically. The movement from praxis to theory really is particularly noteworthy in the case of
Adorno when we consider that his method of aesthetics required that he be immersed in the
world he was analyzing. He knew from first-hand experience not just about playing and
composing music at an intense level, but also about the things that people said and thought about
music and art. His method of immanent critique begins with an idea about music and critiques it based on his own experience (a conceptually rigorous experience to be sure). If we pose the question of whether and to what degree the questions at hand are being asked implicitly or explicitly in the music or by the musician, then obviously this is a question about theory in musical production and practice being asked in a theoretical way.

**Adorno’s Theory of Art**

A good place to begin to understand Adorno’s aesthetic theory and its framework for making judgments of artistic value is with his recognition that art is a special form of human production which is simultaneously a part of society and opposed to it. He writes in Aesthetic Theory that “It would be truly idealistic to locate the relation of art and society exclusively as mediated in problems of social structure. Art’s double character—its autonomy and *fait social*—is expressed ever and again in the palpable dependencies and conflicts between the two spheres.” The emphasis here is on the inter-dependency of the spheres and the dialectical nature of the relation. Art is a material thing existing within the social sphere and subject to the causality that determines things in that sphere as products of labor, but it is also something more than that. It is also something which stands apart from society and opposed to its instrumental rationality. It is autonomous insofar as it does not have a direct social function, and yet its autonomy gives it a kind of indirect social function. Furthermore, art cannot be autonomous and opposed to society without maintaining an active relationship with that society in the form of its

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137 For instance, in his twenties Adorno became acquaintances and studied with the Viennese composer Alban Berg (himself a protégé of Arnold Schoenberg); and after returning to West Germany he became influential in its musical life as a teacher in the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt (see Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 83-94; 327.)

thus, in order to grasp Adorno’s theory of art, in which its double character is of central importance, it is helpful first to try to understand his use of this notion of ‘truth content’. He elaborates on this connection when he claims that the double character of art,

…leads to the fact that the highest level of art, its truth content and what finally gives it its quality as a work of art, cannot be a purely aesthetic matter. On the contrary, the truth content itself…leads beyond the works precisely because it characterizes the moment of art in which art, in its truth is more that art.”\textsuperscript{139}

Thus, the possession of truth content by a work of art is what legitimates that thing as a work of art, and our ability to discern that quality in a work is what allows for aesthetic judgment. In order for a work to be in possession of truth content it must both reflect its nature as a social product, determined by social forces and preexisting conditions, and also ‘transcend’ its status as a merely constructed artifact by somehow getting at a ‘higher’ truth. It should be made clear however that what sets Adorno’s notion of truth-in-art apart from other theories which see art as a form of knowledge (as Adorno’s does), is the fact that his requirement for an artwork to be true is not that it serve as a vehicle for some eternal, unspeakable truth but that it be the manifestation of the most advanced and self-conscious understanding in a particular historical context. The truth it expresses is an eminently contextual one. According to Adorno, artworks (contrary to their treatment as facts by psychoanalysis for instance) have “their own objectivity, their inner consistency, their level of form, their critical impulse, their relation to nonpsychical reality and, finally, their idea of truth.”\textsuperscript{140} Truth is internal to the work of art and cannot be grasped from either its subjective construction or reception. It exists on its own terms. And yet, that truth cannot be understood without understanding its external determination, that is, the social context in which that work came to be. Adorno describes this in various ways that amount to something


\textsuperscript{140} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, 9.
like an internal crystallization of external conditions. As a crystallization or sedimentation of actual conditions, the truthful work of art will contain within it (albeit in an encoded, material form) the tensions existing within the society that it was produced in.

Art’s autonomy is its existence as something which is non-instrumental. Its value comes not from its potential or actual use in the achieving of some social end, but only from its independence from such instrumentality. Authentic art works are inherently valuable, but, again, this should not be understood in terms of an artwork having value simply. Rather, in order to be an artwork – the kind of social product which is capable of transcending instrumental calculation – it must meet certain criteria of truth, and the fact that it is capable of doing so internally without relying on anything external to it, in particular the subjective element, is what gives it its quality of autonomy and its legitimacy as a work of art. This idea can be formulated in terms of what is given emphasis in Adorno’s thought as the ‘primacy of the object’. In his aesthetic theory, this manifests itself most of all as concern for the work of art itself to the relative exclusion of the subjectivity of the producer and audience. To focus on the objectivity of art means, among other things, a focus on the truth content of the artwork. As should hopefully become clear, for Adorno, the struggle to understand art is really the struggle to understand something which has an existence and truth independent of the one which we consciously or intentionally give it. Only by understanding it as such can we possibly hope to understand ourselves in relation to it.

In this way, Adorno’s aesthetics is remote from the notion of art appreciation (or what Adorno often refers to as ‘the culinary’) due to the latter’s acceptance of subjective evaluation as having objective validity. The culinary stance toward the work of art would be one that fails to recognize the possibility of truth content and thus makes relative what is in fact not. Opposed to
such a stance toward art, Adorno’s notion of responsible aesthetic judgment is such that the artwork must be analyzed for its own sake so that the artwork’s own understanding and its own truth content are brought out. This stands opposed to art appreciation insofar as the success or failure of the artwork lies internal to the artwork itself, leaving the audience as subject with only the task of trying to accurately discern what is objectively true in the work. According to Adorno, it is in art’s objectivity alone that its truth content is to be found, and yet, it is obvious that a work of art, such as a piece of music, must be composed, performed and will likely be listened to by individuals not directly involved in its production. What then can the role of subjectivity be seen to be in an aesthetics which seems only concerned with the quality of the work itself and apart from either the intentions of the artist, the virtuosity of the performer, or its reception by the audience? Despite the primacy of objectivity, it is not the case that subjectivity must be removed from the understanding of art. Indeed, Adorno tells us that the subject, although now playing a subordinate role, functions in two important ways in the legitimation of art. It does this on the one hand as a kind of precondition for the creation of true art and on the other as the thing which art constantly seeks to reproduce in an objective form. Adorno separates his theory from traditional theories of the value of art by understanding the artist as a kind of vehicle who allows the artwork to express its own truth content. The artist can act either as an impediment or a conduit for the creation of authentic works and as such, Adorno is interested in the objective aspects of the artist’s subjective experience. More precisely, what is needed is for subjectivity to be of a certain quality. In each subjective case – composer, performer, and listener – the work is made possible in terms of its truth content by being understood in a way that requires the subject to be assimilated into the work in a way.
The act of ‘assimilation’ pointed to above is what Adorno sometimes discusses as one of the mimetic aspects of art and requires a high level of both philosophical self-reflection and spontaneity. Thus, we might say that these two attributes function as subjective conditions for objective aesthetic truth. Adorno writes in Aesthetic Theory that a “subjective paradox of art” is …to produce what is blind, expression, by way of reflection, that is, through form; not to rationalize the blind but to produce it aesthetically, ‘To make things of which we do not know what they are.’ Spontaneity amid the involuntary is the vital element of art, and this ability is a dependable criterion of artistic capacity, though it does not gloss over the fatality of this capacity. Artists are familiar with this capacity as their sense of form. …Artworks are smart or foolish according to their procedures, not according to the thoughts their author has about them. Such immanent understanding of the material assures Beckett’s work is at every point sealed tightly against superficial rationality. This is by no means the exclusive prerogative of modern art but equally evident in the abbreviations in late Beethoven, in the renunciation of superfluous and to this extent irrational ornamentation.”

While the notion of ‘mimesis’ is never straightforwardly defined in Adorno’s writing, we can gather from passages like this that he takes it to operate as a kind of non-identifying, non-discursive aesthetic rationality that somehow connects subject and object with collapsing the latter into the former. The ‘assimilation’ of the subject mimetically into the artwork happens through the “immanent understanding” on the part of artist. What this means is that the artist has a crucial role to play in what becomes the truth-content of the artwork he produces, though not in any conscious or intentional sense. Because of the relationship between subject and object in the artwork, the history of art becomes a kind of secret history of subjectivity. For instance, in a late essay on ‘informal music’ he writes, “the objectified elements of art, those which have, as it were, congealed into things, point back to the subject as to their objective correlative: subjective mediation appears to be an inextinguishable component of aesthetic objectification.”

Given what Adorno sees as the damaged nature of bourgeois subjectivity, only artworks that ‘mime,’

141 To copy the translator’s note: “Here Adorno quotes the last line from his “Vers une musique informelle,” in Quasi una Fantasia.
through their formal aspect, that damagedness have any hope of achieving the truth they
inherently seek. What this means in any particular case remains unclear and can probably only
be answered through careful analysis of the work by a consciousness that is itself capable of
sufficient artistic mimesis.\textsuperscript{144}

To understand the claim that art is delimited by the requirements of self-reflection, we
might begin with the idea that it is self-reflective in roughly the same way that philosophy is and
for similar reasons. Adorno believes that philosophy and art, insofar as they strive toward
autonomy, share a common \textit{telos}, namely, a mode of behavior in which method is not externally
determined. He writes in \textit{Negative Dialectics} that “common to art and philosophy is not the
form, not the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep
faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its
meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing.”\textsuperscript{145} Both are engaged in the
activity of finding measures or creating them and so cannot be held to external ones. Both art
and philosophy, by being functionless, oriented toward objectivity and yet beholden to an
element of playfulness, retain the ability to point toward something beyond \textit{what is}. They do not
give themselves some end that, once fulfilled, would mean success, and thus they do not prevent
themselves from seeing beyond all particular ends. This is what Adorno meant when he wrote
that “the only thought that can be made practical is the thought that is not restricted in advance
by the practice to which it is directly applied. So dialectical, in my view, is the relation between
theory and practice.”\textsuperscript{146} This relationship between theory and practice exists equally in the realm
of art. The ability for art to be unrestricted by instrumental considerations and particular ends is

\textsuperscript{144} For a substantial and very interesting discussion of this receptive aspect of mimesis in Adorno’s aesthetic theory
see Shierry Weber Nicholsen, \textit{Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno’s Aesthetics} (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT
Press, 1997).
\textsuperscript{145} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 15.
\textsuperscript{146} Adorno, \textit{Lectures on negative dialectics}, 53-54.
its autonomy, and this form of autonomy is what gives art its importance. Unlike most social
praxis which, as practical activity, is end-oriented, art and philosophy, as such, must be ‘end-
free’ and leave themselves open to the possibility of the unexpected in order to be ‘productive’.

A problem arises however when one considers that, like philosophy, art has a historically
developing consciousness and finds itself in the precarious position of becoming aware of its
own functionlessness and thus undermining this aspect. We saw in Chapter One that philosophy
is forced by history to modify its practice in order to incorporate historical development into its
self-understanding. In the case of philosophy, this happens in such a way that certain options
which were accessible at an earlier moment in time become unavailable and philosophy is forced
into a negative stance. Untrue actions and thoughts become untenably naïve when those who
possess them are confronted (through historical force) with their unreality. What was once
radical becomes reactionary under new circumstances. Artworks, and musical works specifically,
must also respond to the historical context in a way that will inevitably change their form in
accordance with increased self-reflexivity. Consider the following passage from Adorno’s late
essay “Vers une musique informelle,” which comes at the end of a passage in which he has been
discussing the failures of musical works to respond adequately to the musical reality which they
find themselves in.

The events that have taken place in the world, which are repeated daily and can get even worse,
have contributed effectively to the undermining of art in which subjectivity asserts itself as a
positive good, just as they have devalued every would-be pious community art. Impossible
though it be to conceive of music, or indeed any art, as bereft of the element of subjectivity, it
must nevertheless bid farewell to that subjectivity which is mirrored in expression and hence is
always affirmative, a form of subjectivity which Expressionism inherited directly from neo-
Romanticism. To that extent the situation is irreconcilable with the position of classical
Expressionism in which expression and the individual were unproblematic features of music.147

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Here Adorno analyzes this failure of artworks in terms of the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity. Music, if it is to be successful (that is to say, truthful), must be fully aware of the material options available to it in any given period. In this case, due to world-historical events seemingly unrelated to musical production, the musical work must be aware of the fact that its subjectivity (which cannot be altogether gotten rid of) cannot take the form of ‘expression’. What is implied by his rejection of any present attempt at producing in the form of classical Expressionism is that, in the present and because of historical factors, the individual is no longer an “unproblematic feature of music.” As a result, any music in the present which does not recognize this fact as a presupposition of its production is untrue and unfree; either naïve, deluded, or reactionary. Also implied in the above is an insistence on the need for negativity in the musical work in the sense that what Adorno found problematic with subjectivity in music at the time (and almost certainly would even more so today) was its affirmative character as expression. As with non-musical affirmation, this form of subjectivity in music continues to posit classical ideals despite the fact that those ideals have been shown to be no longer tenable. I will return to this question of the need for negativity below.

In another passage from “Vers une musique informelle” Adorno suggests that the opposing tendency, to exaggerate the objectivity of the musical work, is also a result of historical development, and is equally problematic. In this case, that exaggeration is the result of the increasingly diminished subject attempting to assert control where possible, and this is a symptom of decline which we saw as present in philosophical thought as well. He writes,

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148 Although this way of speaking about the work as though it had agency is unusual and in some ways problematic, it follows from Adorno’s insistence on the primacy of the object. Although the tendency is to want to speak of the artist (and not the artwork) as being ‘aware’, Adorno is consciously attempting to present a theory which is capable of recognizing the importance and independence of the work relative to the individual. The authentic work is indeed no inanimate object; it has an existence of its own.
The risk I am alluding to manifests itself in what I have heretically termed the loss of tension. The real social emasculation of the individual, which everyone feels, does not leave the artist unscathed. Composers tend to react to it by renouncing any control of their music by their ego. They prefer to drift and to refrain from intervening, in the hope that, as in Cage’s bon mot, it will be not Webern speaking, but the music itself. Their aim is to transform psychological ego weakness into aesthetic strength.  

It may seem strange that Adorno is criticizing the artist for attempting to remove himself from the expression of the work, given that we have just seen him critique the ‘expressionistic’ artist for apparently not removing himself enough. However, what must be understood here as the basic insight is that the relationship between subject and object in musical production is a complex, interdependent, and dialectical one. Any theory of artistic production which fails either to be cognizant of this or to act on its awareness, will fail as a work of art insofar as it seeks to be true. What Adorno claims to have identified in the above two cases is essentially a failure, in opposite respects, of the works to be appropriate to the material they are composed of, and this in turn means that they fail to be free in the important sense. He begins the preceding passage with the claim that the risk of art’s failure manifests itself in the “loss of tension.” In other words, the work of art (unavoidably produced by an artist or artists), if it is to fulfill its potential, must reflect or contain, within itself, the tensions inherent in the material (that is to say, in the world around it). The difficulties that exist in the course of historical development will inevitably be sedimented in the material which is available to the artist for production. Adorno writes the following about this relationship between material and production:

> The sound material available is different at different times and it is not possible to overlook these differences in considering the concrete shape of the work. Material cannot be thought of except as the stuff with which the composer operates and in which he works. And this in turn is nothing less than the objectified and critically reflected state of the technical productive forces of an age with which any given composer is inevitably confronted. The physical and historical dimensions mutually interact.

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It is not enough, however, for the content to simply be present in the material, which could not
be otherwise: it must also be formed in a way that will make that content explicit and transparent.

So, Adorno’s analysis of contemporary art is also a response to the way that social
changes lead to art’s own changing awareness of itself; its growing self-consciousness and
subsequent loss of self-evidence. As stated, this development in art is roughly parallel to
philosophy becoming unable to continue to act as though it had access to the whole, that is, to
absolute truth. Again, this inability to continue on in the same way represents a problem which
must be addressed, and this can only happen in one of several ways. As he frequently does,
Adorno identifies directions that art can and does go in attempting to overcome the contradiction,
none of which are sufficiently self-reflective, and thus, are considered, in effect, non-options.
Art can simply insist that no change took place, it can attempt take on a social function, giving
up the claim to autonomy, or it can retreat into the world of low art, making no claim to either
autonomy or purpose. Each option fails immanently insofar as it is unable to retain the
transformative nature that motivated and underlies the option in the first place. In other words,
each option is responding to a problem that arises with the claim to the autonomy of art, and each
one attempts to solve the problem in a way that either undermines that autonomy or leaves it
behind entirely.

Allow me to elaborate on this situation by looking to a related discussion in *Aesthetic
Theory*. As discussed above, autonomous art may be said to have a kind of non-instrumental
social function insofar as it retains its independence from the social sphere, a sphere in which
value is external and comes from an instrumental relationship between means and ends.
However, in the course of historical change art had developed an awareness of this role in
society, of its ‘usefulness’, and lost the *authentic* naïveté that allowed it to both be true and
transformative. In the following passage he describes an aspect of the former situation of autonomous art. He writes:

Although the magic fetishes are one of the historical roots of art, a fetishistic element remains admixed in artworks, an element that goes beyond commodity fetishism. Artworks can neither exclude nor deny this; even socially the emphatic element of semblance in artworks is, as a corrective, the organon of truth. Artworks that do not insist fetishistically on their coherence, as if they were the absolute that they are unable to be, are worthless from the start….

Although Adorno does not speak explicitly of ‘autonomy’ here, I understand the distinction between commodity fetishism and some deeper form of ‘fetishism’ in art, to point essentially to the problem of the autonomy of artworks. The point that Adorno is making is that although the history of artistic production has moved beyond the stage at which art is endowed with the fetishistic properties of magic (art objects thought to be capable of communicating with gods or spirits for instance), it nevertheless retains a fetishistic element that is somehow deeper and more meaningful than the form that is tied up in the commodity fetishism that has been identified with capitalism since Marx. If I understand his meaning correctly, then describing this “insistence on coherence” as ‘fetishism’ is somewhat misleading. I take it that this use is intended dialectically as a re-thinking of the concept and should be understood as indicating a good separation that stands opposed to the bad separation of commodity fetishism. The good separation is the autonomy that art seems to have as a power independent of its status as a mere object of production. This is the power of “semblance” or “coherence” that Adorno claims an artwork must unwittingly insist on in order to have artistic value. In other words, art which admits to being just a form of communication or an instrument or means for a purpose (even if its purpose is itself) is false as a result. Adorno continues:

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152 His use of the term “fetishism” serves in comparative contrast to the discussion of commodity fetishism. The Marxian notion of commodity fetishism functions importantly in this passage as the focus of those “committed” artists that, as we will see, Adorno was criticizing.
…but the survival of art becomes precarious as soon as it becomes conscious of its fetishism and, as has been the case since the middle of the nineteenth century, insists obstinately on it. Art cannot advocate delusion by insisting that otherwise art would not exist. This forces art into aporia. All that succeeds in going even minutely beyond it is insight into the rationality of its irrationality. Artworks that want to divest themselves of fetishism by real and extremely dubious political commitment regularly enmesh themselves in false consciousness as the result of inevitable and vainly praised simplification. In the shortsighted praxis to which they blindly subscribe, their own blindness is prolonged.153

So, again, art appears to be stuck, trapped by itself and by history, in an insoluble problem. In particular, self-reflection on the condition of art as having this social power, leads to the insight that its functionlessness (its “irrationality”) is, in reality, functional (“rational”). Adorno suggests that when art becomes aware of this aspect of itself and can no longer insist fetishistically on its own absoluteness, as it once did, it begins to insist on its functionality. Thus, if art wants to remain in good conscience it can no longer insist on its own functionlessness. Self-deception is not going to help the problem.

In this we see the two non-options mentioned above. On the one hand is the attempt to simply ignore the change and insist on art being what it always was. On the other is the attempt to give art a purpose and social function. Some art tries to commit itself socially in order to free itself programatically from false bourgeois consciousness and commodity fetishism. The reasoning behind such art is presumably that if an artwork is endowed with a social function then it is no longer under the illusion that it has an existence totally independent of social determination. This however, because it is the result of over-simplification, only leads to another less excusable, more damaging form of untruth in the form of “prolonged blindness.” Put in another way, Adorno is claiming that art, in its autonomy and naïveté, should be blind to social concerns, but is now becoming blind for other reasons. He discusses this situation in the opening pages of Aesthetic Theory, writing that

153 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 228.
In [the unfreedom of the whole] the place of art became uncertain. The autonomy it achieved, after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered. Drawn from the ideal of humanity, art’s constituent elements withered by art’s own law of movement. Yet art’s autonomy remains irrevocable. All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function – of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty – are doomed. Indeed, art’s autonomy shows signs of blindness. Blindness was ever an aspect of art; in the age of art’s emancipation, however, this blindness has begun to predominate in spite of, if not because of, art’s lost naïveté…”  

It has become uncertain what purpose art serves because it has become aware of its functionlessness. It is possible that with this new form of autonomy, art has managed to, in Adorno’s words, “sever its own preconditions.” A truly self-conscious response would need to recognize that such an attribution of social function cannot help but remain external to the work of art itself and that, as such, it must fail to achieve its stated purpose, which is to mobilize art in the interest of freedom. I will return to this problem below when I take up a more thorough examination of Adorno’s interaction with explicitly political art.

The third inadequate way of attempting to overcome the historical impasse is to retreat into the comfort of the world of commodities. Adorno addresses this in a section of Aesthetic Theory dealing with what he terms the “deaestheticization of art” (or, even more literally – the “de-artification” of art):

Art responds to the loss of its self-evidence not simply by concrete transformations of its procedures and comportments but by trying to pull itself free from its own concept as from a shackle: the fact that it is art. …Those who have been duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities were never familiar with art…[and] they push for the deaestheticization of art. Its unmistakable symptom is the passion to touch everything, to allow no work to be what it is, to dress it up, to narrow its distance from its viewer. …Nothing remains of the autonomy of art…other than the fetish character of the commodity, regression to the archaic fetishism in the origin of art: To this extent the contemporary attitude to art is regressive.  

So, art, that in this way takes on a popular form, is capable of being for the consumer whatever they want it to be, or perhaps more accurately, whatever is most efficient from the perspective of

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154 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 1.
155 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 16-17.
the culture industry. Adorno is here playing off the superficial similarity between the two forms of fetishism. In this case however, the response by art is not a rejection of fetishism in the form of a rejection of autonomy, as with the political art referred to above, but rather an attempt to embrace what appears to be the freedom found in the popular form. Insofar as the commodity (artistic or otherwise) has developed in late-capitalism in such a way that it has freed itself from use-value and has truly become fetishized (in Marx’s sense of ‘dancing furniture’) it has the appearance of independence from the instrumental rationality of the market. This however is a false independence and is, as Adorno puts it, “a parody of aesthetic semblance.” The freedom of truly autonomous art operates not by its openness to the will of the artist or consumer but rather operates precisely by incorporating elements which cut off any ability to cater to those subjective needs. As elaborated above, the truth content of an artwork is internal to it, and although it incorporates subjective elements, it does so in an objective way. However, we should not forget that although commodified ‘art’ is not autonomous, this recognition does not of itself solve the problem that art is faced with.

Adorno goes on to formulate this concern in terms of the role of the artist as a necessary means of production when he writes that “Trust in the needs of those who with heightened productive powers were to raise the whole to a higher form no longer makes sense, now that these needs have been integrated by a false society and transformed into false ones.” This returns us to the need for self-reflectiveness in the work of art and in the artist, in that a fundamental condition for self-reflectiveness in artistic production is a truthful relation to the possibilities present in the artistic material. While the quality and successful production of the artist’s intention is not the determining factor in the evaluation of a work, this subjective element

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156 This critique is similar to the one applied by Adorno to jazz music, which is discussed below in relation to the theory and practice of improvisation.
does nevertheless have an important role to play. Because it is produced by an artist, art is limited by the mental and physical materials available. Thus, any inadequacy in the artist to comprehend the most advanced conditions of artistic production will necessarily manifest itself in the art object. If autonomous art needs to be at the forefront of aesthetic understanding then any such subjective deficiency is obviously a problem.

At this point we begin to see that, for Adorno, any art that wants to take itself seriously can only respond to the historical impasse that it is faced with by continuing on as negative self-reflection, just as with philosophy; that is, if continuing is even possible. On understanding this point, Adorno’s comments in a late essay on the difficulties faced by contemporary musical composition are helpful. He ends the first section of the essay by focusing on the unfortunate historical situation of aesthetic subjectivity:

Everything lies with spontaneity, i.e., the involuntary reaction of the compositional ear, quand même. But if one composes in deadly earnest, one must ultimately ask whether it is not all becoming ideological nowadays. Therefore, one must confront the possibility of [music today] falling silent non-metaphorically and without the consolation that it can not go on that way. …Perhaps only that music is still possible which measures itself against this greatest extreme, its own falling silent.158

The possibility of music “falling silent” is recognized here as the possibility that music has actually lost the ability to be autonomous and thus has lost the ability to be art. This possibility is due, as above, to the regression of listening on the part, not only of the audience, but even more crucially, the composer. Because the ability of the composer to experience at a level which is adequate to the material is necessary for the production of a work with truth value, regression on the part of the composer leads to untrue or ‘ideological’ works. What the serious or honest composer is faced with is a situation in which he cannot determine whether he is operating under false assumptions. If this were the case and if the composer continues to compose then the music

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itself becomes ideological and unable to speak truthfully. In this case it seems that perhaps music doesn’t have anything more to say and should respond to that fact by literally ceasing to speak. I take it, however, that Adorno is not actually suggesting that music cease, and thus he is also not suggesting that composers stop composing. Such a suggestion would be positive and thus equally ideological. Rather, it seems he is suggesting only that we make ourselves aware of this possibility, of music falling silent, as something which possibly should occur, so that the awareness itself may serve as a guiding praxis. I understand the final line quoted above to mean just this. In measuring itself against its own potential extinction, current music is forced into a position where the only acceptable praxis is one which makes no positive claims and gives up any illusion that it is whole unto itself. In other words, the most that it can hope to achieve is both awareness by the composer of the incredibly difficult situation that music finds itself in and thus also the production of a musical work which manifests that awareness. If the problem that we began with can be stated as one brought about by an excess of self-reflection, then, paradoxically, it seems that for Adorno the response can only be more self-reflection; i.e., if art continues to have a place, continues to be legitimate, then that is only in a negative form, as a form of insecurity regarding its own status and thus as something which is constantly in motion.

In addition to being of considerable influence on Adorno’s theory and practice, both philosophical and musical, Schoenberg was also the composer whose work, at certain stages, Adorno took to be one of the best historical models for free music. To understand more concretely what the call to negativity means in the context of a musical language, what it requires, and how this is equivalent to self-reflection, it will be helpful to look specifically at Adorno’s defense and critique of some of Schoenberg’s musical works from within this framework. In each case, as should become clear, the quality of the individual work is
determined according to its truth content. In the contemporary situation, this determination is a function of its self-reflectiveness, which in turn is gauged as a precondition for its autonomy or self-determination.

The period of Schoenberg’s career that Adorno considered his most successful was the pre-serialist period, beginning around 1909, during which his compositions were defined by their ‘free atonality’. Regarding the details of the work during this period—including most famously, *Erwartung* (op. 17) and *Pierrot Lunaire* (op. 21)—and Schoenberg’s development toward it, allow me to consult the account of Charles Rosen. Acknowledging that Schoenberg himself described the musical revolution that resulted from his movement to the atonal as “an emancipation of the dissonance,” Rosen explains the dissonance-consonance relation and what it meant for dissonance to have been capable of being ‘emancipated’.  

The primary means of musical expression is dissonance. This is true at least for Western music since the Renaissance. …There is nothing inherently unpleasant or nasty about a dissonance… A dissonance is any musical sound that must be resolved, i.e., followed by a consonance: a consonance is a musical sound that needs no resolution, that can act as the final note, that rounds off a cadence. Which sounds are to be consonances is determined at a given historical moment by the prevailing musical style, and consonances have varied radically according to the musical system developed in each culture. …A dissonance is defined by its role in the musical “language,” as it makes possible the movement from tension to resolution which is at the heart of what may be generally called expressivity. …In this continuous swing between tension and resolution, the complete “emancipation of the dissonance” meant, and could only have meant, a freedom from consonance, from the obligation to resolve the dissonance.

Thus, understanding Schoenberg’s transition to atonality from more traditional forms of musical expression requires recognizing the break he made with the traditionally assumed need for *resolution*. This break, however, was part of a larger process of the collapse of musical ‘tonality’. Explaining tonality, Rosen tells us that it is a system

…with a central perfect triad [tonic]: all the other triads, major and minor, are arranged around the central one in hierarchical order. …A tonal work must begin by implying the central position of the tonic, and it must end with it; therefore everything that follows the opening and precedes...

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the final tonic may be conceived as dissonant in relation to the tonic triad, the only perfect consonance."\(^{161}\)

It was in response to this progression of the tonal system, from its early formations in the eighteenth century through the much less structured versions of Richard Strauss and others in the late nineteenth century, that Schoenberg rebelled by composing works which renounced tonality. About Schoenberg’s most radically atonal work *Erwartung*, Rosen writes that he “did away with all the traditional means in which music was supposed to make itself intelligible… There is no fully developed sense of key anywhere in *Erwartung*, and each motif that appears is abandoned after a few seconds.”\(^{162}\) What holds together the new decentralized work as a whole, what achieves ‘resolution’ in the absence of tonality is complicated but is due in part to his use of “tone, color, rhythm, texture, and phrasing, and partly by the new importance given to chromatic saturation.”\(^{163}\)

These observations are mirrored in Adorno’s discussion of Schoenberg’s atonality in “Vers une musique informelle.” There he writes that

> The oldest, boldest and most important [large-scale atonal work] stems from Schoenberg himself, namely the last Orchestral Piece from Opus 16. In this work there is no thematic unity in the usual sense. Instead, symphonic unity is established by a completely different method: the migration of the main line from one voice to the next. Here already the technique of putting things together comes to determine form. This is only one of the infinite number of organizing principles which can be read out of the conception of the piece and which render superfluous any appeal to systems external to the work.\(^{164}\)

What Adorno is pointing to here as being particularly successful in this work, is the way in which it creates its own musical context and thus renders itself structurally independent from outside control. This is not to say that it understands itself as existing somehow outside of the history of composed music as the product of an autonomous subjectivity. On the contrary,

\(^{163}\) Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg*, 63.
\(^{164}\) Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 291.
Adorno claims that it is able to achieve this independence from “external systems” only by manifesting that history immanently through advancing its accumulated technique.

Writing about his concept of a truly free music, understood as “a type of music which has discarded all forms which are external or abstract or which confront it in an inflexible way...[and which should] nevertheless constitute itself in an objectively compelling way, in the musical substance itself,” Adorno says that “Such informal music had been a real possibility once before, around 1910.” He is referring of course to what he saw as the possibility in Schoenberg’s free atonal works, describing Erwartung as a work “in which everything strives forward to a coda without a recapitulation.” This implies that, despite its unrivaled truth at the time, it nevertheless fell short of the ideal of what Adorno believes is contained as a potential in art. What Schoenberg’s works did well was achieved through control of the material.

Generally speaking, in the realm of art, the need for continuous reflection leads quickly, perhaps even more so than in philosophy, to the issue of control. The dialectical relationship between freedom and control proves central in all forms of artistic activity but perhaps especially in the exchanges that take place between the composition and performance of music. Adorno attempts to come to terms with this concept of control throughout his writings on philosophy and art as one that is central to the question of artistic theory and praxis. As we will see, the continuum of control is one on which the most heavily composed symphonies and the most radical improvisation lie. The notion of control will also serve as the intersection between the discussion of art and politics and so, as we move toward a more explicit discussion of this intersection, the idea of control will grow increasingly important.

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166 Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 274.
Recall that the discussion of reflection began with the recognition of a need for autonomy or self-determination. So we can see now that this need for self-determination may be phrased also as self-control and that this need for self-control, especially in the case of art, often manifests itself as a need for control of material. Quite interestingly, the affinity between Adorno’s theory of critique and Kant’s theory of enlightenment and moral universalism, discussed in the last chapter, reasserts itself here in the context of art. Consider the following from “Vers une musique informelle”:

…if art really desires to revoke the domination of nature, and if it is concerned with a situation in which men abandon their efforts to exercise control through their intellect, it can only achieve this through the domination of nature. Only music which is in control of itself would be in control of its own freedom from every compulsion, even its own. This would be on the analogy with the argument that only in a rationally organized society would the elimination of scarcity lead to the disappearance of organization as a form of oppression. …Only what is fully articulated in art provides the image of an undeformed and hence free humanity. The work of art which is fully articulated, thanks to its maximum control of its material, and which therefore finds itself at the furthest possible remove from mere organic existence, is also as close to the organic as is at all possible.”

While there is a great deal that could be said about the connections made here, what at least comes across clearly is the degree to which Adorno sees the dialectic of control as being involved in the question of artistic freedom. He invokes once again the Kantian idea that certain apparent subjective freedoms must be sacrificed for the sake of greater ones, through his claim about the correlate of control, namely, that domination is required to free oneself from domination. In both aspects the struggle is one between the internal and the external – between autonomy and heteronomy. As with the discursive rationality discussed in the context of politics, artistic rationality seeks to free itself of determination from the outside and replace it with control from the inside, that is, self-determination. As with that of “intellect,” this can only happen in art through a process of becoming self-conscious, which, as before, requires awareness of the ways in which it is unavoidably not self-determined. Without this its blindness would

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inevitably interfere with its control. In art, more than in the political or philosophical spheres, self-determination must take the form of control over material since this is the level at which art is rationally constructed and thus, it is in this respect that a lack of awareness will wreak the greatest havoc. Consider an earlier passage from the same essay which addresses the question of material:

…musical categories are probably indispensable to achieve articulation, even if they have to be wholly transformed, unless we are going to rest content with an undifferentiated jumble of sounds. The problem, however, is not to restore the traditional categories, but to develop equivalents to suit the new materials, so that it will become possible to perform in a transparent manner the tasks which were formerly carried out in an irrational and ultimately inadequate way. This would be the prime task of the material theory which I am envisaging here. But if the materials of music are not static, and if to work with the available materials is to mean more than contenting oneself with…skilful manipulation of the means available, then materials themselves will be modified by the act of composition. The materials will emerge from every successful work they enter, as if newly born. The secret of composition is the energy which moulds the material in a process of progressively greater appropriateness.”

In this way, we seem to get a theory of art which is made out of a strange combination of Kantian, Marxist, and Socratic principles. From the concern with self-determination and the explicit discussion in Aesthetic Theory of modern art’s “straining toward maturity as the organized and heightened aversion toward the childish,” Adorno intertwines this with what looks more like a ‘materialist’ theory of art in which the truth of art must be traced primarily in the progress of material change. The ‘informal music’ that Adorno is recommending could function equally as the aesthetic parallel to either universal or communist society. On the other hand, to put it in the Socratic terms used earlier, we might simply see his recommendation for the control of material as a way of demanding that art “know what it doesn’t know” by incorporating the inadequacy of previous material into itself. Apart from the specific question at issue here, this discussion forces us to recognize again that, for Adorno, the questions of artistic and non-artistic freedom are inextricably bound up with one another. The mimetic aspect of art points to

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169 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 43.
its utopian quality in the sense that the “irrationality in the principle of reason is unmasked by the avowedly rational irrationality of art.” Through its enigmatic dialectic of subject and object, art points to a higher form of rationality than the instrumental one exploited through the overly-earnest use of identification for the purpose of control.

The dialectic of freedom, involved in thinking about artworks generally, holds in the case of music. Nevertheless, there are particulars associated with music as an art form that separate it from other forms and make it particularly interesting and valuable, while at the same time making its evaluation more complicated. In particular, in the musical sphere the dialectic of control and freedom plays out largely in terms of structure. This could be seen in the example of Schoenberg above. The question is, essentially, how much of what kind of structure is the right amount and kind? If structure of any kind is thought of as restricting freedom, then the question must also become one of restricting freedom for the sake of some greater freedom. Indeed, such a notion can been found throughout Adorno’s analyses of music, in particular as a critique of the widespread and naïve view that real freedom is something that results from a total lack of restriction.

In his essay, “Vers une musique informelle,” Adorno attempts to work out a concept of informal music that would represent a responsible ‘forward-guard’ of musical development. The essay centers on the antinomy between the subjective composition of music and musical material. What Adorno hopes to suggest with the concept of an informal music is the possibility of a truly free relationship between these two poles of musical production. Despite the affirmative tone that one senses in this essay’s discussion of such a possibility, the conversation still occurs within the underlying framework of the call for a critical musical praxis. In this essay he makes the following claim regarding informal music:

From the standpoint of the composing subject informal music would be music which liberates itself from fear of reflecting [the shadow of the order in which anything goes] and radiating it back, instead of being governed by it. It would learn how to distinguish between chaos, which in reality never was such a great threat, and the bad conscience of freedom, in which unfreedom can blossom and thrive. 171

Here we see one of the primary antinomies that Adorno draws out of the subject-object dialectic of music. Informal music and the musical freedom that accompanies it could only be achieved by becoming fully self-reflective, because this is the only way to get clear about the degree to which it is determined and to which it is capable of determining itself. As an instance of subjectivity engaged in self-deceptive activity, we can recognize cases in which the composing subject over-determines or under-determines the composition as a result of socially inherited fear. A composition may be over-determined in the sense that its composer attempts to assert a greater degree of control over its structure than is possible given the nature of the material and historical circumstance; it may be under-determined in the obverse sense that its composer gives up “control” over the material in an attempt to allow it, perhaps, a certain freedom of its own. This fear and lack of order, always in the name of freedom, ironically, prevents the possibility of a consciousness that would allow true freedom to emerge, namely a consciousness that understands. The requirement may not be for ‘complete’ understanding, but it must be the greatest understanding possible within the given context. As we have seen, given the historical context of late capitalism, this will necessarily be a negative, dialectical, and self-critical consciousness.

The account given above, of the specific historical situation that Adorno believes music finds itself in 172, is reconsidered similarly here as one that involves a confrontation with the culture industry and with the instrumental rationality characteristic of it. In this context music

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171 Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 293.
172 “Finds itself in,” that is, at the time of his writing. It is likely however that the situation would be seen to be at least as bad or worse in the present.
finds itself being made into a means of perpetuating the false consciousness necessary for the advancement of late capitalism. Adorno tells us that music, when faced with the reifying power of the culture industry, often *fails* to respond adequately in two specific ways. The first is by attempting to retreat into “enclaves of sensitive souls.”\(^{173}\) This would be something like the attempt by composer/musicians to provide a situation independent of the demands of instrumental society, one in which music would be allowed to freely express itself through them. The idea is that instrumentalization would be avoided by making the music a function of pure subjective experience, thus achieving a kind of immediacy with regard to that functional role. This, Adorno believes, will necessarily fail insofar as its intention is to save music. In reality, it only serves as a covert defense of control, while the musical truth-content that depends on an unflinching dialectic between subject and object is left behind. In his essay “Difficulties” Adorno writes,

> To the extent that music is made in an unreflected way, to the extent that it does not, itself, recognize its difficulties as preconditions and incorporate them, it degenerates into the mere repetition of things that have already been said a hundred times, a kind of tautology of the world.”\(^{174}\)

Such efforts cannot save music from the corruption of instrumental society by withdrawing from it. The best music can do is to be self-reflectively aware of its own alienation.

The second route to failure is through attempting to control the situation in which the music finds itself by asserting total control over the material. “[Art] may not behave as if it could take the bull by the horns and escape from reification directly into a non-existent immediacy.”\(^{175}\) As with those who would retreat, this attempt also hopes to save music by achieving immediacy (albeit in a different form) and also fails by misunderstanding its position

\(^{173}\) From a quote about John Cage in Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 315.

\(^{174}\) Adorno, “Difficulties,” 646.

\(^{175}\) Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 315.
with regard to the dialectic between music and society. Thus the two responses to the instrumentalization of music are, in the first case a claim to total freedom and in the second, a claim to total control. The former does this through removing the music from the rationalizations of production and commerce entirely. The latter does this by attempting to organize the musical material in such a way that those forces are no longer capable of determining the music’s destiny. Unfortunately, according to Adorno, both of these options involve a fundamental error that emerges as a form of self-deception. In both cases it becomes impossible for the music to be what it thinks it is because it cannot accomplish what it thinks it is accomplishing, namely, autonomy or self-determination. This is, in part, the situation he is referring to when he concludes the ‘informal music’ essay by writing,

Impossible as it has been to discover what music authentically is, it has been no less impossible to bring wholly authentic music into being. It is better to admit this than to bar the way to it by choosing one type or the other and claiming that it embodies the ominously positive musical ideal.  

Just as with society and philosophical thought, resistance to reification in art requires the ability to retain the freedom of thought, which is in late capitalist society, according to Adorno, most essentially the ability to see what might be the case as opposed to what simply is (or appears to be) the case, but also the ability to recognize what cannot be the case. Practice becomes blocked and unrealizable when it ceases to think about itself and about the possibilities for its own success or failure; as before, the self-reflectiveness that Adorno is endorsing is both ‘negatively dialectical’ and historical. The composer or critic must become aware of her relative location in the sphere of knowledge; in this case, knowledge of the world and history and of one’s place in them. As with philosophical thought, the artwork’s power of intellectual resistance is inseparable from its capacity for self-reflection and critique.

\[176\] Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 322.
Adorno’s Critique of Political Art

Like philosophy, art has often been subject to the heteronomous pressures of political strategy and thus has formed in relation to them, and as with philosophy, Adorno’s insistence on self-reflection and critique in the artistic sphere leads also to a critique of attempts to use art for political purposes. The critique of political commitment is necessitated by the nature of art as itself an activity which requires autonomy to be what it is. For this reason it will be helpful to reconsider briefly, as in the preceding chapter, the main features of Lukács’ theory of art that Adorno was responding to. As before, the tension is between Adorno’s adoption of a form of Marxist materialism and his refusal to understand that theory as requiring a commitment to any particular notion of political praxis.

In terms of the general Marxian framework, we can assume that art in the present (whatever else can be said about it) must be situated within the relations of capitalist production. Bourgeois art commodities are produced and consumed, and their appearance is determined by the material conditions which underlie their production. Under bourgeois conditions, artistic production will take on a bourgeois commodity form characterized by separation as fetishization. Just as with ideas and products that attain to the commodity form, artworks as commodities appear to have an independent existence and value and yet stand in an essentially superstructural relationship to the objective processes which give them life. In this form, it would seem that art must be impotent regarding the possibility of effecting real social change. As we have seen, according to Marx and Lukács, bourgeois consciousness can be said to be representational in the sense that it mirrors the real conditions and actual existence of individuals in bourgeois society; but it does so in a characteristically separated way that undermines its ability to be actively engaged in the historical process. In this same way, bourgeois art in a more obviously sensuous
way must be a reflection of real conditions but in a lifeless form which fails to be a vital part of the historical totality. Such art cannot change the way people act in the future but can merely reflect what has already been the case as if it were always going to be the case. The reality depicted by representational art is one frozen for eternity. But what about art that is undertaken in the interest of the transitional proletarian class? Is there art which can have an active role in creating social change by pushing conditions toward revolution?

To answer these questions we should look back once again to what Marx says about the role of the communist party with respect to the proletarian class.

The communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.… They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.  

In suggesting that the communist party represents the proletarian class and thus serves a sort of self-reflective roll for that class, we can perceive a potential shift in the causality of the representational sphere. Bourgeois philosophy perceived the problem of change as a theoretical one and thus undermined its ability to create any actual change. Its representational framework was a theoretical one which hoped for correspondence between subject and object. What is different about the communist party according to Marx is that there are not two fundamentally separate things involved in the representation, but only one. Thus, we can speculate that a similar change would take place in the revolutionary work of art. What was previously superstructural begins to have an effect on its “audience” by giving it an accurate representation of itself which potentially enhances and deepens this self-awareness in ways that would not have

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been possible without it. Whether such artistic immediacy is desirable or even possible, and what the transitional stages would look like are contested questions at the center of Adorno’s difficulty with ‘revolutionary’ art.

To discuss Adorno’s critique of political art is to return foremost to the question of instrumentalization. Recall that we began this chapter with Adorno’s recognition of the social nature of art (in conjunction with its opposing autonomous nature), which he believes is strictly internal to the work of art and cannot be found in its external social consequences. The point about art’s social functionlessness may also be put in more political terms in the following way. It is sometimes the case that artists take it upon themselves to produce under the direction of a political commitment. Obviously, this commitment, willfully accepted, places certain practical restrictions on the work of art. What these restrictions are will be determined by the particular ends of the political movement in question. Adorno’s response to such commitment is to argue that the essence of art is its autonomy and that it loses that essence when it makes concessions to the heteronomy of political ends. Taking its content and structure from political aspirations rather than aesthetic principles, committed art becomes equivalent to political theory. The dialectical point that Adorno is pushing is to see that such anti-ideological efforts are still always ideological, that is, they fail to move beyond the activities which require making assumptions. Furthermore, it is Adorno’s contention that using art for anti-ideological political purposes won’t work anyway. Political messages communicated by art will simply become the victim of false consciousness and dismissed by self-deceptive individuals who either see what they want to see or react to it oppositionally out of commitment to their own point of view. Social contradictions need to be experienced through artworks rather than communicated by them. Interestingly, despite what is indicated by his use of the so called “bourgeois” concept ‘autonomy’, we can see
Adorno providing us with an argument thoroughly inspired by Marxian themes. The criticism being leveled against committed art is that in attempting to damage false consciousness by changing people’s fundamental beliefs, such artists are actually (and ironically) placing themselves in a more compromised position regarding false consciousness.

One can also see that Adorno’s claim—that art will be unsuccessful when used for purposes of edification in the name of anti-ideology—bears a striking resemblance to Marx’s arguments for the super-structural nature of ideas. For instance, Marx, in the *German Ideology*, famously criticizes the Young Hegelians in the following way:

> These innocent and childlike fancies are the kernel of the modern Young Hegelian philosophy, which not only is received by the German public with horror and awe, but is announced by our philosophic heroes with the solemn consciousness of its cataclysmic dangerousness and criminal ruthlessness. [The present publication] has the aim of uncloaking these sheep….

One does not have to squint very hard to see the uncanny sameness of tone and orientation between Marx and Adorno. Marx is here pointing out, with biting sarcasm, that his opponents’ professed radicalism in their calls to “revolt against the rule of thoughts” is above all else self-deception. In my understanding, this is precisely Adorno’s accusation against Soviet Realism and committed artists such as Bertold Brecht. In the same way that Marx criticized the interpreters of Hegel for deceiving themselves about the potency of their methods, Adorno criticizes the artistic interpreters of Marx for the same. Furthermore, we can certainly see that Adorno recognizes a continuity of intention between himself and Marx, and perhaps even solidarity, given his claim in *Marginalia to Theory and Praxis* that, “*Capital* contains numerous invectives, most often against economists and philosophers, but no program for action…The theory of surplus value does not tell how one should start a revolution.”

Nevertheless, Marx and Adorno diverge when it comes to their aspirations regarding theory as well as their view of

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art in relation to society, with Adorno categorically rejecting the possibility of art being used for political ends.

While the influence of Marx and Lukács on Adorno with respect to questions of politics and art was indirect, the influence of his senior contemporary Walter Benjamin played out as a more complicated dialogue about the best way to understand and apply the Marxism toward which they were both drawn. A good example of this can be seen in the exchange that took place over the content of Benjamin’s well-known 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In this essay Benjamin suggested that the extensive reproduction and dissemination of art works, made possible by newly developed technologies of the early twentieth century, was undermining the bourgeois “aura” of artworks and thus ushering in the possibility of popular art with a progressive and potentially revolutionary function. This undermining, he claimed, was taking place as a result of the increasingly direct, disenchanted and de-ritualized relation between art production and the general public, such that, in a sense, the audience takes on the role of critic and participant in a way never before possible. On the particular way that this happens in film as opposed to older forms such as painting, Benjamin writes

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. …With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide.\(^\text{180}\)

Benjamin saw this new critical enjoyment and the ensuing possibility of a “simultaneous collective experience” as the means by which art ceases to stand opposed to revolutionary

politics and instead becomes a tool to be used by it. Because artworks such as film operate both as objects of contemplation and “tactile apperception,” they are able to “mobilize the masses” and thereby “tackle the most difficult and most important” historical tasks. He writes: “…the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.”

In a letter to Benjamin the same year this essay was written, Adorno (after beginning the letter with a tone of considerable deference and respect) includes a critique of this argument and in doing so provides us with some insight into the his thinking at the time (relative to the influence of Benjamin) on the subjects of autonomous art and revolution. He writes that, despite their frequent theoretical agreement on aesthetic questions,

I now find it disquieting – and here I see a sublimated remnant of certain Brechtian motifs – that you now casually transfer the concept of magical aura to the ‘autonomous work of art’ and flatly assign to the latter a counter-revolutionary function. I need not assure you that I am fully aware of the magical element in the bourgeois work of art... However, it seems to me that the centre of the autonomous work of art does not itself belong on the side of myth...but is inherently dialectical; within itself it juxtaposes the magical and the mark of freedom. If I remember correctly, you once said something similar in connection with Mallarmé... Dialectical though your essay may be, it is not so in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards an elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience – that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made.

To understand the criticism, consider the way in which this particular formulation of Adorno’s lends support to my earlier suggestion that we can understand artistic praxis, in contrast with either philosophical or political praxis, as consisting of a more open relationship between theoretical activity and practical activity, and that this contributes to its potentially utopian

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182 This letter is the second of three contained in the volume: Adorno et al, Aesthetics and Politics (New York: Verso, 2007).
183 Adorno et al, Aesthetics and Politics, 121-22.
character. Insofar as the artistic sphere is one in which people can move from theoretical reflection and imagination through to the practical realization of that thought, it is mimetic of the that same possibility in the non-artistic social sphere which remains divided. In this way it serves as a demonstrative critique of the existent, a function which Adorno, in disagreement with Benjamin, claims stands as much against the forces of reification as is possible. Adorno goes on to suggest that, as opposed to the dubious modern artists that Benjamin cites (such as Rilke), the literature of Kafka and the musical work of Schoenberg are not ‘aural’. Rather than suggesting that art take on a political function,

Accordingly, what I would postulate is more dialectics. On the one hand, dialectical penetration of the ‘autonomous’ work of art which is transcended by its own technology into a planned work; on the other, an even stronger dialecticization of utilitarian art in its negativity [and as immanent irrationality]. …You under-estimate the technicality of autonomous art and over-estimate that of dependent art…

Thus, Adorno’s analysis typically demands a greater commitment to immanent dialectical critique. He believes that Benjamin eased his critique precisely when he should have pushed forward. In order to correct what Adorno sees as the non-dialectical error in Benjamin’s essay he suggests the complete liquidation of any appeal to “the actual consciousness of actual workers who have absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except their interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character.” Although this criticism is directed more at Benjamin’s aesthetic-theoretical activity than the art he was praising, the insistence on negativity in theory and non-instrumentality in art overlap.

184 Adorno et al, Aesthetics and Politics, 124.
185 Adorno et al, Aesthetics and Politics, 124-25.
Adorno’s Critique of Improvisational Music

I would now like to examine the question of music’s relation to society through a different musical model, that of *improvisation*. All of these points in the constellation of Adorno’s critical musical theory—the mimetic role of subjectivity and the primacy of the object, the question of production and reception, the temporal, the thematic, and perhaps most of all the dialectic of freedom and control—come to bear on the question of improvisational music.

Unlike the politically oriented music discussed in the previous section, improvisational music (with some important exceptions, AMM most of all) has typically not been governed by a desire to critique specific social problems or effect concrete political change. Nevertheless, whether you are looking at either improvisational elements within the classical tradition, the history of jazz, or more obscure efforts that seem to fall somewhere in between (or perhaps on the fringes of both), there has been a discernible orientation (implicit and explicit) toward increased consciousness and greater freedom. As a kind of turn on the implicitly political quality of improvisation, I will come to argue in this chapter and the next that there is a potential for thinking about improvisational music as a kind of bridge between the musical and political spheres. Generally speaking, such a potential is not one that has been claimed by improvisational musicians themselves in any explicit way. Nevertheless, starting off from certain ideas contained in Adorno’s thought, my hope is to demonstrate that there is such a connection and that it actually is capable of providing significant insight into questions of theory and praxis in both the artistic and political spheres. What I am principally interested in doing in this section is locating the question of freedom more precisely in terms of the basic opposition between composition and improvisation. This, as I see it, is a privileged location for Adorno’s thinking about theory and praxis in music. As has been the case throughout this chapter the idea
here is to provide some framework for understanding the value of the artwork, in this case musical and either composed, improvised or somewhere in between.

Although the essays Adorno published on jazz are minimal and perhaps do not constitute his best ideas on improvisation, they are his most explicit treatment of the subject and for this reason provide the best starting point for trying to understand what I take to be his persistent (if often implicit) defense of composed music and rejection of improvised music. The insistence on negative dialectical self-reflection which characterized his theory and led to the attacks we have seen so far, led also to a critique of jazz and other determinate forms of improvisation. The criticism of jazz took place primarily in a set of well-known essays, two of which were written in the 1930’s (1933 and 1936) and another later essay written in 1953. In all three essays the analysis centers on exposing jazz music as something other than the autonomous art that it is taken to be by those participating in it. In the 1933 essay “Farewell to Jazz” Adorno expressed what he saw as jazz music’s contradictory nature when he claimed that its success was guaranteed by its being simultaneously “available for immediate consumption” and presented as “progressive, modern, and up-to-date.” He considered its consumable elements to include its “impressionistic” harmonies, and its danceable rhythm, “always marked by the bass drum.” With respect to its purportedly “progressive” and “modern” character, he pointed to its being regarded by its many advocates as possessing immediacy and an “untrammeled nature,” being unruly, exhibiting raw sexuality and sexual progressiveness (even indirectly in its unorthodox

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186 Theodor W. Adorno, “Farewell to Jazz,” In Essays On Music: Theodor W. Adorno, Selected, With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes By Richard Leppert. New Translations By Susan H. Gillespie (Calif.: University of California Press, 2002), 497. The title of this essay turned out to be somewhat untimely insofar as it was meant to signal the end of jazz music altogether (and thus, the success he refers to is past success which had come to an end). This, of course, did not happen, something which Adorno himself realized and corrected for in the later essay “Perennial Fashion: Jazz.” The title of that essay consequently signals Adorno’s attempt to incorporate into his previous critique what he saw as the improbable persistence of jazz. Apart from this, little seems to have shifted between the earlier and later essays in terms of his (dismal) analysis.

187 Adorno, “Farewell to Jazz,” 497.
instrumentation), using syncopation (which was seen as a rebellion against traditional rhythmic structures), using the technique of improvisation, and intentionally including ‘false’ notes. With these qualities in mind it was distinguished from ‘vulgar’ commodity music and considered a form of authentic art and at the forefront of artistic creation. In the specific case of improvisation he pointed to the belief that the “virtuoso” musician makes audacious leaps and distortions with respect to compositional tradition and because of this is thought to exist in the “realm of freedom.” According to Adorno, it was believed that through the virtuoso’s actions “the solid wall between production and reproduction was evidently demolished” and “the alienation of man and music mastered out of vital force.”

The problem that Adorno finds with all of this is that, despite all its claims (both explicit and less-so) to being a free, autonomous, and spontaneous form of art, jazz is actually just the reverse. It is in reality a functional part of the culture industry and as such is determined by economic forces. He attempts to show that it is in fact extremely controlled and restricted, and is so, not only externally but even more problematically, in its own internal tendencies. In the face of all the claims made on behalf of the artistic status of jazz, Adorno’s response is that “…all the elements of ‘art,’ of individual freedom of expression, of immediacy are revealed as mere cover-ups for the character of consumer goods.” He claims that it works with a “paltry stock of procedures and characteristics,” practices a “rigorous exclusion of every unregimented impulse,” and exhibits a “tendency to adapt itself to the ear of the listener, no matter whether highly trained or undifferentiated.” Through a sort of back-handed compliment, Adorno says about the more radical techniques of syncopation and improvisation that,

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188 Adorno, “Farewell to Jazz,” 497-98.
189 Adorno, “Farewell to Jazz,” 498.
If someone had wanted to take the syncopation and rhythmically improvisational impulses to their logical conclusion, then the old symmetry would have broken apart; but along with it the tonal harmonic structure, as is the case in the jazz experiments of Stravinsky. But then jazz would have lost its consumability and easy comprehensibility, and would have turned into art music.  

It would have “turned into art music,” except, that is, that such a transformation would have been in vain given that ‘art music’ had already carried out this task long before. He claims that although the syncopation common in jazz was a form of rhythm thought to be indicative of a fresh beginning and a form of “spontaneous regeneration,” and that it was in fact a new element of popular music, it was not however new for art music. Furthermore, Adorno claims art music did it with more “richness” and “depth.” He believed syncopation in jazz to be mere arbitrary ornamentation and that by the end of the song all these seemingly rebellious elements have “fit back into the unshaken schema after all.”  

In other words, if Adorno is correct, jazz turns out to be a manifestation of unfreedom which, through its strictly bound structure, actually serves to regiment subjectivity; quite the opposite of the expression of radical artistic freedom that it is meant to be. In this way, the jazz of Adorno’s critique is also identifiable as a form of pseudo-activity akin to that discussed in reference to politics in the last chapter. As before, pseudo-activity is defined by its lack of subjective spontaneity and self-consciousness, that is, it is defined by its heteronomy.

Adorno does believe that improvisation properly understood can be a force for freedom and spontaneity within artistic production. In jazz, however, he believes that the term is almost always misapplied and ends up referring to an activity which exists within a closed system of possibilities and thus cannot be the vehicle of newness and unpredictability that improvisation properly understood must be. He writes that

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192 Adorno, “Farewell to Jazz,” 498.
The particular effects with which jazz fills out its schema, syncopation above all, strive to create the appearance of being the outburst or caricature of untrammeled subjectivity – in effect, that of the listener… But the method becomes trapped in its own net. For while it must constantly promise its listeners something different…, it is not allowed to leave the beaten path; it must be always new and always the same.”¹⁹³

If improvisation merely refers to the fact that the musician did not plan what he was to play prior to his playing it, then Adorno believes the concept only refers to a kind of specific subjective freedom and has been diminished to such an extent that it no longer has meaning as a manifestation of objective freedom or truth-content. He goes on to add, “The legitimate discontent with culture provides a pretext but not the slightest justification for the glorification of a highly rationalized section of mass production, one which debases and betrays culture without transcending it…”¹⁹⁴

In more neutral terms, we might think of this kind of unplanned performance as akin to what in the traditional framework would be viewed as ‘practicing’ and, as such, is reserved for playing in private. Whether Adorno has something like this in mind, I do not know. Nevertheless, the question of whether such practicing should remain private is a question that will continue to be in the background in what follows and is in the foreground of Chapter Four. While I will continue to elaborate on the question of improvisation and its relation to composition in the next chapter, it will be helpful to look at a few additional passages which deal with the advantages and limitations of the former as it operates in tension with organization.

Whether or not improvisation actually operates as a form of musical production without prior planning, it is clear that in most cases—perhaps especially in the case of ‘free improvisers’ discussed in the next chapter—improvisation in fact does not make use of a formally constructed score. In “Vers une musique informelle” Adorno writes the following about the artistic need for written composition:

¹⁹³ Adorno, Prisms, 126.
¹⁹⁴ Adorno, Prisms, 127.
The factor that defines music as a process – namely, the knitting together of themes so that one follows from another – only becomes possible thanks to the fixed pattern of notes. The complex forms by means of which succession is internally organized as such would be inadequate for any improvised, non-written music-making.\textsuperscript{195}

His point here seems to be that improvisation, by giving up the written aspect of musical production, willfully abandons the only means that a work has for achieving the kind of complexity demanded by the current state of musical development. Especially when music has been pushed by composers like Schoenberg into the realm of the atonal, Adorno believes it has become impossible to rely on the kind of techniques that would be either memorizable or dependent on expressivity that might be thought to emanate spontaneously from the musician.

Discussing the tendency of serialist composers of aleatory music to go back and make changes to works that were produced by machines, Adorno points to something that is central to the question of improvisation as well. He writes that “In music…such retouching operations seem to be indispensable. …In art the way a work is produced is a matter of indifference.”\textsuperscript{196}

What this implies about improvisation is that, to the extent that it focuses on the activity of performance itself, it fails to grasp what is truly valuable about artistic production, namely the possibility of truth imbedded within the artwork itself. To be sure, the performance is the only means of expressing a musical work of art even in the case of highly composed works. However, the difference Adorno is pointing to is that in composed music the performance itself is not the object. Similarly, Adorno compares improvisation to the so called “action” arts of the same period, which he clearly understood to be a form of pseudo-praxis akin to the political actionism of the student demonstrators we saw him criticize in the last chapter, writing that “‘Action painting’, ‘action composing’ are cryptograms of the direct action that has now been ruled out;
they have arisen in an age in which every such action is either forestalled by technology or recuperated by an administered world.”

The notion of the experimental in art is closely related to the question of improvisation and is a topic on which Adorno also comments. Distinguishing between false and genuine forms of experimentation he writes that

If anything has any prospects of survival then it will only be music that is not concerned with safety. This has led to a shift in the meaning of the experimental. The need for security today, unfreedom and heteronomy, exhausts itself in tone-row and serial productions which conserve the timbre and the harmonics of the experiments of yesterday. …The avant-garde therefore calls for a music which takes the composer by surprise, much as a chemist can be surprised by the new substance in his test-tube. In future, experimental music should not just confine itself to refusing to deal in the current coin; it should also be music whose end cannot be foreseen in the course of production. In genuine experiments there has always been something of a surplus of that objectivity over the production process.

Similarly, Adorno claims that the composer cannot in fact imagine every detail in advance. When actually played there will always be surprises: “The tension between what is imagined and what cannot be foreseen is itself a vital component of the new music,” but “it is no more than a vital element.”

The element of the unforeseen in its new and emphatic sense must not be allowed to escape. From this point of view musique informelle would be the idea of something not fully imagined. It would be the integration by the composer’s subjective ear of what simply cannot be imagined at the level of each individual note... The frontier between a meaningless objectification which the composer gapes at with open mouth and closed ears, and a composition which fulfils the imagination by transcending it, is not one that can be drawn according to any abstract rule. To make this distinction in each individual case would not be the least insignificant of the tasks facing any informal composition.

And extending the point about the element of the unpredictable into terms of success and failure, Adorno writes in another essay that

197 Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 316. Though it is unclear which artists Adorno specifically had in mind, one could look at Harold Rosenberg’s essay “The American Action Painters” for the standard statement of action painting’s intentions.
The experimental is not automatically within the truth, but can equally well end in failure; otherwise the concept of the experiment would have no sensible meaning at all. …Experimental, in the legitimate sense, means nothing other than art’s self-conscious power of resistance against what is conventionally forced upon it from the outside, by consensus.201

The picture we get from these passages is one in which the free music captured in Adorno’s concept of musique informelle requires resisting the fetishizing tendency toward the extremes of control – i.e. “faith in the material” and “absolute organization.”202 What instead needs to be understood—and this is in contrast to what he sees as the weakness of most improvisational activity—is that the need for freedom in music can only be achieved by the utmost awareness and thoroughgoing consciousness. The enigmatic and unpredictable elements that are a necessary part of any successful artwork are not enigmatic and unpredictable because they are irrational or blind, or because experimentation is somehow valuable in and of itself due to its capacity for bringing about what is new. On the contrary, according to Adorno, these elements achieve this by representing an altogether different and higher form of rationality. Indeed, the only way to know whether or not something truly new has been achieved is with eyes and ears wide open. In this sense, Adorno’s claim is that experimentation is probably a necessary condition of true works, but it is not a sufficient one.

Examined within this dialectical framework, where it exists in tension with composition, improvisation must be conceived of as a form of music that stands in contrast to the strict notion of composition. This is because composition is something that takes place prior to the performance, while improvisation takes place during the performance. With this in mind, I suggest that insofar as theory can be viewed as an idea which has the ability to govern practice according to some conscious principle and, as such, takes place prior to practice, we may regard the composed work as the result of an activity which moves from theory to praxis. Conversely,

202 see Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 304.
we might regard the improvised work, to the extent that it can be said to be theoretical at all, as the result of an activity which moves *from praxis to theory*.

As I will argue in Chapter Four, although Adorno gives a theory which points, through its implicit and explicit dialectic of theory and practice, to the potential for artistic activity to function as a model for political activity, he fails to give a robust theory of *praxis* in music. Focused almost exclusively on the need for immanent critique and the primacy of the object, I believe Adorno overlooks something of importance in the needs of the development and maintenance of basic musical practice; that is, while he is focused on the many ways in which subjects fail to produce truth in art, he does not focus much at all on the subjective details of that failure. Without doing this, how is it possible to write off the possibility of progressive movement, which perhaps, is not entirely cut off by structural social problems after all? While Adorno claims that true freedom in art will only follow true freedom in society, it seems to me that the relationship moves in both directions more freely than he admits.
Chapter Four: Improvisation

*Freedom is a performance that must be renewed at every occasion that it is practiced.*

- Edwin Prevost, *No Sound is Innocent*

How do the artistic categories of *composition* and *improvisation* fit within the larger context which also contains philosophy and politics? Consider again the framework that I earlier suggested can be seen underlying Adorno’s various discussions of theory and praxis. On that framework both composition and improvisation are forms of musical praxis. As such (that is, as *art*) they each have the potential to contain a more balanced relationship between theory and practice in the present than either philosophy or politics. Adorno’s criticism of improvisation was that it fails to fulfill this potential by fetishizing its practical side to the detriment of the theoretical. This is the same criticism that he made of political praxis, actionism, and the do-it-yourself movement. The difference, however, is that, although philosophy and music both aim to be what they are (i.e. non-instrumental) musical theory is not blocked to the same degree as philosophy from its realization in praxis. Just as Adorno ‘resolved’ the paradox of political praxis by pointing out that philosophy has its praxical side and does not exist as pure theory, composition remains connected to performance and can only be thought of as purely theoretical in the abstract. In contrast to the situation in philosophy and politics, composition has not needed to become defined exclusively by negative critique because its practical side has not been cut off from theory to the same extent. Thus, we might say that Adorno thinks there is a kind of
‘exit’ in music, through composition, that does not exist in the non-musical social sphere. Nevertheless, what he believes to be the motivation for pseudo-praxis—repressed lack of control—remains the same in both cases.

It is my belief that, contrary to Adorno’s criticism, improvisational music is a legitimate form of music-making which is productive of freedom, and that this legitimacy points to a problem with his larger theory. I could argue that Adorno simply did not look carefully enough at improvisation, that he was biased against it, or that he had not yet had the chance to witness good improvisation. These would all be ways of showing that improvised music, in reality, does remain connected to theory (and thus, that it is dialectical in the necessary way and is not a form of reified pseudo-praxis). Instead, what I propose to do is look more closely at what is good about improvisation as it is, without forcing it to conform to the theory of musical organization that is implied in Adorno’s aesthetics. Admittedly, this will require a new and distinct standard of legitimacy. My hope is that the practice of improvisation will itself point toward such a standard. Based on this close look at the improvisational practice, my claim will be that we can see its legitimacy as a need to loosen the relationship of control between theory and praxis. This is another way of saying that if there is a kind of freedom in improvisation that Adorno’s structure is unable to account for, but that is nonetheless important and valid, then that structure needs to be reexamined. I suggest that theory and praxis be reconfigured in such a way that the praxical experimentation so important for improvisation can be given a role in the development of non-reified subjectivity without being cut off by negative critique as unacceptably positive. Indeed, it might even be that some form of improvisation is necessary for the freedom that Adorno is after (musically, this is some manifestation of composed music) even if he doesn’t acknowledge it.
Following the elaboration of this position I will suggest that, given this new configuration of musical theory and praxis, it seems probable that a similar move can be made to open up a discussion about the validity of political praxis. I argue that if I am correct in thinking that there is a significant structural similarity in Adorno’s critiques of both musical and political ‘pseudo-praxis’, then there is good reason to believe that suspicions regarding the correctness of the former critique will be applicable to the latter as well. I find Adorno’s demand for negative dialectics unavoidable. It would be foolish not to concede the unacceptability of false knowledge and delusion when understanding is what is being sought, and I see and experience the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to self-reflection and genuine social understanding. However, I also believe there is a need in his account which remains to be addressed. There are philosophical, political and artistic phenomena that I believe are either unaccounted for, unnoticed, or rejected by Adorno in his elaboration and practice of the negative dialectical position, but that nevertheless contain something true and important. If the reality of the dialectical connection between theory and praxis is to be taken seriously, then such phenomena must be re-examined. The lack in Adorno’s account can be identified as a set of failures which share the characteristic of paying insufficient attention to the demands of the individual subject in the present. I will detail these problems toward the end of the chapter.

In my effort to reopen the question of political praxis I will argue the parallel between musical and political praxis be extended far enough to see whether we might be able to make sense of the notion of an *improvisational politics*. I will be trying to unfold the notion of improvisation in such a way that we can begin to see its legitimacy as a political concept, one which extends beyond the simple definition of being decided ‘in the moment’. ‘Improvisation’ in my view is a broad, fertile concept and practice that carries with it implications for
understanding human social relationships, the related demands and freedoms of time, and even the role and needs of space. The musician and theorist Derek Bailey, in his text on improvisation, cites E.T. Ferand as saying that a historical study of western music which “confines itself to the practical or theoretical sources that have come down to us in writing or in print, without taking into account the improvisational element in living musical practice, must of necessity present an incomplete, indeed a distorted picture.” I agree with this claim and will attempt to show that it is true and that its truth extends deeply into a reflection on politics and art which, although it begins with the specific case of Adorno in this dissertation, has much broader relevance. Ultimately I hope to have shown that we need a theory that remains open to the needs of subjective development; i.e. that both recognizes the legitimacy of musical improvisation and recognizes the unavoidable, and unavoidably improvisational, nature of social change.

What is interesting but difficult in the case of Adorno, on my reading, is that there is a kind of divergence between his explicit theory and the overall tone or motivation that one senses as underlying his thoughts and actions. On the one hand, his critique of identity-thinking in philosophy, politics, and art, manifests in large part as advocacy for overcoming the repressed desire to control. On the other hand, it is hard not to see Adorno himself as desiring a great deal of control. To my mind it is this desire for control that leads, at least in part, to such an impassioned defense of composition over improvisation. Perhaps we may even say that this, his desire for control which he knows is both impossible and unacceptable, is one source of the overwhelming melancholic tone that one finds in his late writing. What I hope to make a case for here is the possibility that recognition of the unacceptability of such a desire for control can

be combined with a hopeful awareness that such control is not in fact necessary for bringing about movement toward freedom.

It seems to me that the issue of social change, manifested in the problem of control, and reflected in the question of musical organization, identifies a deeply rooted philosophical problem which manifests itself in a number of different ways and in different contexts. For this reason, exploring the overlapping circles of theory and praxis seems to me the most adequate way of understanding the concern. In approaching the final chapter in this way I am also acknowledging the need to move beyond a direct confrontation with Adorno’s thought and instead to engage increasingly with the problem itself. Adorno’s thought represents an unavoidable counterweight to any consideration of the problem, but is ultimately only one point in the constellation.

Improvisation

Derek Bailey begins his seminal text *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* with the following words:

Improvisation [is]… both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood. …Perhaps this is inevitable, even appropriate. Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description; essentially non-academic. And, more than that, any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.

Thus, Bailey, himself an experienced and well-known improvisational guitarist, begins a book about improvisation with the disclaimer that it is difficult, if not impossible to define. Indeed

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204 Bailey’s book represents a kind of oral history of improvisational practice and, since written in the mid-1970s, has become an often referenced source of ideas on the subject. Its interviews with composers and musicians along with Bailey’s own commentary are very helpful in understanding the shifting tensions which define improvisation, on its own terms and in relation to composition.

this is a quality which appears to be agreed upon by most theorists of improvisation. Another improvising musician who has written a widely read and influential text on improvisation is Edwin Prevost, a former member of the radical improvising group AMM. Prevost shares this understanding of improvisation, or ‘meta-music’ (as Prevost and AMM have termed their version of free improvisation) though he holds to a somewhat more developed version which tends to extend further into the normative/critical realm than Bailey. In an attempt to protect the “continued integrity of the improvising mode” from the misperception that because it is ‘informal’ it does not have any “underlying structure to distinguish it from other ways of making music,” Prevost outlines certain tentative guiding principles for the improviser. Upon stating that he believes that “all procedures [including improvisation] have inherent objectives and power relations,” he indicates what he takes to be the general character of improvisational practice:

The aesthetic of an improvisation, and its technique, are both only valid in the moment of being. Improvisational ideas will fade, unless they can blend into the process and the mobile logic of dialogical heurism. Finding a new sound, mastering its production, and then projecting it: this is the work of a meta-musician. It is commitment to this investigative ethos which sets him apart from the technocratic ideal…Certainty comes only in the constant search for a sound to meet the need of the meta-musical context. Sensing, evaluating and acting, in creative dialogue, are the medium of the meta-musician.

Several key ideas come out here that will need to be elaborated—including the concepts of “dialogical-heurism,” persistent investigation and experimentation, collaboration, and presentness—but the general situation described is one in which a fundamental part of improvisation is its self-definition.

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206 By “theorist of improvisation” I mean to include anyone, musician or not, who has cared to reflect on the nature of the practice.

207 AMM, a still active (though member-shifting) group based in Britain, began performing in the mid-1960’s.

208 He claims to derive these principles from the conscious and unconscious practice of improvising musicians.

Bailey, continuing in the introduction to his book, translates this notion of indefinability into the categories of theory and practice we have been using when he claims that because “there is no general or widely held theory of improvisation” thus it “has no existence outside of its practice.” Criticizing what he takes to be historian Ella Zonis’ overly academic treatment of improvisational music, Bailey nevertheless agrees with her observation that there is often a “discrepancy between the theory of practice and the practice of practice.” Such resistance to both categorization and the formation of any clear goals presents a strange obstacle to a discussion of improvisation. Nevertheless, judging from the accounts of those who consider themselves to be engaged in improvisation, there are certainly things which it is not, and these negative limitations provide a positive, if somewhat nebulous, picture of the space that improvisation demands for itself.

With this in mind, I will begin by giving some indication of the history of the relationship between composition and improvisation, since the existence and character of improvisation are so intertwined with the history and development of composition that any complete understanding of the former would need to constantly refer back to that dialectical relationship. Consider the account of this history found in Bailey’s chapter on composition, related through the words of French composer and organist Jacques Charpentier. According to Charpentier, composition began as a kind of shorthand for the performer to deal with shortcomings in memory and, as such, served as an appendage to oral and traditional training, an instrument for carrying forward tradition. In this form, written music was imprecise and not yet standardized. As the musical staff and time symbols were introduced and as these developed over centuries, composition became increasingly exact and the musical work began to exist “outside of itself” as an object.
(‘the score’). It was thus no longer a carrier of tradition but rather an instrument of the musical work itself. So, according to Charpentier, there was a development from the “expression of an experienced psycho-physiological continuum – on the spot and at the moment it is experienced” to a “willful, formal, explicative construction which finds in itself alone its substance and its justification.”

The advances in notation allowed for greater complexity in the musical work, both in terms of what the single musician could accomplish by reading while he performed, and also what could be organized among increasingly larger groups of musicians. Without performers needing to memorize every detail of a piece or have extensive experience practicing and communicating with one’s fellow performing musicians, the performed works could grow in length and detail. Because the intention of the composer could be more accurately carried forward into reality, the greatness of the work became limited only by the quality of his own imagination, the breadth of instrumentation, and the natural abilities of the human performers. The severely limiting elements of memory and direct communication had been mostly overcome, as was the need for time to train a musician, since each performer was only responsible for a limited task which could be mastered in a reasonable amount of time and by a greater potential pool of individuals. We might describe this development as moving from the particular, which is constantly changing, to the law-like and universal, which is the same for everybody, at all times.

As musical activity becomes more law-like, there is greater diversity through specialization of labor and more becomes possible. Within this movement, which is sometimes characterized as part of a process of enlightenment, there is an attendant democratization of music in the sense that it becomes potentially accessible to all through the commonality of musical notation and the

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availability of the score. Furthermore, we can see that the development of music toward the compositional form involves a giving up of certain individual freedoms for the sake of greater/higher freedom. As the composer increasingly becomes the sole force of musical creativity and spontaneity, he must give up the ability to perform his own work. At the same time, the musicians who collectively perform the work are given the task of re-creating the intention of the composer as accurately as possible, and thus their freedom is restricted to the manner in which the music is performed. It is only to the extent that each part surrenders some freedom that the whole can manifest the greater freedom of realizing the potential of human creativity.

But the claim that this movement represents a progression toward ever greater freedom is questionable and has indeed been contested. From the perspective of contemporary improvisation, Derek Bailey claims that occidental music is “the most inhospitable area for improvisation” and describes the role of notation as having a “stranglehold” on musical production and as being inflexible with respect to the performer. From this perspective, the development of composition takes control out of the hands of the performer and gives it to the composer. As suggested, this may be a necessary transfer when viewed from the perspective of the musical whole. However, as Bailey and those like him suggest, the lack of autonomy on the part of the performing musician presents certain problems that ought not to be overlooked, including the general loss of the capacity for awareness on the part of the performer.

This concern about the element of subjective control in musical production is one that figures centrally in musical theory, though the usual analysis is somewhat the reverse of

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213 This claim must be qualified in the same way as the printing press in general, namely that such democratization presupposes a process of growing literacy.
215 Some, such as Earle Brown, have tried to return a degree of control to the performer while retaining the overall compositional structure. I will briefly discuss these examples below.
Bailey’s, citing the damaged subject as the *cause* of the need for composition rather than its consequence. For Adorno specifically, the problem of subjective spontaneity is that under present conditions, the subject (in this case the musician) is degraded to such an extent that he cannot be relied upon to act creatively or respond spontaneously even if given the chance. At the heart of his criticism of improvisation is the claim that those who would advocate for a redistribution of power to the musicians overlook this fact. Moreover, it might be suggested that in actuality the performer only has so much potential as a *human* anyway (memory, dexterity, versatility, etc.) This being the case, the absence of the beneficial mediation of composition leaves the music less capable of manifesting spontaneity due to natural limitations as well as social ones. The result, in any case, is that the performer cannot be trusted with the creation of the music. This situation is in part what prompted modernist composers such as Pierre Boulez and John Cage to experiment with aleatory music. In this form of composition, which can be loosely described as being created by randomly choosing notes and sounds within certain pre-given limitations, the burden of creative choice is removed from every individual including the composer and musician. The process involved in such “chance music” attempts to circumvent the liability posed by the subject’s reified consciousness, to the objective quality of the musical work.

One might think that improvisation is a kind of chance music based on the idea that improvising musicians do not prepare what they are to play and thus function as unpredictable sources of sound. In this case, the effect, from the perspective of the composer/performer, would be similarly random. This assumes, at the very least, that not preparing in the way that a composer does is equivalent to a complete absence of preparation, and the notion that the composer has no influence over the output of improvising musicians. Both Earle Brown, who
experienced with the use of improvisation within compositional contexts, and Derek Bailey see a more complex role for improvisation in composed music. Bailey suggests that “The unique experience for a composer in the use of improvisation must be the relinquishing of control over at least some of the music and, even more critically for the composer, passing over that control not to ‘chance’ but to other musicians.”216 Contrary to the notion that improvising musicians can be used as sources of randomness, Bailey believes that their true utility comes only with the recognition by composers of their value as musicians and not merely technicians, that is, as thinking, feeling human beings with musical skill and understanding of their own. These musicians offer the composer an opportunity to collaborate and rely on others; while the result may be a surprise to the composer, this does not allow us to say that the result is random in any simple sense. Nevertheless, merely to assert this possibility does not necessarily alleviate the problem of reified consciousness that bothered Adorno and led also to attempts at aleatory music.

The general response by theorists of improvisation seems to be to try to diminish the importance of musical objectivity, so that the evaluative structure can be refocused on the creative subjects and on the process that they are engaged in. Bailey hints at this shift when he describes, with an ironic tone, the compositional tradition’s practice of not trusting the performer. He writes:

Performance in classical music seems designed to disprove [the idea that music is malleable.] In the straight world the performer approaches music on tiptoe. Music is precious and performance constitutes a threat to its existence. So, of course, he has to be careful. Also, the music doesn’t belong to him. He’s allowed to handle it but then only under the strictest supervision. Somebody, somewhere, has gone through a lot of trouble to create this thing, this composition, and the performer’s primary responsibility is to preserve it from damage.

216 Bailey, Improvisation, 70.
Although it may not be obvious outside the context of his larger argument, the emphasis in this description is on the status of the composition as a “thing” that has autonomous value and that should be handled accordingly. It is apparently Bailey’s view that such an attitude is out of line with a healthier musical practice and is, in any case, out of line with the intentions of improvisation. In this question of process versus objectivity lies a tension in the various practices and ideas about improvisation that is difficult to resolve. On one hand it is clear that many, if not most, improvisers regard the meaning of their music as relying heavily or even exclusively on its location within a specific intersubjective context. And yet, it is also clear that they do not want to abandon the idea that the music must somehow stand on its own apart from the social relationships under which it was produced. My own experience confirms the presence of this tension. I have found on occasion that this distinction between musical objectivity and intersubjectivity comes to the fore when only listening to a recording of an improvisational performance without being able to see it. This effect occurs through the isolation of a single musical aspect and the removal of all the habituated responses that go along with seeing people and instruments within a particular space. I do not however go so far as to suggest that those ‘visual’ aspects are not themselves ‘musical’, but such a definition would stand in contrast to the traditional notion of musical objectivity. In contrast to this, I have had the experience in listening to and watching recorded performances of groups like AMM (as opposed to viewing such performances in person) that such music would be difficult or impossible to understand outside a particular group of individuals who are ‘local’ to the practice (in a particular time and place). While I do think there is something to be gained from a close listening to even a recorded free-improvisational performance, there is clearly something missing which prevents what is being listened to from making sense. To watch a video recording of such a performance helps to
give a better sense of the context that the sounds one hears were created in, and allows you to imagine yourself being at the performance. But it is an altogether different experience to be in close physical proximity to those people making the music or even to actually be one of the people making it. This is a tension that will remain at the center of what follows. In any case, what the practice should be exactly we will have to see, but it will not be one which takes the role of the performing musician as purely functional.

So what then are the main features of improvisational praxis? It is clear that the practitioners of improvisation consider one of its core traits to be its orientation toward presentness. It is seen as an art that exists in the moment, is not permanent and not fixed. This idea is expressed by the organist Stephen Hicks when speaking about the nature of improvisation. When asked whether he thought of a particular improvisational work in terms of success or failure, he responds by saying

> Occasionally you play and think—yes, that was quite good—but most of the time…I think an improvisation should be played and then forgotten. …It’s either good or bad but if you listen to an improvisation over and over again it just gets worse. …[Without recording] you couldn’t [listen to it over and over again], and I don’t think you should. It’s something that should be heard, enjoyed or otherwise, and then completely forgotten.217

This particular expression tends to one extreme, but the general sentiment is widespread, Bailey himself adding that improvisation is a music that “celebrates music’s ephemeral nature” and that this is a quality that continues to attract many of those who participate in it. Along similar lines, Prevost makes the somewhat stronger claim that if music is to be truly autonomous– as metamusic seeks to be – then it can only have meaning “in the moment of being heard” and for those directly involved (more on this shortly).218 Speaking about the incompatible goals of improvisation and musical recording, reproduction, and dissemination, he writes:

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218 Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 102.
…the idea of embalming the past does not imply a respect for the life-forces which generated the music in the first place. …Even if it could be proved that the sound of these musics is as was once performed, so much meaning has been lost in its detachment from its own time and place as to make controversy so much babble.219

The meaning that is ‘lost’ in the reproduction is not just the intended meaning of its creators (because this could probably be saved in most cases), but much more so, the ability to experience and understand the reason it was played and the context in which it was created. After the performance, such music can be nothing more than an exchange commodity. He goes on to claim that “…the meta-musical engagement with free improvisation is a generative response that demands and develops new motifs to express new meanings; a constant process of re-definition; an ever-present ear to the needs of the moment.”220 In other words, in a fundamental sense improvisation just is the musical practice of creating in the moment. It is defined by its resistance to the solidification of lasting meaning. This, of course, is to walk a fine line where one risks letting that resistance itself fall over into a positive definition. Whether or not this is the case we will have to see, but it will in any case likely depend on the particular activity in question.

If improvisation is defined by its temporal and contextual specificity, then on what grounds can we evaluate the quality of any given improvisational activity? Denying it any significant lasting art objecthood and no clear external source of musical value, many improvisers seem to want to say that the criterion of truth depends on something like intersubjective confirmation. If improvisation resists the notion of lasting meaning but does not desire to be a kind of musical nihilism (which I believe it does not) then that meaning must be found in the practice itself. Indeed the very structure of Bailey’s account – primarily in the form of interviews with musicians – implies that the value and significance of improvisation probably

219 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 102.
220 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 80.
can be known only by those participating in it, recognizing at the same time that participation
grows to potentially include individual audience members in addition to performers. According
to Prevost, in contrast to traditional composed art music (or even pop music at the other
extreme), it is the intersubjective constitution of improvisation that allows it to be truly experimental.

Only by-passing or superseding either [art music or pop music] is it possible to create new forms reflecting aspirations and human relations not forged by the market economy. A new language of music must be developed and evolved through collective exploration. …Invention of new sounds, new sonic relations, new human co-operation, in the making of a music that the old bourgeois system will not even be able to recognize as music.221

Prevost’s claim that non-improvised art music is unable to see past the heteronomy of the market economy is almost certainly an over-simplification. Nevertheless, the central insight is that improvisation has the potential to be collectively productive and autonomous in a way that no other music has been able to be so far, and, he thinks, is structurally unable to ever be.

Prevost is not shy about stating his belief that legitimate improvisation is about social relations and process, and is not about either musical objectivity or feeling. He writes “The meta-musician must put music aside or else be consumed by music. All meta-music’s aesthetic priorities arise from the direct relationship of player with materials, player with player and players with audience.”222 The key operative term here is ‘player’ and is meant to direct our attention to the importance of the participating individuals relative to the music itself. The underlying notion is that musical meaning requires, at the very least, active participation by musician producers. Prevost suggests that the meaning that improvisation takes is overwhelmingly particular and writes that in improvisation “occasion is a dominating aesthetic impulse. The music is formulated to serve a particular need that transcends the merely musical.

221 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 119.
222 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 103.
This sense of musical meaning outweighs, in my mind, the inner technical preoccupations of much contemporary western ‘art’ music. …The technical interests and complexities which fascinate the specialist contemporary composer rarely reach any but a small and similarly highly informed public.”

The notion of occasion is one that Prevost relies on to elaborate what he sees as improvisation’s special ability to reorient music away from the tendencies of consumption and technical fetishization and toward its role as a way of building relations directly and actively between its participants. While many improvisers regard what they do as an activity that can be undertaken to good effect solo (a possibility I will discuss more below), Prevost finds its greatest meaning in its collaborative potential. As such, the meaning of music shifts from being something to be consumed, to being “an expression of life,” specifically of those most directly engaged in it. In examining the “microsocio-musical relations which exist and develop during the practice of making music,” Prevost suggests that, in the compositional mode, artistic success is gauged by the degree to which the performance “represents a perfect execution of ideas and interpretation,” which were determined prior to and thus outside of the temporal, physical, and social performance ‘space’. In contrast to this, the improvisational mode of music making requires that its problems “are solved ‘within’ performance” and hence “the music is made real by the creative input of the players.”

What exactly Prevost has in mind by this “realness” is unclear, but he seems at least to be suggesting that for the players (and perhaps also for the ‘participating’ audience) the music becomes less objectified and external and more directly connected to their own experience. This is to define musical reality in a particular way, and while the act of redefinition itself does not refute an opposed theory like Adorno’s, it nevertheless points up an aspect which demands, at the very least, its own self-critique. Central

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223 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 167-68.
224 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 172.
to his argument for this definition is that improvisation is ‘dialogical’ in a way that composition cannot be. He writes that

...as improvisation is essentially a collective form of music making, the creative emphasis is also determined by the dialogical interaction of musicians. The existence of other players enters the investigative perspective and becomes a crucial element in the musical environment. In the compositional mode the musicians relate to each other via the score—in other words communication is interposed by an external agency, independent of them all and therefore not in any composite sense dialogical.\textsuperscript{225}

For Prevost the intersubjective formation of meaning is one of the aspects of the improvisation that most definitively sets it apart from other forms of music making and makes it a preferable practice for the production of individual freedom.

In this discussion of the way that improvisation develops and understands itself intersubjectively, we can also begin to see what appears to be another fundamental trait, and that is its pedagogical character. By this I mean to point to a couple of things that may not be immediately associated with the term. As opposed to traditional Western training which teaches exact reproduction by the musician, improvisation is pedagogical in the way it takes development as a primary function and permits, even embraces, the experimentation, practicing, and failure that must accompany it. John Stevens, a British improviser and one of the first people to attempt to teach free improvisation, claimed that by finding a teacher to learn an instrument “…you miss a mass of important musical experience. Studying formally with a teacher might be the right way to achieve certain specific aims, but to do only that is a very distorted way of approaching a musical instrument. It has to be realized that a person’s own investigation of an instrument – his exploration of it – is totally valid.”\textsuperscript{226} What I would like to highlight here is Stevens’ belief in the importance of a certain quality of musical experience

\textsuperscript{225} Prévost, \textit{No Sound is Innocent}, 172.
\textsuperscript{226} Bailey, \textit{Improvisation}, 98.
which can only be had through a particular relationship with an instrument, including
‘investigation’ and ‘exploration’. Given his claim that such a relationship cannot be achieved
through the distorted pedagogy of ‘formal’ musical training, it is implied that what is needed
instead is something like an improvisational space within which a more free relationship can
develop, one that is not prescribed from outside. To the extent that classical musical training is
directed specifically at technical proficiency it cuts off the experimental impulse in favor of a
work ethic that would more completely serve the interest of the composition. Free
improvisational practice on the other hand abandons all pre-ordained determining ends other than
‘freedom’ and thus remains open to whatever possibilities the player thinks, or feels, to be
necessary or desirable. If the performer sees fit to explore the different sounds that can be
achieved by scraping a single piano string with first a plastic knife and then a metal one, this is
not necessarily unacceptable. Indeed, if done in the interest of musical freedom then it is
welcomed.

Bailey points to his belief in the necessity of such openness when he suggests that a large
part of the cause of the decline of jazz was its historically increasing tendency to close off
experimentation and development to all but an elite few. The alternative of following pre-
existing strictures has the effect of habituating one’s musical abilities in a way that is very hard
to undo. Thus, if the goal is subjective musical spontaneity then subjective experimentation is at
least a necessary part of musical praxis. Continuous subjective artistic development requires
experimentation and experimentation requires the ability to fail. As Bailey’s thought suggests, it
may be the case that there will always be a few strong individuals who are willing to go forward
despite the prospect of un-legitimated failure, but for most the threat has the effect of causing
one to simply reject experimentation. (Implied also is the importance of that openness remaining
available to all who want it, or, to put it another way, in any vital musical culture, people must feel free to attempt their vision and express themselves without worrying about the consequences.) It should be said that to some extent the practicing that goes into classical training does allow for the legitimation of failure and experimentation. Even so, this is always for the sake of the higher good of a more perfect performance achieved by learning from one’s mistakes. Part of this process is weeding out those individuals who cannot meet the required standards of proficiency which remain externally defined, and furthermore all activity short of the final performance is classified as mere practicing. Improvisation on the other hand might be said to raise the status of ‘practicing’ to equal status with the performance so that they become qualitatively indistinguishable. Improvisation is a musical activity that begins from wherever its participants happen to be and is open to everyone.

It has been suggested that development requires experimentation, but what exactly is the role of openness and experimentation in subjective development? And what does it mean to develop in the absence of any particular goals to develop toward other than freedom? Consider Tony Oxley’s thoughts on his participation in the free improvisational group Joseph Holbrooke:

…my main impression [of participation in Joseph Holbrooke] is one of continuous development. The search was always for something that sounded right to replace things that sounded predictable and wrong. …Sometimes there’s an assumption that this sort of thing is done just to be different. That’s totally wrong. It’s an emotional demand that you have to meet. When you’re wearing chains you don’t become aware of them through intellectual processes. You can feel them. At the time, the reasons for changing are not considered. They seem irrefutable.227

While the irrational imperative suggested by Oxley is questionable if taken as total with respect to developmental processes, his experience points to an aspect of musical practice that comes up repeatedly in the accounts of those involved. The idea that you become aware of unfreedom by ‘feeling’ it or experiencing it, rather than thinking about it, is important to consider, especially in

227 Bailey, Improvisation, 89.
light of the fact that compositional practice is so strongly oriented toward development through theoretical understanding. You have to know what freedom feels like to know that it is missing. And even if you know that something is wrong you need to experience its actuality in some form to know that it is a real possibility – something worth striving for. John Stevens, whom I mentioned above as having taught classes in free improvisation, suggests a similar experience: “I found the best way to transmit information that I had was to actually do it. I get them to do it in the hope that they will then share my experience of that thing and so know it in the way that I know it. …if the players can be made to feel a thing working they will then know the essential part about how to do it.” So, again, what is being suggested is that there is some part of understanding that can come only from direct experience of the thing or activity that is being understood, and without that experience the developmental process will not proceed. In Stevens’ case, at least, this is a call for a pedagogy that tends toward doing rather than thinking.

Interestingly, the improvising musician turned music teacher Gavin Bryars, despite his having consciously turned away from improvisational performance, finds unique and important pedagogical qualities in improvisational practice, explaining that “…My main objections to improvisation have not been eradicated, they have been assimilated into a broader musical practice. …If I have to experience improvisation I would rather it be as a player than from the outside.”

So we also begin to get a picture of improvisation as something which perhaps can be taught but only in a way that is quite different from the manner found in classical training.

Having no specific end, improvisation has little use for practicing as rehearsal. This is what

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228 Bailey, *Improvisation*, 120.
229 Bailey, *Improvisation*, 117. Interestingly, although he does not here mention it, this sentiment of Bryars, that improvisation is better experienced from the inside than the outside, is in-line with many other advocates of improvisation, though they do not see it as a fault.
Cornelius Cardew (of the improvisational group AMM) means when he suggests that improvisation instead calls for ‘training’, and in particular, a training that builds a kind of ‘moral discipline’. Without a clear and particular end to work toward, improvisational practice is without guidance. It takes place within ‘new territory’ as the old ends, assumptions, and ideals have been consciously given up. There remains no option but continuous self-creation and thus the practice that takes place in improvisation must be, at least in part, directed toward the individual ability to begin and maintain that self-conscious and self-critical effort. In terms of the difference between improvisation and composition, it is not that the compositional tradition has not attempted to progress by a kind of self-consciousness and movement past old assumptions, but improvisation, unlike composition places this burden at the level of the individual musician/creator and at every moment, as a practice, rather than at the level of history. Related to this kind of subjective development by experimentation, Prevost articulates the way that he believes failure becomes success:

Some configurations may exist beyond rational creative thought: the key seemed to be in letting the music go out of control, in having the courage to fail. Indeed, seeking failure itself was a possible route to success! For AMM these ‘controlled accidents’ were practiced variously: through…testing the bowing qualities of an unknown metal sheet [etc.].

Without getting caught up in the paradoxical semantics of the claim that failure is a means to success, the main point here seems to be that an important part of creation is the willingness to try something even though you think it will not work, the reason being that the results may turn out to be positioned beyond our capacity for imagining and analyzing in a rational sense. Room must be left for the happy accident, especially in the social-human fields of music and politics, but probably also in the so called ‘hard’ sciences. The problem then with traditional musical

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231 Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 19.
232 As the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend has theorized. See for instance his *Against Method* (1975).
education is that, except with regard to the ‘exceptional’ minority, its precise methods and insistence on compulsive practicing tend to teach away from the imagination and away from any sense of creative agency in the performing musician. This is what Prevost means when he complains that “Tutoring makes the student psychologically dependent. …Received technique masks its deep assumptions…” Improvisational music has the ability to resist, and dismantle, such dependency by forcing the musician to create without the help of his usual aids. Where the musician comes to an improvisational performance with so much method already ingrained into his playing that he would rely on it even when put in this position, then he must make a special effort to identify those hidden forces and consciously push away from them in hopes of finding some new territory. This ‘new territory’ need not be new in any objective, historical sense, but only for the musician. Returning to the standing question of the connection between development and experimentation we get some help from Prevost:

> By definition the improvising musician is not certain of the sounds that will emerge in performance, or the responses which may be attached to them. But he cannot shirk responsibility for them. They will become a part of his emerging being, with which he must live and from which he must progress, note to note, performance to performance. This experimentalism marks the most significant philosophical difference between improvisation and the conventional classical mode. …As music evolves between *listening musicians*, dialogue determines musical direction even if the parties try hard to ignore the other.”

Again Prevost formulates the question in terms of improvisation’s collaborative dimension. He claims that subjective development needs experimentation and can function as such without choosing particular ends because the improvising musician has, by definition, been placed (by himself and by the world he lives in) in a state of directionlessness. In the absence of any traditional methodology, the musician-creator really can do little else but experiment. In putting it this way he draws the clearest connection so far between the importance of experimentation

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and improvisation’s intersubjective grounding; the experimentation with sound is the only means that individuals have to learn to communicate musically with each other in the absence of some external pre-given system. Thus, improvisational practice, at least in its more radical forms, seeks to be a kind of ‘starting over’, both for the individual musician and the performing collective. To be clear though, it cannot be that the improvising musicians are ‘blank slates’. This is impossible and to pretend such would undermine any hope of achieving a practice which can aid in genuine development away from musical heteronomy. Rather, the goal is to make a genuine effort to extricate each other and oneself from external compulsion and perhaps more importantly, from the external forces that have made themselves internal over time.

By way of qualifying this account, it may be that the experience of the classical musician is not quite so formal and dead as improvisers like Bailey have made it seem. Certainly, different classical musicians have had many different experiences. The bass player Esperanza Spalding described her own experience playing composed classical music as one of being “intimately connected” with her fellow musicians. "You get together [with] like-minded individuals and choose a piece of music," Spalding says. "You sit together with this music on the stand, and you have to listen so carefully, breathe and be connected so intimately with everyone around you to balance all of the parts involved in bringing this piece to life.” Of course Spalding is referring to a situation in which she and the other musicians have themselves chosen the piece that they will play and will also be responsible for the interpreting that is often left up to the conductor. These simple acts of autonomy should not be underestimated and indeed we may even say that they represent the presence of improvisational elements (broadly construed) within the

composition. In composition the score itself is only the beginning of control and I expect that the experience would change greatly depending on the size of the ensemble and the degree to which the material has been externally determined. Both of these variables are at the heart of the present inquiry into the connection between musical and political creation. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that her experience of playing music, which has for the most part been externally created, seems much more similar to those experiences described by Bailey as being typical of improvisational performance and foreign to traditional non-improvisational performance. His view of that standard Western instrumental training is that it produces “specifically non-improvisers, musicians rendered incapable of attempting improvisation. …it teaches that the creation of music is a separate activity from playing that instrument” and adds that “composers prefer the instrumentalist to limit his contribution to providing the instrument, keeping it in tune and being able to use it to carry out, as accurately as possible, any instructions which might be given to him.”

Regardless of whether Bailey has over-generalized the damaging effects of traditional musical training on the musician, his core concern remains deeply important. His question is about the extent to which music can and does allow the performer to develop and exercise creative autonomy. Put in the Marxian musical terms of Adorno, we might say that Bailey, along with many others, is worried that the Western musical tradition has made the individual musician merely functional to the larger progression, and sees improvisational practice as a way of breaking down the subjective reification that compositional practice has wrought. This dynamic is often expressed as the difference between passivity and activity, where passivity is a lack of autonomous participation in one’s own musical doings. Gavin Bryars, the composer, music teacher and former improviser mentioned above, developed an objection to improvisation

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because of its “personalizing of music,” a problem that Adorno had with it as well. He thinks that it risks creating too strong a connection between the music and the performer, such that there was nothing objective left outside of the performer. However, despite this opinion, Bryars came to recognize the value of improvisation as a practice which is good for the performer himself because it, more than other forms of musical practice, demands participation and activity as opposed to spectatorship and passivity. Prevost identifies such a demand for participation as being central to the experience of improvising for the members of the group he was a part of, AMM. One of the original members, Lou Gare, suggested that AMM-music-making had the general objective of sharpening perception and as such acted as “an ‘irritant’ of the kind that promotes and demands responses.”

According to Prevost,

> Sound has no meaning without being heard. Hearing alters the complexion of being. Listening shapes, delineates and defines the listener. Sound stimulates the psyche, using the aural reflexes and automatic channels to elicit response. There is no sound-as-art without a thoughtful human reaction. Each art-sound challenges the listener, because it does not contain any life-preserving information. Meaning in music exists only as long as the listener has a conscious and cumulative sense of being.

Thus, for both the improvising performer and the audience member, the kind of intellectual and sensory passivity that is typical in both popular and classical music is difficult. The difficulty of the music, its non-intuitive quality, jerks the listener out of complacency by providing nothing on which to rest expectations, and forces her to choose either active participation or self-exclusion. And given the lack of a guiding structure, the choice to participate necessarily involves taking part in the process of giving the sounds meaning, and such a process requires total effort and concentration. Indeed, according to Prevost, commitment to the activity is necessary for more than one reason, stating that “Persistence is required because improvisation and the meta-musical life are not easy task-masters. Maintaining an ethos of heurism and dialogue is very much

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238 Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 179. My emphasis.
counter to the expediency and social atomism of our times.” and adding that “The enduring improvising musician displays tenacity enough to frighten most professional musicians. Courage and determination are required to survive on the economic margins.”

The jazz saxophonist Steve Lacy relates a story which connects this potential ‘activating strength’ of improvisation to its status as experimental, open-ended, and self-creating. Talking about playing at home with fellow jazz musician Don Cherry he said:

…he used to tell me, ‘Well, let’s play’. So I said ‘OK. What shall we play’. And there it was. The dilemma. The problem. It was a terrible moment. I didn’t know what to do. …It took a few years to get to the point where I could just play. …It happened in gradual stages. …And then it stayed that way for a couple of years. No tunes, nothing. Just get up and play. But it all had a lot to do with the musical environment. You have to get some kindred spirits. …And you have to keep it going otherwise you lose that freedom. And then the music is finished.

The conditions of improvisation force the musician to begin to create without any established guidance; which is not to say that the musician cannot look around for elements to work with or be inspired by. However, this will be done with the awareness that the choice ultimately lies with oneself. What also comes out in this account from Lacy is the incremental nature of individual development. Improvisation has the potential, in a way that composed performance does not, to facilitate the individual’s shedding of the fear of creation. In the right “musical environment” – according to Lacy: in the presence of “kindred spirits” – the musician can be coaxed into trusting herself to make decisions (more or less conscious) about what should be played. The idea seems to be that the collaborative environment is such that no one is made to feel other for having experimented and failed or for simply expressing their musical ideas. As long as one is serious, and thus reciprocates the trust shown by the other players, anything is acceptable. As I will argue shortly, this aspect of improvisation closely parallels what I see as

239 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 38.
240 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 65.
241 Bailey, Improvisation, 55-56.
the importance of friendship in the social/political sphere. In both cases, it is because the desired change is at the level of the individual and because this change takes place incrementally, it needs an intersubjective environment which is both open and safe. Gavin Bryars had the following to say about his participation in the group Joseph Holbrooke:

We developed a collective language. Not a consciously articulated language but step by step – each step by a different person… The ideas that were contributed individually all colored the development but we were in a position to trust each other sufficiently to share those things, to allow the individual contributions to come in and be used collectively.²⁴²

Regarding, specifically, the effort to diminish the fear of creation, Prevost tells us that his improvisations have been concerned with getting the musician to know what it feels like to really begin, that is, to create something from nothing. Again, while this “nothing” cannot be taken literally where the socialized subject is concerned, it is nevertheless important to foster, in the musician, an understanding of his potential as a genuine creative force, as the source of his musical world. While pure autonomy is impossible, the hope remains to be able to free oneself from the sense of helpless obedience, subservience, and consumerism that is too often the result of other forms of musical practice.

In addition to creative confidence, the active state that will be left behind by the process of stripping away subjective musical reification seems to be in large part an increased sensitivity, awareness and spontaneity. In terms of sensitivity and awareness, many improvisers point to the change in the relation to time and also space. Morton Feldman has claimed that “When the performer is made more intensely aware of time, he also becomes more intensely aware of the action or sound he is about to play.”²⁴³ Regarding the significance of size (which has both temporal and spatial aspects), Prevost claims that “the orchestral environment is inimical to collective creativity. Symphonic musicians cannot hear what the music they make sounds

In contrast, he suggests that improvised music is a “small music.” This seems to indicate that truly collaborative activity requires both a great degree of intimacy as well as temporal flexibility. These are needed in conjunction with each other so that musicians have both the capacity and willingness to listen to their fellow performer-creators, and have an open, reciprocal dialogue with them. While composed music is not necessarily ‘large’, the ability to go large would seem to be one of its core advantages. Furthermore, the ‘largeness’ at issue here is just as much, or more, a question of quality as of quantity. In other words, whereas the focus of improvisational music (even when performed in a larger group) is usually very much on the specific circumstances and events of the performance and the spontaneous communications between creating performers, the focus of composed music, on the other hand, is typically expanded in such a way that attention to detail, while keen, is at every moment subjugated to the overarching goal of the performance. This meaning is emphasized when Prévost makes reference to this notion of “small music” again in another essay. Arguing for the importance of recognizing the connection between the freedom of the individual and that of society, he writes:

> It is when improvising with other people that the identity and the potential of each musician can evolve. …[Improvisers, despite their self-motivation,] know from practice that their individuality is nurtured within society and only made recognizable by virtue of the wider society. This paradox lies at the heart of the music’s development and meaning. …A small music dealing in large issues is easily ignored, when many have an interest in the ignorance of a true construction of individualism.\(^{245}\)

The suggestion seems to be that improvisation, because of its subjectively-focused character, has the ability to foster a new musical individualism that would be capable of addressing social questions at the same level as highly composed music, but in a more complete way due to its incorporation of a healthier relationship between individuals and the group.

\(^{244}\) Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 126.

\(^{245}\) Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 89-90.
From the perspective of the free improviser, composition, as a system of musical planning, creates musical objects which persist after their time despite the fact that the context of their origination has likely passed and that they may no longer be relevant. In such cases the relationship of the audience and musicians to the music, and thus to each other, is likely to be even more mediated and arbitrary than it was at its inception. What was, in some respects, a means of qualitative expression (if not discussion), becomes merely a means of exchange – a common currency. In the face of this context-less-ness, the performer/listener is left to respond in a purely technical or emotional way, because the thing has become external to him and manipulation is not within his jurisdiction. Of this situation, Prevost writes that “The inner ear, recognizing formulas, soon closes. …All other meanings [than technical skill] are closed off, unless fingers happen to slip.”\textsuperscript{246} Whether or not systems really do kill the ability of the ear to play with sound, the possibility alone should be enough to prompt a serious reconsideration. Later in the same text, Prevost puts the same point in a somewhat more tempered way when he suggests that systems “offer possible routes to self-knowledge but they also create well-worn paths of perception from which it is difficult to stray. The meta-musician walks where the signs say ‘keep off the grass’. The meta-musician looks at signposts and walks the other way.”\textsuperscript{247} Radical improvisation, of the kind that AMM practices, consciously puts a kind of presentness at the center of its practice and thereby resists the tendency toward repetition, systemization and reification of the senses.

While we have already gotten some idea from Prevost of the importance of collaboration to improvisational praxis, let us take a more sustained look at the important role of collective

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{246}] Prévost, \textit{No Sound is Innocent}, 33.
\item[\textsuperscript{247}] Prévost, \textit{No Sound is Innocent}, 180.
\end{footnotes}
performance in improvisation. Certainly this collaborative aspect of music, regardless of where it lies on the composition/improvisation continuum, is the element most easily related to the political. It is also, I believe, the element which separates the two forms of musical organization most distinctly. When people attempt to do something together, as at least a minimally cohesive unit, the relations between them will need to be worked out for the sake of that activity. Even if a group of musicians agrees to play together in the same location but with no common material (e.g. everyone plays what they want, at whatever pace they want; imagine a quite anarchic scene), there is nevertheless some established relation and agreement, namely to play in the same physical and temporal space, and to play independently of one another.\textsuperscript{248} What the particular arrangement will be is both affected by the circumstances of the collaboration and will in turn affect the outcome of the collaboration. As discussed earlier, in the history of western music the collaborative group has grown in size and its material has become more complicated largely as a result of advances in compositional technique. The composed score provides a collection of musicians a clear way of working together toward accomplishing a goal; indeed, in a way, from the perspective of the performer, it provides the goal. Improvising performers, thrown back upon themselves, with no shared score, face quite a different social task. Bailey, a musician who often chose to perform solo, writes the following in his text:

> Whatever the advantages of solo playing there is a whole side to improvisation; the more exciting, the more magical side, which can only be discovered by people playing together. The essence of improvisation, its intuitive, telepathic foundation, is best explored in a group situation. And the possible musical dimensions of group playing far outstrip those of solo playing.\textsuperscript{249}

He also remarked that “some of the greatest opportunities provided by free improvisation are in the exploration of relationships between players” and that “the most obvious differences to group

\textsuperscript{248} This might be characterized as a situation of tolerance. Anything more anarchic would probably not involve what anyone would want to call music, unless the sound of people arguing or instruments breaking could be considered as such. Perhaps in the end this would also be a valuable musical lesson!

\textsuperscript{249} Bailey, \textit{Improvisation}, 112.
improvisation – greater cohesiveness and easier control for the soloist – are not, in improvisation, necessarily advantages and an even greater loss, of course, is the unpredictable element usually provided by other players.” I am not sure exactly what Bailey has in mind by improvisation’s “intuitive, telepathic foundation” but he is, in any case, trying to draw attention to the unique social situation that improvisers find themselves in and its potential for musical exploration. The idea that improvisation is advanced by the greater disorganization, unpredictability, and lack of individual control brought about by collaboration suggests what Bailey understands the essence of improvisation to be, namely, it somehow involves the ability to create something simply by acting with others toward a common purpose, even if that common purpose is simply to play together. Of course, the simple act of playing together, if it is to be truly collaborative, requires that the differences between individual ideas about the music be negotiated. Decisions will need to be made, either discursively prior to the performance or, even more importantly, in the act of creation. The absence of any set structure for making such decisions and working out these relations is what makes improvisation so interesting and what seems to make it so exciting for those participating in it. Although this participation may even be stressful for those involved, depending on their social or musical disposition, the opinion of many improvisers, including Bailey, is that it is this active engagement that makes the music vital and worthwhile for those musicians. To be able to have a say in the basic creation of music is a fundamentally different experience from simply being tasked with the job of playing one part (or even the entirety) of somebody else’s creation. But is the experience of active participation better than that of functional participation? Prevost is less ambivalent in his answer to this question and tells us that

Part of AMM’s philosophy, its ethos if you like, is the idea of concurrent commentary: separate voices speaking at the same time, interweaving and interleaving. But each voice is not atomized

\[250\] Bailey, Improvisation, 105-6.
or individuated. Paradoxically, it may be that individuality can only exist and develop in a collective context.\textsuperscript{251}

And he goes on to say the following:

One of the generative themes of this meta-music is the relationship between musicians. The music exists and develops through the interchange, the dialogue of the musicians. They set and re-set the agenda – in a continuum. Of course, there are strong feelings between the players – the experience of AMM is perhaps the most important single phenomenon in our lives. …The sharing of such an intense creative experience is in itself instructive. …I doubt if our strong relationships could survive very long without the creative vehicle of AMM. It gives the meaning to our association.\textsuperscript{252}

The question of audience is closely related to the question of collaboration. While we have seen that the improvisational musician typically moves consciously toward collaboration with other improvisers, the collective relationship with an audience is somewhat more fraught. By virtue of simply being what it is, any audience stands apart from the activity of the performers to at least some minimal extent. Because the improvisational performance is inseparable from its creative moment it cannot help but be exposed to and changed by its environment, and therefore its audience, in a way that composed performance is not. Thus, the tension that exists in any performer-audience relation, and that comes from their separateness, is intensified in the case of improvisation. For better or worse, improvisers place themselves in a position to have their creative process be directly influenced by the audience to a greater extent.

Bailey puts it this way:

…to improvise and not be responsive to one’s surroundings is a contradiction if not an impossibility. …Undeniably, the audience for improvisation, good or bad, active or passive, sympathetic or hostile, has a power that no other audience has. It can affect the creation of that which is being witnessed. And perhaps because of that possibility the audience for improvisation has a degree of intimacy with the music that is not achieved in any other situation.\textsuperscript{253}

Prevost remarks similarly, though more abstractly:

\textsuperscript{251} Bailey, \textit{Improvisation}, 129.
\textsuperscript{252} Bailey, \textit{Improvisation}, 129-30.
\textsuperscript{253} Bailey, \textit{Improvisation}, 44.
Audience perception observes, demands, delineates the dynamic of musical intercourse. Its meaning is as much in their hands as the performers. This is the challenge which converts passive receiving into an active component of the meta-musical life.²⁵⁴

Both theorists clearly identify the unique closeness of the audience to the improviser. Bailey describes it as “intimacy” and Prevost implicitly points to a kind of non-hierarchical equality that comes in the form of a relationship of “activity” rather than passivity. In both cases, the audience, it seems, is actually being given a status approaching membership in the performing collective.

This suggestion, that the line between performer and audience may potentially be blurred or breached, brings up a number of questions that are crucial to understanding any theory of musical value. Adorno, as we have seen, pushed for a theory of music which placed the value of the musical work primarily outside the subject. For many or most improvising musicians, the subjective value of the activity to the direct participants (i.e. not the audience insofar as the audience is separate) is the greatest consideration in its objective evaluation. However, given this, the fact that improvisational music is regularly played for an audience raises a problem.²⁵⁵ What benefit do they receive from watching and listening to an activity that considers neither their subjective preferences nor their objective interest? If improvisation seeks to bring the audience into a role of greater participation, to what degree is that possible? In what sense does the audience remain distinct? And given some degree of distinctness, to what extent is the performance intended to benefit them or serve their interests? As with publishing a poem or selling a painting, the reasons on both sides of the creation/reception divide are multiple and difficult to parse. The relationship may be one of exchange, in which each party has their own independent interests fulfilled without necessarily needing to have any overlapping interest, or it

²⁵⁴ Bailey, Improvisation, 124.
²⁵⁵ For that matter, the fact that composed music is played for an audience raises a similar problem if we understand its value to reside independently of audience enjoyment.
may be more complicated than this, involving a sort of hidden communication about intentions and expectations. These are difficult questions and no clear indication of an answer is given by the improviser-theorists that I have looked at. What is clear, however, is that, to the extent that any influencing element can be regarded as external to the process of improvised creation, it is seen as threat to the freedom and potential of the process and its subjects. Consider a quote from Indian improviser Viram Jasani:

I personally feel that with a lot of Indian musicians it’s actually at the time that they practice that their best creative powers come out, because they are really free – they’re not worried about an audience sitting there and this is a time when they really let themselves go – a musician obviously will try to put on his best performance before an audience, but he feels restricted. He’s very careful.  

It is Bailey’s opinion that when the improviser begins to feel the need to let external standards determine the musical choices he makes, this usually has a detrimental effect on the music. In particular, giving the audience too much control over the musical output has the potential to make the music itself predictable and less free. The approval-seeking impulse is probably present to some extent in all musicians (perhaps in the form of feeling obligated to provide an expected return for the audience on their entrance fee), but it is especially dangerous in improvisers who are faced, in a much more visceral way, with the pressure of audience expectation during the activity of creation. On this point, improvising rock guitarist Steve Howe, in a conversation with Bailey, points to the deleterious effects that audience power can have on the psychological state of the musician. “I think when the audience is there there’s a demand for it to be good, and when you’re at home, because there’s no demand, it’s so laid back that I think you can come up with some of your best music…when there is no call.”

In his experience and certainly that of many others, the pressure of audience expectation makes the musician feel...

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stressed and distracted to the point of hindering her ability to be creative and experimental.

Interestingly, another improvising rock guitarist, Jerry Garcia, describes a quite different experience of audience expectation. When it is suggested that his audience—which is known for repeat attendance and the absence of any expectation of hearing the same thing each time—may be “a kind of ideal improviser’s audience,” Garcia responds by saying:

…I think that you have to train the audience, that’s all. I think if you say what we’re doing here is we’re inventing this as we go along and you too are involved in this experience…then there’s value to that… [A lot of our audience] will be back every night and they know that it’s gonna be different every night. …[sometimes] the audience has a great night listening to us struggle… They share the responsibility for the music."

Garcia adds that, because of this structure and relationship that has been established with their audience, he believes the band is more “adventurous” and “experimental” when playing in public than in private. Nevertheless, it is also clear that for many improvising musicians, the power of the audience is one of the attractions of improvisation even when the conditions are not as idyllic as those that Garcia appears to have experienced.

The improvising jazz saxophonist Ronnie Scott is someone who claims that playing for an audience has value even considering its potentially detrimental effect on the music. Indeed, he suggests that the presence of an audience is a precondition for the performance having value at all, and thus he brings us back to the intersubjective aspect that is commonly experienced as being at the heart of improvisational practice.

You can’t divorce playing this kind of music from the fact that there is an audience, you can’t play it in a vacuum. It’s got to be something that communicates otherwise it doesn’t mean very much. I mean, you could sit in your front room and think you are playing fantastically and if there’s no audience it doesn’t mean anything."}

Interestingly, despite his above cited claim that the audience is detrimental to the quality of the improvisation, Steve Howe speaks positively about the audience in the same interview with

Bailey: “I think the audience do contribute an awful lot, but I don’t quite know how to talk about it because it can make me so excited.” So, for Scott and Howe the interaction with the audience really seems to be an integral part of what improvisation is. Even if one thinks this ultimately has a negative effect on the music, as Howe apparently does, there is still a recognition that this is something that must or should be lived with. In my own experience as an audience member to improvisational performances I have observed varying responses in myself and others to what was going on, some of them enjoyable and some of them not, some thoughtful and some reactionary. As opposed to popular music and tonal forms of composed music, it often seems the effect of improvised music doesn’t automatically register as would a melody, especially a familiar one. Furthermore, I have often been compelled to think ‘what would I do if I were playing?’ and was thereby made aware of the difference between myself and the player. What needs to be pointed out is that in each case I felt it very difficult to remain a passive observer and was pushed into thinking about the music in some form or another. This may be partly a fact about me, but I don’t think that can explain it. It also does not mean that my involvement had any effect on the music or what was played. Nevertheless, I do think that being prevented from becoming a mere spectator stands to the credit of whatever improvisation manages to achieve it. I would suggest that, whatever the relation between audience and performer ends up being in the particular, what seems to set improvisation apart is its desire to expand the conversation to include the audience as much as possible; and insofar as it is not possible, to create a separate space where the pressures of heteronomy do not limit the potential of individual spontaneity and collaborative experimentation.

260 Bailey, *Improvisation*, 44.
261 While I have tried my hand at improvising alone and with friends, I have never done so in front of what I would call an audience and so I cannot personally speak to that experience.
In Bailey’s text he reports a comment made by Steve Lacy which gets at an idea that seems to me to be at the heart of the tension between the highly composed music that Adorno defends and the kind of freely improvised music that I have been exploring, and also points us toward the coming discussion of political improvisation. Responding to a request to describe this relation in fifteen seconds Lacy cleverly says: ‘In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds.’

While not strictly true in either case (composing certainly has some temporal limits, while the thought and experience that goes into an improvisation can never be confined entirely to the performance space) the underlying idea here is that composition is critical and thus legitimate because it is a form of musical production which allows, in principle, an infinite amount of time to construct the final work. During this time all necessary considerations can be made and incorporated into the music, leading to the creation of art which hopefully is advanced enough to remain critical. On the other side is the idea that improvisation, as composition’s antithesis, is something that takes place within definite practical limits and thus is hampered in its ability to convey artistic truth. Because the act of “composition” in improvisational music does not take place prior to, but during, the performance, its results rely much more on the physical and mental abilities of all the performers. It does not have the ability to insist on an infinite (or even very long) amount of time to ‘get it right’. In the improvisational performance the creator (or creators) are present and engaged in the act of creation during the performance. There is no rational distance in the choice-making activity and reflection cannot be ‘infinite’ because decisions must be made within a confined space. However, one may well ask whether it has to be this way. After all, it seems possible that the performer could simply take all the time he needs while standing before the

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262 Bailey, *Improvisation*, 141.
audience. I see two possible but very different reasons (from the perspective of improvisation) for not allowing this and for forcing the choice-making into a shorter period. One is that the audience would not tolerate such a long performance, though this makes the improvisation at least to a minimal extent subservient to the audience. The other is that, because the composition and the performance take place within the same time and place, to allow such deliberation would end up having an undesired side-effect on the ‘work’ or performance. In classical composition one has the luxury of expanding what will be a relatively short performance time into a much longer creative process. Indeed, this is perhaps the basic reason for choosing written composition as a means of expression. In practice, the audience does not see the work until it is complete and it is as if it emerged whole from the artist-composer. In improvisation this process of creation is not hidden and so its duration must be taken into account as an aspect of the complete work that is the performance. A better way to put it would be to say that open-ended creation which abandons the primacy of the perfected art object does not have the means or the desire to keep track of time in the conventional way. Creation is something that takes place in time and uses time rather than having time as a material to be manipulated and shaped, so to speak. Prevost articulates an improvisational conception of time that overlaps with this notion:

Music’s primal concern is time. Music’s medium is time. Music offers perceptual distinctions of duration, and works in them. Through music we grip time, and allow ourselves to relinquish the grip of time passing. …Playing a long sound and waiting for it to finish might try our patience, perhaps enough to stop the sound and turn attention away from it. But if we play a long sound and listen to it, while we have a perception of its temporal magnitude, we may never be sure that the sound has finished. …It is the possible existence of other worlds, even the inkling that other worlds can be thought of, that makes possible the break with the hegemonic determinism of industrial clock-time. …Music as a time and motion study can liberate us, potentially, from unconscious, culturally acquired responses.263

Here Prevost is describing the potential that sound and music have to draw our attention to the passage of time and thus to experience temporality in ways that we may never have before. In a

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263 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 35-36.
world where most of our daily actions are circumscribed by imperatives to keep schedule and be efficient and where much of what passes as entertainment habituates our senses to a constant and rapidly changing intake, a sound that goes on too long, unnecessarily long, has the power to force us, in a material way, to recognize the presence of something different. Furthermore it forces us to recognize that this other thing exists apart from us and apart from the system that we have become accustomed to and that it is out of our control, perhaps aggravatingly so. When the discussion turns later in this chapter to the possibility of defending political praxis, the contrast between these dual uses of time will help to bridge the gap between musical and political improvisation.

Reconsideration of the Critique of Improvisation

Speaking about his late experience improvising, the performance clarinetist Anthony Pay has said that the difference between playing improvisation and composed music is “that one is unknown poetry in which I can progress. In playing written, precisely notated music I’m not actually progressing. I’m just learning to do better what I already do.” What I think he is suggesting is that, in the activity of improvising (his “unknown poetry”), the absence of a fixed goal allows the musician to develop as a musician. In contrast, the fixed end involved in the task of reproducing a score does not allow for qualitative growth, but only quantitative improvement with respect to that particular, artificially-set goal. Pay’s sentiment goes quite far in pointing us toward the kind of freedom in improvisation that any theory of organized music, including Adorno’s, is ill-equipped to acknowledge. As discussed in the preceding section, the development and fulfillment of individual musicians is at the heart of most conceptions of improvisation, while it is simply not a serious concern of composed music. The reasons for this

264 Bailey, Improvisation, 69.
have already been discussed, but the significance of this fact for the larger musical context needs to be spelled out more clearly.

Prevost would seem to agree with Pay, and articulates the means by which improvisation honours the needs of the musician, in terms of its ability to break down experience and build it back up again. Consider the following quotes from Prevost

The call-sign of meta-music summons listeners to the knowledge that they are listening. Uncertainty follows. …There is no neutrality in a meta-music… It is a medium of human refreshment. Thereafter flows the possibility of construction, to make a music expressive of whatever content is desirable, to reflect the needs and aspirations of life rather than the use of music as an anodyne… After the first tentative call to attention the meta-music moves out into debate.265

The disciplined use and monitoring of sound production sharpens aural perception. The speed of response necessary in collective improvisation (if it is to be anything more than a mechanical parallelism) introduces an intuitive element, that defies, counters and reorientates rationality. …It is only by fracturing and dislocating the old forms that the reservoir of useful elements can be extracted.266

Here, Prevost identifies the effect that participating in improvisation has on both the musician and the ‘listener’ (which, importantly, may include both the performing and non-performing listener). Through a kind of alienation-effect, the listener is pushed out of their habitual mode of hearing and forced to either engage the music or turn away from it. In this way, Prevost’s ‘meta-music’ is interested in the ability for the subject to start-over. He believes it has the potential to shake the listener out of their heteronomous complacency and, assuming they choose to engage the sound, gives them the awareness necessary to begin to form their own responses. In the case of the musician-listener, this hopefully leads to a more spontaneous musical response, whether what is being listened and responded to is the sound of one’s own instrument or that of another. In this way the collaboration and dialogue that develops will be one that is defined not from outside (that is, through the reactions carried subjectively by the collaborators) but internally by

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265 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 44.
266 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 159.
the participants themselves. In this way, by “fracturing and dislocating the old forms” the subjects harness the musical process to help undermine their own reified perception. What is implicit in this, and what I think is important for understanding the divergence from Adorno, is the idea that this change in perception has the subsequent effect of forcing thought to take its place as the critical aspect of creation. Thus, the undermining of reified perception leads also to the undermining of reified consciousness more generally.

Describing his experience of listening to more rationally structured forms of music, specifically in this case the ‘chance’ music that he and others like Cage created, the composer Earle Brown said that

…because they were organized by chance the continuity was very strange so they were in one sense very good. But they were the antithesis of what I was interested in, which is performer intensity; the relationship of one person to another…I wanted to give the musician a little breathing space. I guess I like that feeling of space, flexing, breathing, you know?...I really like the society of making music with people, you know? And that’s what I try to create in my scoring. …[Improvisation is] here and I think it’s going to stay. And it’s not going to do away with the writing of music but it’s going to bring an added dimension – of aliveness – to a composition and bring the musician into a greater intensity of working on that piece.267

The implication here is, at least in part, that the rational theory of progressive music fails to deliver and becomes, if not irrelevant, incomplete without some way of addressing the problematic relationship between composer and performer. As already mentioned above, Gavin Bryars, despite his difficult relationship with improvisation, came to recognize its value as a means of activating the participatory potential of the musician. Where organized music has functionalized the musician, systematically eliminating the need for him to think or perceive freely, improvisation carries the potential to push the musician as a spontaneous human being back into the picture. In the case of the audience, being asked to participate and play a more active role in the creative process transforms the relationship into one of mutual benefit rather

267 Bailey, Improvisation, 64.
than mere spectatorship. According to Brown and other improvisers, this new relationship between composer, musician, and audience should have a beneficial influence on the music itself. While this is surely a difficult claim to prove, the suggestion is worth taking seriously.  

(Interlude)

Perhaps an example from the realm of social-political practice will help to illustrate this point about the importance of de-functionalizing the subject.

Recently, while listening to the radio, I heard an interview which seemed to me to reflect in an interesting way the musical aspect of the social. The interview was with an American doctor named Steve James who had been practicing medicine in Haiti both before and after the catastrophic earthquake in 2010. His experiences took place within the extremely difficult and damaged conditions of the Haitian poor who have been politically subservient and dependent in one form or another for over five-hundred years (many of whom, or their ancestors, first arrived in the country as dispossessed African slaves). In recent decades relief organizations and religious missions, like the one that James worked for, have taken over much of the formerly politically managed infrastructural tasks of the country. In the interview James spoke about being medical director at a well-established mission hospital in Haiti for many years before making the decision to shift his practice toward one which effectively surrendered most of the control he had previously held as hospital director. About this decision he said the following:

…It almost became for me an either/or. On the one hand was that in the face of dysfunction and in the face of extreme human need, what was required of me was to build a citadel, to become a dictator; and in that dictatorship, benevolent dictatorship, I could be the cowboy to fix the

268 In a tangential way, this possibility often makes me think of a similar issue in the social sphere. Like music that achieves its pinnacle through the functional organization of its actors, large-scale systems of health-care in contemporary democratic societies do a good job of providing an end product while undermining its beneficiaries’ ability to be accountable to each other in an active rather than passive way. In both music and health-care, a smaller-scale organization might work better on the whole by providing some of the active accountability even if it loses some degree of efficiency.
problems that would bring efficiency, service and security. What’s wrong with that? Why not become a benevolent dictator? The problem that I found with that is that that model creates, in a way, a new slave-plantation mentality, where the slaves become dependent on the slave masters and in the end one reaps the fruit of slavery, discontent, anger, violence. The choice to then go the other extreme to purposely work hard at not becoming a dictator, for the sake of building community, means that people are going to suffer, people are going to die, goods will not be provided, services will not be rendered. Here we are praying, when there is somebody that needs a C-section when we can’t get it for her. There’s a terrible choice. 

When asked by the interviewer to elaborate on the cause of these terrible consequences, Dr. James answered that they happen “Because community takes time, perseverance in relationship building. …It’s the height of evil probably, from an American cultural point of view, to not fix a problem when it’s right there to fix…” James does not here provide much in the way of either philosophical or empirical support for the claims that he is making. However, I think his decision to drastically change direction points to some important issues for thinking about the dynamics and responsibilities of control. Thinking about these issues has the potential to further our consideration of the connection between the social and the musical which is at the center of this chapter.

Based on his experiences as a practicing aid physician in Haiti, Dr. James clearly developed the opinion that the autonomy of individual Haitians, even when accompanied by terrible hardship, is preferable in the long-term, for those people, to a situation where help is administered from without. He expresses the idea that if the autonomy of individuals is valued, then at some point they must participate actively in the decisions that go into creating and maintaining the world that they live in. He points out that, in terms of consequences, either short

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269 From an interview which aired on a recent episode of the radio show *This American Life*. The transcription is my own. “Island Time,” *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago, May 21, 2010.

270 According to the James’ own synopsis of the efforts, there is reason to be hopeful about the future of the Haitian-run clinics: “The good news Steve says, is that the slow cumbersome process is working. There’s progress. These clinics are surviving, basically on their own; supporting themselves with very little outside help. And when the earthquake hit, that progress paid off. It was Haitians who were on the scene first; doctors like Mano, pulling people out of the rubble, distributing water, days before the foreign aid organizations arrived.”
or long term, this may amount to considerably more pain for those individuals than if those decisions were made and carried out by an outside agent with greater experience and capacity (such as an NGO). The point, however, is that when individual and social autonomy is the primary value, the end result—in this case the quality of life of the individuals concerned—becomes less clearly important. Ultimately the recognition is that quality of life and social-political autonomy are not clearly separable.

What I immediately recognized in this account is the similarity between James’ perception of the organizational alternatives that are available to the aid-effort, and the alternatives that one finds in music between composition and improvisation. One of the most striking parallels between this kind of community building in the social or political sphere and improvisation in the musical sphere is that both are focused on the autonomy and growth of all individuals involved. Thus, in both cases the criteria for evaluating the quality of any particular activity is strongly tied up with the degree to which that activity is inclusive and internally controlled. What is interesting in the case of music, however, is that from the perspective of someone like Adorno, this emphasis on the freedom of the musicians (or even more so on a participating audience) is misguided at best. From the perspective of a notion like ‘truth content’, both the composer (and her composition) and the performer are secondary elements to the musical object. This is the ‘thing’ that has or lacks historical legitimacy and can be either ‘true’ or ‘false’ within a given context. Although drawing the parallel is easy enough, transferring such an idea into the political realm is tricky. It strikes me that, in the example above, the correlate to the musical ‘object’ in the compositional legitimation-structure (with its emphasis on truth content) could be said to be the overall health of those Haitian people overseen by the doctor. As the doctor claimed, there was little doubt that the physical health of these
people would improve dramatically if he were to assert dictatorial control over the medical organization that was treating them (because indeed this had been the case in the past). Such control (which we might at this point describe as ‘compositional’) has all the advantages that come along with efficiency of a single dominating opinion. When individuals are freed from the difficulties of making decisions on their own or within group discussion, they are able to take on specialized tasks which would not otherwise be possible and which may have the effect of improving overall conditions. As in a symphonic performance, miscommunication between components becomes far less of a problem because everyone is reading from the same set of directions and watching (or listening to) the same conductor. However, as suggested, the argument against such control is quite similar in both the musical and political spheres. If the final product in either case is orchestrated centrally and totally (even if individuals are relied upon to do their part) then it is not difficult to draw the consequence of removing that central control. The organization will collapse.

If what we are talking about is a musical work which has a distinct beginning and end, then perhaps this is not such a problem. However, in the political sphere, this is rarely, if ever, the case. The material is arguably the people themselves. To make political activity primarily about the creation of some, possibly remote, final end (such as ‘social harmony’) is to objectify the individuals who are ostensibly the beneficiaries of that achievement. This is the sort of mentality that one sees in political rhetoric which declares ‘war’ on poverty and the like. The logic of warfare is such that individual human beings become means to the achievement of some higher human end, and the concrete present is sacrificed for an abstract possibility. What would be better according to the viewpoint expressed by James would be to try to understand the underlying causes of such problems and address them in a democratic way. In the above, this
designation of certain forms of political control as “compositional” is meant to point to the way in which social power can be distributed in a form similar to that which is characteristic of compositional music. Implied in this is the dialectical relationship between the concepts of composition and improvisation, such that any social structure can be identified as being more compositional or more improvisational on a continuum of political organization. Accordingly, we may say that the structure James decided on, which distributed control more broadly, was based on a more improvisational model, though it undoubtedly retained compositional elements. But what is the parallel situation in music? What is the problem with composed music that is addressed by the implementation of improvisational methods?

Adorno’s criticism of jazz and improvisation, in favor of composed music, fails to consider the musical performance as a practice which served any artistic purpose for those who were most directly involved. Because the quality of a musical work is purely a function of its truth-content, the benefit of neither the composer, musician, nor audience should be considered in its composition. To make the issue one about these subjective elements would be, according to Adorno’s theory-praxis structure, to make it about something other than music, and thus, to put praxis before theory. But I think improvisation is right to acknowledge the musicality of these elements, as well as the legitimacy of allowing musical decisions to flow from subjective concerns.

From this perspective we can also say that Adorno’s critique was too unqualified. Adorno made little effort to engage these musicians on their own terms, preferring instead to stop at the point at which their ideas about their own music could be shown to be false. It is my opinion that the music Adorno critiqued (and generally resisted), although he was often right to
critique them, were probably indicative of a legitimate need that called for a more direct form of
dialogue than the one he provided negatively. The question of communication in art illustrates
this tension well. In his informal music essay Adorno said the following against art as
communication.

The structure of musical objectivity through the subject and not towards the subject sets it off
sharply from communication. This latter concept properly belongs in the culture industry, which
calculates questions of artistic effects, as well as in applied market research, which tells us what
intellectual products must be like if they are to find purchasers. To this informal music is
intransigently opposed. It is concerned instead with the representation of a truth content and with
a true consciousness, not with adapting to a false one.271

Adorno speaks only to the communication of the artist, or artwork, with the audience and not
about the kind of communication that exists between improvising musicians. This fact points to
the presence of a false dichotomy in his thinking about the problem. It seems that for Adorno
music is organized either subjectively or objectively, and if it is the former then it is governed by
something a-musical and thus cannot be autonomous. On this picture the musician is neither the
subjectivity that the musical objectivity is “through” or “towards.” Rather, the musician appears
merely as a tool. As we have said, this is a situation that is quite amenable to many musicians
who practice within this tradition and are happy to defer to the music as a cause which
supersedes them. While I do not want to argue that there is no place for this kind of music, it
does exclude an aspect of genuine musicality that takes place at the level of the musician as
human being and creative force, and perhaps even more importantly as one of the ends of music.
Improvisation seeks to revise the traditional structure by validating this aspect and exploring its
potential as an important part of musical creation.

In a preface published with his lectures on the sociology of music (written in 1962),
Adorno directs his attention to the differences between lecturing and writing in a way that I think

is very interesting for the question of communication and improvisation. Writing about his
decision to leave his published lectures mostly unchanged, he says

Under no circumstances would [I] tamper with the lecture character. The book contains only
minor retouchings and supplementations of what was actually spoken. Digressions, even leaps,
were left standing to the extent that seems permissible in extemporaneous speech. Whoever had
experienced the incompatibility of an autonomous text with the act of addressing an audience will
not try to hide the differences and ex post facto to force the communicative word into ruthlessly
adequate phrasings. The more apparent the difference, the less false pretension….[I have] resisted
the temptation to use materials, documents and references as fillers for what essentially has been
spontaneous reflection—a kind of reflection into which none of that entered unless it was present
in the author’s immediate experience. No effort was made to be systematic. Instead, the
reflections were focused on neural points.272

Of particular note are the comments about the “incompatibility of an autonomous text with the
act of addressing an audience” and about the spontaneous nature of his reflection. What is
implied by these two claims together is that for a text or reflection to acquire the attributes of
autonomy (of free, independent thought directed foremost at objectivity) it must be carried out, at
least in part, separately from the influence of an audience and with ample time to make the form
fit the content. A text will be difficult and true in a way that a speech which is rhetorically
catered to communication with an audience cannot be.273 Adorno has apparently identified two
different but necessary activities in composed and improvised philosophy, though only the
former can hope to achieve autonomy.

The issue of collaborative participation in improvisational praxis is tied to this question
of communication. As already suggested, what Adorno seems to ignore in his discussion of
communication in art is the communication that takes place between direct participants,
especially the musicians. In the previous section, we saw Derek Bailey point to an

273 Or at least typically is not. Whether this is a matter of necessity is an interesting question; i.e. could a true
autonomous improvised philosophy take place, for instance by turning one’s back to the audience as the jazz
musician Charlie Parker used to do (see Bailey, Improvisation, 47)
understanding of improvisation as a music that tries to foster a creative praxis that need only begin with the simple act of playing together. This will require negotiating the differences and problems that arise in any genuinely collective undertaking, and thus will require some kind of communication, even if it is solely musical. This communication, far from being the sort of pandering that might occur by a musician to his audience, can itself be thought of as musical. The relationship between musicians does not begin and end with the implied question ‘What would you like to hear?’, but is hopefully a more complex and sustained discussion about what should be played and heard and even about what kind of musical (or even non-musical) activity that relationship constitutes. It is through this (unavoidably local) musical communication that the musicians become an active part of what is happening, and that it becomes worthwhile for them.

I think it is fair to say that Adorno’s aesthetic theory does not allow for the development of either the notion of a “small” music (i.e. a temporally and spatially local music) or a theory of musical pedagogy. Recall from the previous section that improvisation is often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, theorized by its practitioners as having pedagogical characteristics. These included its emphasis on experimentation, the legitimation of failure, the centrality of experience for understanding, and its recognition of the importance of individual development for the well-being of the larger social organization. Generally speaking, improvisation’s focus on the edification of the subject points to the underlying notion that what is good for the musician is good for the music, so let us look closer at the elements to better see the role they play in this connection.

One of the things that should have been apparent from the discussion of improvisation is that its practitioners hold the possibility of failure to be simply part of the process of playing
In collaborative situations, including those involving a participating audience, such failure often results from the difficulties of collective decision making. Mistakes are an inherent part of any activity which strives for some kind of determinate development or seeks to solve a problem. This stems from the lack of understanding about either how to bring about some particular end, or even what the end should be. Although I take this to be evident in the sense that anyone alive will have experienced the unavoidability of failure, I don’t want to oversimplify the problem. One of the clear differences between the practices of improvisation and composition is in their relation to failure. Clearly trial and error is just as much a part of the composing aspect of formal music as it is a part of the ‘composing’ that takes place during improvisational performance. The difference is that this experimentation takes place in a hidden space prior to performance. The performance then is meant to be free of mistakes insofar as this is humanly possible. Indeed, the potential for pushing the human to its ‘heavenly’ limits could be seen as one of the virtues of traditional formal performance. In this separation between the hidden space of creation and the visible space of performance there is something important for understanding what is so different about improvisation. Although the score and performance of traditional music may be available it is far from open; indeed it remains closed off in a basic way to the creative participation of every individual present, whether it be the conductor, performers, or audience. In the hidden space of composition failure can be reconceived as something else – as simply part of the creative process. At the heart of the motivation of improvisation is a desire to expose what is typically hidden and to undermine the separation between process and product.

In this movement out into the open, we can recognize a kind of decentralization of creative power, the result being that the privilege of being able to fail and continue on with the project becomes accessible to everyone involved in the ‘product’ rather than only the composer.
How might being able to experience failure in this way change a person? Or, to put it another way - under the conditions of traditional performance, what is the difference between the experience of the composer and that of everyone else? The composer is made freer by the elimination of the risk that takes place during the process of creation, but he is the only one. If we don’t want to exclude others from this benefit, then the project needs to be reconceived so that they can participate as they are. In improvisation, conditions for performance become at least as crucial as the conditions for composition were. Because of the element of trial and error, it requires a safe space where a person does not feel afraid to fail. The ability to engage freely in a practice of creative trial and error is crucial for the experimentation that is at the center of improvisation in its role as a regenerative praxis; that is, one which holds the potential to break perception down and for the individual to herself initiate a process of building it back up. In turn, experimentation is crucial for creating a situation in which the subject can gain understanding through experience. We might say that one of the central goals of improvisational praxis is to know what it feels like to really create, to think and do at the same time, and to really be a part of the activity one finds himself involved in. When the musician is freed from the pressures of mechanical re-creation she can concentrate on re-creating herself instead. Where the late-capitalist society that we live in makes us habitually impatient and insensitive, afraid of failure, and generally passive through a kind of learned impotence, collaborative free-improvisational musical practice holds out the possibility of breaking these habits through a process in which we experience their negation. Prevost points to the connection between experiential understanding and autonomy when he writes that “Only by approaching the unknown or the confused image or expectation can the meta-musician hope to find new
explanations. Playing it wrong is the only way of becoming yourself. Playing it wrong is the only way of proposing other worlds.”

Before concluding my defense of improvisation, we should consider some of the problems that improvisers must be willing to struggle with openly if their practice is to meet the standards of self-reflection, dialogue and pedagogy that I have claimed it sets out for itself. Improvised music has no monopoly on self-reflection; on the contrary it is faced with difficulties in this respect that compositional music is not. After all, whatever problems there are to be considered and incorporated into the music must take place within a collective of individuals and must become part of the regular practice. Indeed many of the problems that must be reflected upon are the result of the movements of the collective itself. On the other hand, its dialogical resources may provide an advantage that is unavailable to the composer insofar as the open and pedagogically critical conversation of an improvisational collective is less likely to provide an environment conducive to self-deception. Less likely in the sense that, if the members of a collaboration feel secure in their ability to be honest both in their own expression and in their thoughts about the expression of others, then the impetus for such self-deception has been significantly undermined.

Nevertheless, when discussing the progressive function of any local music, including free improvisation, caution must be exercised insofar as it involves exclusionary practices intended to maintain a kind of intimacy that can only be achieved in a relatively closed group. As Prevost points out, such groups come with their own “semi-secret language” that excludes the

274 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 162.
unsympathetic from understanding inter-group communication.\textsuperscript{275} This can take place as exclusion of new musicians or of the audience from the decision-making process. As a local music, improvisation is not open to anyone with the appropriate knowledge of its structures in the way that composed music typically is. Rather, because it is progressive at the level of the subjective participation (rather than at the level of cultural history), it demands that, in one way or another, you be on the inside so that you can understand that logic of development and be a part of it. Dialectically speaking, understanding rationally progressive music also requires you to be on the ‘inside’, but entry in that case is, in theory, open to any rational human being.

Furthermore, because there are no formal structures in place for the negotiation of differences there is always the danger that the conversation is not proceeding as openly as may be thought. While there is no question in composed music where the creative agency lies, there is always the potential in improvised music for self-deception about who has control; that can be on the part of a leader who does not want to believe that he is dominating others, or of a follower for whom it is easier to think that he is making an equal contribution than to make a disturbance by confronting the group. This is the kind of situation that Scott Thompson is worried about when he argues in “The Pedagogical Imperative of Musical Improvisation” that the potential for authoritarianism within collaborative improvisation needs to be countered by a commitment to pedagogical practice:

\textsuperscript{275} What Prevost sees as the positive side of the exclusionary closed system of communication is that it also “offers an alternative to the perceived established means of expression and the cultural priorities which dominate and control it.” (Prevost, \textit{No Sound is Innocent}, 172) The thing being noted here as exceptional about small groups is that they serve the purpose, within totalizing society, of creating a space in which there is a kind of freedom (if only temporary) from external control. The paradox, when considering the universalizing potential of the local, is that without the exclusionary practices inherent in these groups no such free space would be possible. If the goal were transparency, inclusion, and openness with limitation, the hegemony of the dominant culture would quickly undermine the effort. Such groups, at least at first and insofar as they remain ‘groups’ in a small-scale sense, exist outside of the power relations of traditional politics, in this case, traditional musical politics. Their goal is merely to exist.
…ongoing pedagogical engagement [in which musicians actively learn from their collaborators] is a necessary trait of a responsive, responsible improviser. The nature of authority within this pedagogical model—the roles of teacher and student—resists fixity and, at its best, this authority circulates fluidly within any ensemble, a process that informs the relationships between players that are articulated and negotiated primarily through sound. “Authoritarian” musical practice, which circumscribes this fluidity, is rarely reconciled in successful group improvisation, a tendency that hints at the vitality and near-necessity of the pedagogical model…”

Responding to the same basic concern, Prevost suggests a more progressively-oriented take on the situation that improvisation find itself in: “there will probably always exist a possibility for mechanisms of control to arise: for the music-making to become an exploitable situation. Meta-musicality begins when the potential power of each sound is appreciated, even if only in principle. Meta-music develops only when all the possible modes of subjection are replaced by creative and diversive collaborations.”

In addition to the concern that individuals may find themselves intentionally excluded or unintentionally alienated from the audience of improvisation, the question of audience also poses a different set of problems. As suggested earlier, the relationship between the performer and the audience is an antinomy that is perhaps only intensified in the case of improvisation where there is no established convention or clear line separating the two elements. Improvised music must constantly walk the line between its desire to include the audience and to ensure that it does not become a heteronomous force such that the creative process comes to be secretly beholden to the desires of the audience rather than a dialogue with its members. To a large extent, as suggested by the earlier comments of Jerry Garcia, this question will depend on whether the audience itself is progressive or reactive. What are their expectations? Do they see the performance as a commodity? And if so, can they learn to see it any other way? A solution might be for a performer to give the audience the opposite of what they appear to want. For instance, if they

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277 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 84.
seem to respond positively to the inclusion of a major chord, you give them a long succession of atonal noise. This sort of artistic provocation is something that composers such as Schoenberg did well on a much larger cultural scale. While this practice is undoubtedly necessary in improvisation as well, the situation is somewhat trickier given the closeness of the audience, both in terms of being present at the time of creation and, even more significantly, in terms of the greater intimacy that is likely to be present in an improvisational performance. On the one hand, one does not want to intentionally ‘provoke’ a friend or collaborator. At the same time, a true friend is someone who will want to be critiqued and made better as long as that relation is reciprocal. In that case it is the aggressive, uncaring connotations of the word ‘provoke’ that seem problematic. The very existence of ‘friendship’ between the performer and audience creates a paradoxical situation for a theory of art which takes the necessity of provocation and autonomy seriously. Perhaps the best suggestion that can be made in this respect, from the perspective of improvisation, is for that difficulty to be made a conscious source of creative productivity.

The danger of being repetitive or derivative should be recognized as well. One reason for this is that, since there is no standardized method the learning method sometimes involves imitating another player. Also, even though improvisers confront the absence of old assumptions and respond with self-creation, it is still the case that in collaboration, players can get used to each other in such a way that a new collective habit forms. Although this in itself is not necessarily bad, it does tend to push the experimentality of self-creation away from the forefront. This tendency is something that Bailey experienced and tried to find ways to overcome. Discussing his practice in the group ‘Company’ of inviting non-improvisers to perform, he writes:
There is, after all, some very basic idea behind ‘improvisation’: it means getting from A to C when there is no B; it implies a void which has to be filled. Sometimes, in improvising circles, that absence is missing. One way of retaining it was to introduce non-improvisors. My impression is that an improviser having to deal with a non-improvisor finds it totally different to having to deal with another improviser, known or unknown. Assumptions have to be dumped, practices usually taken for granted can no longer be relied upon.278

So, while Bailey found an interesting, if imperfect, solution, the problem itself is worth noting as one to be aware of. Furthermore, to the extent that improvisation is local its ability to keep track of its repetitions is far more haphazard, a problem exacerbated by the natural limits of subjectively held memory. On the problem of incorporating old musical works, including those remnants from other musical forms that are a part of the culture that we all share, Prevost writes that “Extracts from music’s past will fit into a meta-music only when they have been transformed enough not to generate the thought processes, responses and associations of which they were originally a part.”279 But how can we ever be sure that what is generated as new is not simply a more repressed version of old? In a way, to dwell for long on this question would be to misunderstand the importance of improvisation. It is true that it is very much concerned with the practice of experimentation as a way of creating new music. However, the newness in question is first and foremost a matter of subjective progress, and one of free-improvisation’s advantages over other forms of new music is that it does not obsess over the need to constantly progress beyond what somebody else has done.

In theory, composition and improvisation are antithetical activities. In practice they are and will continue to be integrated to various extents and in various ways and can perhaps even be complementary. It is likely the real struggle for power and legitimacy that forces music to choose sides and be represented as *either* compositional *or* improvisational. Ultimately, I think

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279 Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 105-6.
there is reason for striking some kind of qualitative mean between the musical opposition of
chaos and order. However, getting to that point will require experimentation with forms of
informal musical communication and composition. In this way I disagree with Prevost’s hard-
line position as unnecessarily combative when he says

There is no happy meeting point between the two forms [classical composition and
improvisation] because ultimately they represent entirely different world views. If clarity of
purpose and practice is misted by opportunistic collusion with the classical mode, the
improvisational ethic will waste away. As well being the enforcement of musical property rights,
the composition is a powerful agent of possessive individualism in general, whilst improvisation
proposes and practices a freer, dynamic of human relations, however problematic.280

The reality is that composition and improvisation are much closer in purpose and structure than
Prevost would like to admit. I do not want to say that there is a “happy meeting point”; the
struggle between these cannot be easy and the result may not even be what we would want to call
a compromise, since this would suggest a stasis. But unlike Prevost, I think that this struggle
carried out purposefully through experimentation with both forms of organization can be
creatively productive if in no other way than to give musicians an experiential understanding of
composition’s shortcomings (though in all likelihood they will experience shortcomings in
improvisation as well). If improvisers are serious about letting individuals fail, then they must
be able to do so in this way too. Some have tried consciously to return a degree of control to the
performer while retaining the overall compositional structure, and there are many ways to
attempt this. The composer Earle Brown, who was one of the first composers to integrate
improvisation into his formal works, relates his interesting experience of working, on the one
hand, with totally organized serial music, attempting to see “how much flexibility could be
achieved with notation,” and, on the other hand, with extremely minimally dictated composition

280 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 66.
to see “how much control could be implied through very vague indications.” In other words, he was experimenting within the organizational field in order to try to achieve the maximum degree of freedom in the musical work. Brown was one of the first ‘traditional’ composers to experiment with improvisation, and although his comments are aimed at the incorporation of only some improvisational playing within a more traditional compositional context, they provide some insight into the fundamental differences between the two types of creation. He suggests that what is lost in strict composition and that can be regained with some improvisation “is the possibility of the intense, immediate communication of ensemble collaboration which is an extremely important aspect of ‘music-making’…” In particular, he describes the improvisation he is looking for as an ‘ordering’ that comes about in an “intuitive conscious manner spontaneously during each performance.” So again here, the fundamental attributes of improvisational practice come from the participating musicians being placed under conditions which force creative thought, deliberation, and decision making to take place in an active and spontaneous way. The hope is that by having the composer relinquish at least some control over the final product, the musicians will gain a participatory experience that will enhance the music itself. It would seem that rather than being mutually exclusive, composition and improvisation exist on a continuum and that it is the location on this continuum, and within a specific context, that has implications for the participating subjects, not their participation in either composition or improvisation. That being said, given the difficulty of the situation faced by the contemporary musical subject, there is an important difference between improvisational technique and improvisational praxis, where the latter serves as a more defined theoretical response to the tradition of compositional dominance.

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Going forward, I will argue that political practice is formed by the same concerns about organization and control and should respond similarly. While I will suggest that greater attention and effort must be placed on the improvisational in both music and politics, this must be with the awareness that it is always part of a broader dialectic which takes place on a continuum of organization.

*From music to politics*

What I hope to have shown thus far is that improvisational music, both in practice and in reflection, is a complicated and rich musical activity that is vitally important not only for the musicians that participate in it but also for the larger musical sphere which should include both improvisation and composition in dialectical conversation with one another. In the last chapter I examined Adorno’s brief and largely unimpressed consideration of improvisational music. Although his reasoning there is complicated and demands serious consideration, in the end I think it oversimplifies both the activity of improvisation and the motivation (both conscious and unconscious) that improvisers have for engaging in it. Composition may very well present the only means for achieving the most advanced musical consciousness, and the musical understanding represented in the most advanced products of western composition can perhaps only be dialectically countered by additional, and more self-reflective, composition, thus pushing further the conversation. Improvisation clearly does not fit comfortably into this picture of rational musical advancement. Nevertheless, for Adorno to dismiss it variously as a regression into more simple-minded forms that are easily commodified, or as a retreat into the reified subjectivity of self-absorbed individualism, was, I believe, a failure to see past some particular aspects of the particular manifestations he was faced with, and thus a failure to recognize the
Deeper connection between improvisation and composition as integrated and complementary musical practices. I suggested above that Adorno’s criticism of improvisation as a form of pseudo-praxis misses the way in which, even in its less self-reflective forms, improvisation is indicative of some real musical need that should be addressed. Likewise, I believe that similarly critiqued forms of political activity are also worth a second look. I am concerned that the kind of activities lumped by Adorno under the pejoratively intended labels of ‘do-it-yourself’, ‘pseudo-praxis’, and ‘actionism’, while subjectively reactionary in some ways, may point to an important objective need—specifically the need for the self-determination which large-scale democratic society has failed to provide—that is recognized on some level by those who advocate its practice.

Although Adorno’s critique of do-it-yourself praxis is not extensive, it is characteristic of his political perspective in a way that is helpful for understanding the limitations of that perspective. Recall that the problem he identified with this praxis is that it overemphasized the importance of spontaneous action in relation to theory and that it did this out of a less-than-conscious desire to feel politically autonomous. Adorno believed that what was actually demanded by politics was an approach nearly the reverse of this: to be self-reflective about the degree (more precisely, the lack) of spontaneity actually available, and this for the sake of advancing theoretical understanding. Clearly Adorno is responding to what he perceived as a need for critique of the undialectical political actors advocating the do-it-yourself praxis. In this sense his response is dialectical. However, at the same time there seems to be something less than fully reflective in his consideration of the content and motivation of their efforts. I believe Adorno is moving too quickly over something of importance. In my own experience I have found that, paradoxically, choosing to do things for myself (or with a small group of people) that
would otherwise and more easily be done by more mediated means has had the potential to break the illusion that I am independent in ways that I actually am not. In such circumstances, we seem to be forced to reckon with the infrastructure of our interdependence. Insofar as Adorno’s claim is that do-it-yourself praxis is a delusion of independence, this experience serves to defy that claim. In the same way, as seen in the case of improvisational music, trying to play an instrument for oneself, especially in a collaborative situation, creates a more realistic conception of more complicated compositions. There have been many manifestations of political praxis structured by the interest in local and direct forms of action. This is simply inherent in what it is. Some of them, perhaps all of them, deserve to be critiqued. This is in accordance with the critical imperative being argued for here. But there is no reason why many of these practices cannot be conceived of as being a way of promoting the larger community rather than as a pulling-away from it.

Rather than continue this conversation about political praxis by defending specific practices, as I did with improvisational music, I think it would be more helpful at this point to formalize the project. It seems to me that the improvisation that I looked at already (described primarily through the lenses of Bailey and Prevost) represented a rather developed self-conscious experimental practice, whereas much of what can be grouped under the label of action-oriented politics is borne out of frustration and disappears as quickly as that frustration is dissipated by the difficulties of ‘real-world’ organization. In light of this difference I will proceed instead by suggesting the outlines of a theory of improvisational politics that I think would bear the same relation to Adorno’s critique of political praxis as improvised music did to his critique of that musical praxis. While I do think that the needs implied in those action-oriented political movements are worth taking seriously, only a more intentional and durable practice will be able
to stand up against Adorno’s criticism—one that understands the subjective need that it is working with and doesn’t delude itself into thinking it is more than it is. As before, the lack in Adorno’s account can be identified as a set of failures which share the characteristic of paying insufficient attention to the demands of the individual subject in the present. While negative dialectics may be necessary for addressing the failures of large-scale society, its focus on objectivity prevents it from recognizing the way in which small-scale social relations are political too. As already hinted, we can see this problem as manifest in Adorno’s interactions with those students he was critiquing.

For instance, consider the appeals for ‘constructive criticism’ that bothered Adorno so much. Although I have no direct evidence, it strikes me that such appeals are likely indicative of a desire, on the part of those making them, to be engaged with by their critics at a more immediate dialogical level. What I am suggesting, in a way, is that there is a certain lack of respect in the act of anonymous critique, that is, critique which comes from the outside rather than from someone whom you know to have your best interest at heart. That Adorno was so adamant in his resistance to constructive criticism in public, but so careful to make his criticism constructive in conversations with his friends might indicate that in some respect he would have to concede this point. In this way there is, unfortunately, a kind of opportunism in his accusation that the student activists who demanded discussion were not actually interested in having a discussion. It is not clear to me that Adorno himself was particularly interested in having a discussion with the students either. While I do think that Adorno’s criticism is appropriate, his method of immanent critique does not really operate at the level of subjective dialogue, but at a more general societal level. As Adorno argues, to insist that criticism be permitted only if it is capable of suggesting a positive alternative is to misunderstand the need being addressed by such
criticism. And yet, we can see that underneath such a demand is, quite likely, a reasonable, if
obscured, frustration with praxis.

The politics implied in Adorno’s critique is such that it can be productively compared to
his aesthetic theory. While his demand for negative dialectics as political praxis does not call for
the kind of political control that would be equivalent to that control which the composer
exercises over the performers of his musical work, it does, nevertheless, refuse to surrender
control to the political equivalent of those musicians. Adorno’s negative dialectical praxis, to the
extent that it refuses to let theory give up its control over human action, maintains a centralized
theory-praxis structure that cannot acknowledge the legitimacy of a “small politics.” Like the
concept of a “small music” that Prevost used to describe meta-music (AMM’s form of free-
improvisation), a “small politics” will have the general character of being local and pedagogical,
the central elements of which are an emphasis on experimentation and unmediated dialogue, the
legitimation of failure, the centrality of experience for understanding, and recognition of the
importance of individual development for the well-being of the larger social organization.

As I have suggested, the basis for Adorno’s political praxis was an unwillingness to
engage in any activity which required setting aside critical reflection for the sake of action. The
reason for this was his belief that, at least in the present context, critical reflection is always a
precondition for successful action. While this is called for at the level of social totality, it fails to
respect the way that individuals get to a point where they can even begin to participate in such
critical reflection. To complain about the fact that people are not capable of such reflection (and
to say that this is the reason for the unlikelihood of qualitative social change) is, I believe, a
consequence of abstracting from the particular needs of particular individuals. There is no one
thing that all individuals require in order to be able to develop a capacity for autonomy, i.e. for
critical spontaneity, and this is something that I think improvisational music can help us to see. As stated, individual development takes place by a process that requires experimentation, trial and error, and the ability to regard failure as an unavoidable part of the process of understanding.

To better understand how these elements fit into the concept of political improvisation, think about the connection in the following way. In life there are some things, activities, and relationships that need actually to be *done* in order to be learned. If we can say, in the present case, that the thing to be ‘learned by doing’ is *freedom*, then the claim is that freedom is something that must be practiced in order to be learned. The problem however is that the present social organization prevents this practice. Our society prevents this practicing of freedom because practicing and learning of freedom requires *experimentation* and this in turn requires adequate *time* and *space*, all things which are not granted under present conditions. Furthermore, freedom in society requires genuine dialogue and this in turn requires both a real interest in the question and a free search for answers. These two conditions must occur simultaneously and are mutually determining. The dialogical relation must be reciprocal, and so with one condition missing, there is no point in having the other. Non-dialogical relations are passive. In our society, the relation between television and its audience is probably one of the clearest examples we could give of such passivity, but voters in representative democracy find themselves in a passive relation as well – both relations being characterized by consumption and one-way conversation. Part of the difficulty of addressing the passivity of these relations is that they take place in a somewhat coded way, in the sense that people perceive accurately that they have a right to express themselves, while failing to see that they have already largely been deprived of the means to do so. Having dialogue only in the form of prepared choices is false because the second condition (a free search for answers) is missing. Unfortunately, it may be that there can
never be a free search for answers under current social conditions (i.e. the question cannot be asked and the answer cannot be given – people cannot even imagine another form of life). Thus, it is in this way that the freedom to experiment with freedom (which is prevented) has as its primary form (and precondition) the freedom of genuine discussion. If current social conditions, i.e. the organization of time and space, prevent the freedom to practice (experiment with) freedom, then we can say that this prevention is material, and must be undermined materially, that is, by creating an environment in which individuals are free to dialogue about, and experiment with, both their questions and answers. This is where improvisation enters the political picture.

Consider the relationship between thought and creativity—a dialectic that has been operating primarily in the background of our discussion so far, but can be seen as being at the heart of the often-difficult conversation between art and politics. How then should we understand the relationship? Creativity and thought may be seen as contrary activities insofar as the former is a proliferation or expansion of possibilities and the latter is a destruction or narrowing of possibilities. Such a definition fits with Adorno’s conception of philosophy as having a self-imposed obligation to critique, before all else. His response to what he sees as an age of careless proliferation is to use even the typically creative forces of art and politics as a means of negative criticism. Critical thought and creativity correspond in Adorno’s thought to two seemingly contradictory ideas that he held regarding the problem with late capitalism. One sees the problem as the inability to discriminate and the other sees it as the inability to see beyond the existent. In actuality, for Adorno, these two things are part of the same problem due to the fact that the capacity and willingness to discriminate is a precondition for seeing beyond what one is being discriminating about – that is, without negativity the question of creative possibilities
doesn’t even arise. In a sort of turn on this notion (but one that Adorno would regard as incompatible) it has become commonplace for anarchist and autonomist political theorists to regard destruction as an act of creativity. The destruction they have in mind is expanded from Adorno’s theoretical meaning to apply to the material destruction of the existing social structures. Such activity becomes creative to the extent that it is the only way to create space for anything new. In a world where freedom exists primarily or only as a choice between pre-existing alternatives, the material destruction of those alternatives is a precondition for genuine freedom of choice. The question I would like to pose in response to this, but even more so in response to Adorno, is whether creativity can be an act of destruction? Or, to put it another way, can we conceive of a critical creativity?

Because the elaboration of a kind of critical creativity in the musical sphere is what I think Edwin Prevost intended in his multiple defenses of improvisation, it might be helpful to go back and take a closer look at a pair of tentative propositions formulated by Prevost for the metamusician: heurism and dialogue. The first is meant to get at the improvisational practice of

heurism and is articulated in the following way

Heuristic discovery is not the stripping away of material obscuring the perfect form. It is rather the demystifying of the conditioning of the senses, and their clarification; the discovery of freshness in perception. The meta-musician looks for meaning, and for music with meaning, and looks to invest as much meaning as possible in the music. The intention is to transcend all previous experience of music production and music consumption. The intention is making music, and listening to it, as if for the first time.

The second proposition is aimed at the practice of dialogue:

Dialogue is the interactive medium in which the products of heurism are tested. Sounds are placed: placed in contrast to, in parallel to, in imitation of, in respect of, without regard to, other sounds. Minds struggle, coalesce, defer or acquiesce. Inner debate meets outer debate. Instant

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283 Examples might be the collaborative work of Hardt and Negri, the work of John Holloway, or that of the anonymous authors of Ai ferri corti con l’esistente, I suoi difensori e I suoi falsi critici (“At daggers drawn with the existent, its defenders and its false critics”) 1998.

284 Prévost, No Sound is Innocent, 3.
decisions dictate the immediate direction of the music. But more thorough observations can later impose their own logic on subsequent proceedings.\textsuperscript{285}

Transferred to non-musical social realm, the picture we get of improvisational praxis from the concept of heurism is one in which growth must be conjoined with destruction. To say that discovery is the “demystifying” and clarification of the senses is to point out that the practicing (understood in the developmental sense) of freedom by the subject cannot take place without the break-down of whatever habitual tendencies have accumulated at the level of subjective decision-making. Improvisation achieves this by providing a means of acting which will make that accumulation more apparent and thus allow for a conscious response. It provides a way of framing the desire to do things differently so that individuals can have the courage to experiment. As Prevost claims for meta-music (and which should be equally the case for improvisational political praxis), the goal is not to reveal some underlying purity or to get back to some earlier clarity, but to provide a space within which individuals, including those in collaboration with one another, can move freely enough to begin to understand what they are (and are not!) capable of on their own. In Prevost’s representation, dialogue is partner to heurism by ensuring the presence of the environment needed for such free movement. Only in a context of open discussion will the kind of development be possible that is initiated and carried out by individuals on their own and without external guidance. It may be that some individuals have a strong idea of what they want but need to be careful not to create an atmosphere where people can’t speak up and have ideas. Many times the stronger or more experienced individuals in the group can say something that shuts people down, especially younger less-confident people. With a self-awareness of this potential they should find a way to encourage them to keep going and keep thinking about what they’re doing in a way that they will eventually be able to give back at

\textsuperscript{285} Prévost, \textit{No Sound is Innocent}, 3.
a deeper level. The assumption is that the more able someone is to feel that they are self-determined and have a genuine interest in their activity, the greater their commitment and the level of execution. Furthermore, in terms of collaboration, the emphasis on dialogue may provide a space within which people can be surprised by what they can accomplish collectively. This is something that it seems people rarely have in highly organized society.

The willingness to exhibit what is not yet complete is really at the heart of improvisation. It is interesting that such a mindset is really contrary to much philosophical praxis, which tends to want to remain quiet until the whole truth has emerged, as well as being contrary to the more materialist aspects of Marx’s revolutionary theory, which, despite its rhetoric, places the possibility of revolution always more than an arm’s reach away. (Given that one must wait until the objective conditions are just right, and even then it is not clear what one’s role in the change will be.) In contrast, improvisation seeks to practice a kind of experimentation which is determinate without having an overriding object to which all actions and consequences are subservient. What is important is that individuals and autonomous collectives keep trying to develop themselves and refine their understanding of what is possible. People often try to conceal their imperfections and hide the fact they are in a stage of development. Why is it so apparently uncomfortable to have one’s partially-formed self exposed? Without trying to explain the probably very complicated cause for this, it nevertheless seems likely that such behavior is intended to provide the individual with some psychological comfort in a situation where he has little security or control. To behave this way is to involve oneself in a delusion that is not acceptable on any musical or social organization that takes the autonomy and well-being of its members seriously. And yet such concealment is built into the very fabric of both traditional composition and bureaucratic power politics.
Shifting attention only slightly, I would like to bring in the idea of friendship to help understand what is at stake in a small-scale social practice. Within the social sphere, friendship occupies, in an informal way, a space very similar to what I am suggesting more formally with the notion of political improvisation. While it is ultimately up to experimentation in collectivity to determine specific answers to questions about the structure of that practice, we might begin thinking about the limitations by considering the model of friendship. Not only is friendship something with which most or all of us have already experimented, allowing us to refer to our own experience, I believe it also serves as an important conceptual link in bridging the individual and collective in any form of praxis – political, musical, or philosophical. In attempting to formulate an improvisational politics, friendship helps to address many of the questions that arise (such as those of size, creating a suitable environment, intimacy, experience for understanding, etc.).

The importance of understanding the issue of trust in society and making the practical connection between the individual and the collective was something understood by Kant. Framed in terms of universalism, untangling this question was a considerable part of the focus of his political essays on cosmopolitanism and enlightenment. It is also, I believe, at the heart of his concern in his thoughts on ‘friendship’. In a lecture on the topic of friendship from the late 1770s, Kant argues that while there are several relationships that go by the name of ‘friendship’, there is only one that deserves to be called true friendship. What defines this absolute form of friendship, which Kant calls “friendship of disposition or sentiment,” in opposition to the lesser forms he identifies, is the absence of any service provided or instrumental demand made upon
one friend by another. He notes the following as fundamental for understanding what is special about this form of friendship.

In ordinary social intercourse and association we do not enter completely into the social relation. The greater part of our disposition is withheld; there is no immediate outpouring of all our feelings, dispositions and judgments. We voice only the judgments that seem advisable in the circumstances. A constraint, a mistrust of others, rests upon all of us, so that we withhold something, concealing our weaknesses to escape contempt, or even withholding our opinions. But if we can free ourselves of this constraint, if we can unburden our heart to another, we achieve complete communion. That this release may be achieved, each of us needs a friend, one in whom we can confide unreservedly, to whom we can disclose completely all our dispositions and judgments, from whom we can and need hide nothing, to whom we can communicate our whole self. …We all have a strong impulse to disclose ourselves, and enter wholly into fellowship; and such self-revelation is further a human necessity for the correction of our judgments.286

Friendship for Kant, if it is to be truly beneficial, that is, in a moral sense, must be non-instrumental. This requires the ability for the friends to help each other become better, more moral people. He argues that this in turn requires complete openness and lack of constraint so that honest communication about faults and inconsistencies is possible. In other words, friends must be open to criticism and willing to criticize. Furthermore, because the barriers that serious people construct for the sake of self-preservation can usually only be broken down slowly through successfully repeated attempts at trusting others, the trust required for such openness appears to require a good deal of time and effort to develop. It is also the case that finding people who are serious enough about benefiting themselves (for Kant, ‘having a good will’) to be willing to put in the time and effort to work toward such an open relationship is certainly difficult and will itself require time. These conditions constitute part of the reason why Kant believes that true friendship can only be experienced between two or three people at a time, a question I will come back to shortly. We are not always honest with ourselves, even when we are willing to be open with each other, and it seems to me that the task of pointing out such self-deception must fall to friends who have shared enough common experience to provide more

disinterested points-of-view than we can ourselves. This again, however, can only happen in a
durable way if that friend can expect such insight to be received willingly.

Given what has been said, it may seem that true friendship is something which can be
praised without reservation. This, however, is not the case for Kant because he thinks our
ultimate goal in friendship, as in everything, should be the universal. He goes on from the above
to write that

…any tendency to close the heart to all but a selected few is detrimental to true spiritual
goodness, which reaches out after a good-will of universal scope. Friendship, likewise, is an aid
in overcoming the constraint and the distrust man feels in his intercourse with others….287

Thus, for Kant, friendship is ultimately a distinctly non-universal but universalizing tool which
undermines itself as it does its job. Despite its non-instrumental status, as a relationship that is
practiced at the subjective level for its own sake, in the larger scheme there is no intrinsic worth
even in true friendship, and this small-scale form of human relationship is to be left behind as
humans become increasingly capable of seeking “universal pleasures and a universal friendship,
unrestricted by special ties.” In dialectical terms, the hope is for “universal friendship,” and thus,
in a sense, more friendships, but this precisely spells the end of what we typically think of as
friendship, i.e. the kind of special relationship that Kant thinks can only exist between two or
three people.

While I think Kant’s analysis of friendship is insightful and very helpful for thinking
about its conditions and limitations, I do not share his idealism with respect to the progression
toward universal society. Kant helps us to see why the exclusiveness of friendship or of a close
(and thus closed) improvisational group may be disconcerting to us. However, to conclude from
his argument that there is no place for the kind of local practice that requires such exclusion

would be to overestimate the extent to which we can use the idea of universality to guide our present actions and would, furthermore, misunderstand his intentions. Within the context of the theory of improvisational praxis I am presenting, friendships will be unavoidably part of the experiments in organization. A lot is assumed in political theory about the nature of human beings and what can be expected. But, the only way to know is to do. The political sphere is not a good place for such practice, because there it is difficult for people to escape their fear. In contrast to this, the ideal relationship of friendship strongly parallels the kind of practice identified in musical improvisation in its potential for creating a space for openness and growth. As pointed out earlier, a sense of security is a necessity in collective improvisation. In my experience, such is rarely achieved in non-musical social organization, or in traditional pedagogical settings like the classroom, where there is often little accommodation of the shy. John Stevens spoke to this difficulty when he discussed his improvising classes which started from the audience and developed into a group which varied from beginners to experienced players.

...what I would do is get them to do something [like play a long note]...and get into a collective continuum as a group. Initially what everyone is looking for is comfort. So if they start on one note and it provides difficulties, they change to something more comfortable. Once they are comfortable with this process of inhaling, exhaling and blowing a note, then they can allow the note to change in sympathy with the group.288

The recognition at issue is that such security or comfort leads to compromise. It is not that people are incapable of compromising or even that they don’t want to. Rather it is just that they feel threatened or embarrassed and untrusting. This is what Kant says friendship does: it helps with the transition to increasingly large social interactions.

In the case of improvisation as the creation of an environment in which people feel secure enough to be open, we can see that the issue of size arises insofar as it imposes limitations on

288 Bailey, Improvisation, 119.
what kind of environment can be created; unless maybe the duty for creating comfort is spread amongst the group and does not fall solely to the instructor or leader. Stevens adds that in working with groups of people it is important to “stay in touch with the whole group of people all the time.” This would be difficult in a large group and would set obvious size limitations unless we consider the possibility of a less hierarchical distribution of responsibility in this regard. In general, the movement from musical to political runs into a difficulty when we consider the question of size. It is not a coincidence that true improvisation does not work well with more than several people. There are requirements of reciprocity that must be met, and these in turn require time and energy. This is one sense in which composition, as a musical tool, parallels the administration of society. It facilitates a kind of growth/expansion that requires mediation and cannot support what is unsystematic. At what quantity does the qualitative experience I am recommending in friendship and improvisation begin to disappear? As the size of the group grows it is inevitable that the closeness between individuals will diminish and the mechanism of organization or control will have to change. Improvisation, as an intentionally unsystematic praxis can support only relatively small relations. When considering non-musical society, this becomes a question with large implications if one does not want to resign the theory to utopianism. Smaller, less-centralized forms of organization may allow for greater individual autonomy, collective responsibility and intimacy, but you also open the doors for abuse and for forms of persuasion which are potentially much more dangerous because of their subterranean nature. How small must it be, and how much can improvisational politics do to prevent abuse? My response to this problem is to say that it is precisely the task of an improvisational politics to answer this question, because this is the question that overly organized politics is incapable of addressing.
Along these lines Stevens talks about his workshops where his approach is somewhat different. He expects the participants to just start playing without him and says “And if someone comes who’s new to the class then it’s the responsibility of the people who are experienced in the class to invite the newcomer to play.”

Hugh Davies of MIC claimed that his group provided “a security which enabled unrestricted exploration of the new musical possibilities to take place.”

He also says of tensions (or what would be observed as cruelty from outside) functioning positively in the group that “This is only possible when improvising musicians know each other well enough for a common language to have come into being, and a mutual trust in each other permits one to push against the limitation of that language and the relationships on which it is based.”

Prevost suggests that “the whole essence, and ultimate meaning of dialogue is transformation.” In other words, dialogue is not for the purpose of conversion (of one person’s view to the other) or agreement, but rather self-knowledge and the development of consciousness of all involved. For this to work, however, requires a balance of dialogical power and a lack of insecurity on the part of the participating individuals. Prevost adds that “…[unless] the relationship with materials and with fellow musicians is free of the tendency to dominate or exploit, then nothing will change. The old hierarchy of power relations will merely be renewed.”

These descriptions of mutual transformation and the ideal improvising environment could just as easily apply to the conditions brought about and required by the practice of friendship. In the same way, friendship paradoxically provides both the security and critical provocation necessary for subjective growth. People must be willing to be honest and put

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293 Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 70.
everything on the table or else the criticism that they receive from their friends and collaborators is useless.

There is an element of friendship that Kant does not appear to consider and which we have not yet discussed, but which, in my own experience is absolutely fundamental to any genuine friendship or intimate relationship, and that is mutual need. When I think about what differentiates the friends who I’ve known the longest and who I continue to share the most with from those who merely come into and out of my life as convenience permits, need seems to be a determining factor. Perhaps this is just a way of pointing to the importance that a good friend will hold relative to the other elements of your life, but that status is significant because it contrasts so starkly with the increasingly functional character of most relationships in late-capitalist society. In that sense, while Kant doesn’t expresses his idea of a friendship of disposition in terms of ‘need’, this may be a part of what he has in mind.

Interestingly, if we look again at Kant’s defense of friendship, we can see that it bears elements that are not unlike a Marxist critique of reification. Remember that according to Kant’s moral theory, universal law dictates that people are ends-in-themselves and thus are not to be treated solely as means. As we have seen, although such instrumentalizing takes places in the lesser forms of ‘friendship,’ he believes that genuine friendship involves a reciprocity which excludes any possibility of treating the friend solely as a means. It seems to me that the kind of relationship that is talked about as being ‘commodified’ is basically one that has become instrumentalized in the sense that the people involved treat each other as means and not as ends. Commodification of relations refers to any reduction of an individual’s particularity (i.e their individuality) to a generalization that allows them to be grouped with others based on assumptions about their situation or their reasoning. We make such judgments about people all
the time. It is simply part of the operation of the world that we live in. Friendship, however, is a practice that, by its very existence, stands opposed to the world of exchange and expedience and demonstrates the unacceptability of prejudice. It opens a door to de-objectifying in an ever wider sense and rebels against any abstracting of the individual. As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out “to recognize someone as a friend means not being able to recognize him as ‘something.’ Calling someone ‘friend’ is not the same as calling him ‘white,’ ‘Italian,’ or ‘hot,’ since friendship is neither as property nor a quality of a subject.” This goes some way to explaining why sex seems so difficult between friends, siblings, and those romantic partnerships that last a long time, given that sex, as it is typically exists in our world, demands the ability to objectify.

In the same way that thought is resistant to un-thinking and life is resistant to the demand for un-life (placed on the worker as a demand to negate his own life for the sake of the whole system), friendship, because it is a creative expression of life, may be thought of as a refusal of reified, alienated relationships. Friendship by its nature yearns for freedom and bucks at the imposition of limitations. It is anarchic and non-instrumental. It wants to be the source and the beginning and not to be a tool. Insofar as it is a fundamentally creative activity it is like art as something which exists as a response to a lack of freedom. Art says ‘you cannot keep me from creating the physical and auditory world I live in!’ Friendship says ‘you cannot keep me from creating the world of relations!’

In my personal experience friendship has been a decidedly disruptive force. The force of need that I have claimed is a part of close friendships has often persuaded me to make decisions for sake of those friendships but that were not necessarily the most beneficial to me from any other perspective. In a related way I think the moments of pleasure in friendship I have

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experienced in my life have served in a way that is somewhat analogous to the utopian in art for
Adorno to the extent that it preserves a vision of a better world simply by being what they are.
In their non-instrumental logic these relationships have been critical of ‘what is’. I know that I
was changed by the experiences of close friendship that I have had, not necessarily in a
conscious way, but in the way that they given me a point of reference in light of which other
kinds of relationships have since seemed not pointless or un-enjoyable, but hopefully
instrumental imitations of something better. In a similar way, I think that, this has to have been
the case for Adorno as well, to the extent that his capacity for feeling and thinking critically was
formed by his own singularly great experiences growing up in Frankfurt, that is in the sense that
you have to understand both beauty and horror to be able to see the need for critique.

But friendship within the sphere of everyday life is difficult, in part because it is so
unclearly defined and because there is so much seemingly at stake. Moreover, it is perhaps too
resistant to expansion to be a good space for the practicing of political organization. This is the
point at which a more formalized praxis of political improvisation can take over the task of
experimenting with forms of social organization. While friendship is often an experiment, it is
too earnest to be experimental.

If we can assume that as a collective grows in number, it will be increasingly the case that
autonomous individuals will have conflicting ideas about how things should be done, then
finding a way to make such conflict constructive is essential (if we don’t want to simply silence
them). It will also require an awareness of both the difficulty of change and of the differences in
opinion regarding that change and about means for achieving the change. I am inclined to call
this something more like patience than tolerance because rather than accepting difference as a
fact, it accepts it as an unavoidable (and possibly constructive) element in change (as opposed to
liberal tolerance where the current forms are accepted). To put it this way brings it close to something like friendship in which patience is always paired with actual expectations that the individual will make an effort to become closer to you in a shared project rather than just keeping out of each other’s way (restricting freedom for greater freedom). The refocusing also requires experimentation by the collaborating subjects. Experimentation into what works and what doesn’t; into determining what it is we even want; and into what the problems are that really require attention. How do we go from being individuals who push each other away in various ways to acknowledging others as equals, as well as each others right to express their lives within the same space which you have to express your life and creativity? How do we open up so that others appear non-threatening (who are in reality non-threatening) and free communication is possible? These are the same questions which appeared in the sphere of musical activity. As already suggested, making changes in the social sphere of everyday life will probably be more difficult than in the musical sphere where heteronomous relationships can be minimized and people are more willing to open up to the possibilities of experimentation and experience. Nevertheless, I think it is an effort worth making. Given the difficulties of entering into intimate human relationships, one must believe, in order to be willing to make the leap into collective activity, that the kind of trust necessary for such collectivity is really possible. It may be that the only way to really believe that it is possible is to have actually experienced it.

Where there are real ‘organized movements’ (i.e. revolutionary movements) I would argue that they all have the qualities of care and locality. Without these qualities there can be no lasting collectivity or unity. It is the closeness that allows for the relationship to be constantly renewed. Thus, the activity I am advocating is a way of preparing movement, but perhaps even more than that a way of maintaining movement. And as with ‘practice’, I mean ‘movement’ in
two distinct but related senses. Obviously, we are dealing with the question of political movements, but even more so I am interested in the ways that are available for putting life back in motion so that those kinds of movements, lasting movements, become increasingly possible. It is important that the collective not become a thing and thus cease to be a real collective, a lasting one that breathes and constantly changes so that it can remain what it is. I have been arguing that the way to achieve this is through the kind of activity that is an essential part of friendship in general and of free musical communication in particular.

Like free improvisation, of which one can always ask (at least from the outside) ‘Is it really music at all?’, improvisational politics does not clearly conform to traditional political models; it is neither a struggle for political power nor a clear refusal to engage such instrumental forces. Improvisational music, regardless of whether you choose to call it that, is, among other things, an exploration and re-exploration of sound, of instruments (man-made and perhaps not), of human relationships, and of oneself. It is a means of expression and an act of creation. Similarly, improvisational political praxis would need to center on an exploration of relationships and forms and instruments of organization. In this way, improvisational politics must not be conceived of as either revolutionary or progressive (both of which are legitimated by the end toward which they are directed), but process oriented.

Conclusion

A theory of music like Prevost’s, which I have made significant use of in my exploration of improvisation, is already a rather political one (in the sense that he is focused on the relations of control within music), and we should not fail to recognize the ways in which political categories have already been used by him as a model for a theory of improvisation. However,
there is no reason why such a dialogue between politics and music should not serve as an aid to our understanding of each. Looking at improvisation we see that music of any kind expands into the political sphere by being fundamentally social. Likewise, the political expands into everyday life through its ability to be improvisational. I am not suggesting that political actions can have aesthetic value. Rather, improvisation is a concept that applies to both spheres. When political activity takes on an improvisational form it self-consciously conducts experiments in the organization of life that have the effect of blurring the line between standard political discourse and social activity more generally. This new politics represents a de-centralization and is local/improvisational in that way. This will be called un-realistic or utopian or enclavish, but it is simply a rejection of the claim that global change has no need of the local. My argument is that it urgently does. In contrast to the view according to which the best we can do is preserve a vision of a better world, an approach which gives primacy to praxis must claim not to be able to postulate such a world in advance, at least not to the degree that is implied by Adorno. This is why an activity which comes before theory must be willing to enter the sphere of unknowable consequences and insist on experimentation.

There are really two separate points being made here with respect to Adorno’s aesthetics and his critique of praxis that I should perhaps be more careful to distinguish. One is that there should be an increased recognition of the need for localization in both music and politics and the other is that there should be an increased recognition of the need for democratization in music and politics. The process of democratization is recognized rightly by Adorno as being on the one hand, politically desirable, but also, as it has it has actually taken place, a contributing factor in the undermining of individual social-political agency.\footnote{Recall the following passage quoted in Chapter Three: “…because of the preponderance of innumerable societal processes over the particular individuals, people in their societal role are not identical with what they are as}
toward local activity – whether it is in the form of friendship, collaborative music or politics – can be considered a kind of sustainable cultivation of democratic practice. Like those involved in the agricultural cultivation of gardening, individuals practicing local relations successfully will be forced to adjust their perception to the pace of change that is inherent to such activity. In a garden, we cannot sense the changes that take place in the course of an hour or a day, but this does not mean that there is nothing happening or nothing to be sensed. What it requires however is a change in our expectation and willingness to commit an adequate amount of attention to a single practice. This, it seems, is something that most people have become very bad at, but it is something that is demanded of the gardener, of the friend, and of the citizen. No matter how much we understand about the causes of the world’s troubles and how much there will always be left to understand, it seems possible that the beginning of the solution simply lies elsewhere. This is not to say that the global problems are not the real problems, but rather that the exclusive focus on those problems by individuals is a red herring. It is probably true that individuals have little control over the course of world politics. But it is not true that individuals are simply incapable of acting autonomously. The reasons for any such inability should be identified and countered, and it is my claim that often the attention given to the unchangeable (at least by us) global is what prevents us from engaging in the local.

The irony is that, although it is sometimes thought that political law is a practical way both of getting moral behavior ‘off-the-ground’ and sustaining it, in reality law, in many cases, turns out to be unsustainable in practice due precisely to its abstract character. While laws are indeed more resistant to change, are more easily enforceable, and more widely defensible, they

immediate, living people. Democracy, according to its very idea, promises people that they themselves would make decisions about their world. But democracy actually prevents them from this “deciding for oneself about the world.” Adorno, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture,” 296.
also, when separated by time from their inception, lose their ability to motivate without help from some form of pedagogical or ideological maintenance. No matter how much organization is right, it must move from the inside out, and for this reason, it must be constantly renewed by those people who are directly participating in it and are affected by it.

I want to be careful of making ‘closeness’ a positive ideal and I hope that I have not done that. It may be that friendship in any context (in music, sports, or hardship) is a way of focusing individuals and bringing them together for the same purpose through singular shared experience. But how can we be sure that this coming together is good? One of the powers of music, for instance, is to draw people together for the sake of a destructive mass phenomenon. Thus, it needs to be closeness with certain stipulations. In any case it seems we have still gained something here, which is the recognition of the importance of this connection between people. Without it the striving for a free music (or anything else) is futile and detached.
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