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HOW THE WORLD REALLY ENDS

ADORNO ON WORKING THROUGH CATASTROPHES TO COME

Michael Berlin

Writing under the threat of nuclear war, Theodor W. Adorno remained strikingly silent about its possibility. From the perspective of the present, this relative silence by an author who was elsewhere so eloquent on the subject of catastrophe could appear as a lacuna that confirms the charge of quietism that has hung over his work. Yet, at a time in which buzzwords around the topic of climate change proliferate, this absence appears prescient. In eschewing epochal terms like “the nuclear age,” Adorno’s writing lets the bomb stand as an absence that focalizes the everydayness of the processes that could lead to its use.¹ In its simultaneous elevation and disavowal of human agency, the language with which nuclear war and climate change have been theorized works to naturalize catastrophe as a fated outcome of history.² Anticipating the latter through the former, Adorno perceived that there were those for whom the threat of nuclear annihilation served as a sublime limit of the human that would force humanity to think of a “world without us” and others for whom it would demand a new humanism that could assume responsibility for risk on a planetary scale.³ By no means opposed to each other, these two views come together in a metaphysics that is caught between a “we” that would constitute the human and the world in which *we* could act.

Critiquing the terms in which these questions are posed, Adorno’s postwar writing draws a connection between the scale in which a catastrophe is thought and the political possibilities that could emerge in its wake. Then, as now, Adorno’s work demonstrates that such theorizations of the end of the world remain eschatological in their attempt to find anew humanity’s proper place in a universe it can control. Adorno’s critical theory anticipates the prevalence of the term “Anthropocene” in its resistance to the idea that humanity’s domination of

nature is either “recent” (*kainos*), or reducible to a single definition of “man” (*anthropos*). If the word “world” itself already encodes the idea of “the age of man” (David, 1217),⁴ then Adorno’s working through the intellectual fixation on the world’s ending elucidates how these fantasies authorize the catastrophes that occur for the sake of its survival. Rather than trying to simply find another way forward, Adorno analyzed the twinned pulls of triumphalism and guilt that this immense capacity for destruction engenders in those who envision a global future. By drawing attention to the ways an attachment to the world can easily justify its maintenance as is, Adorno’s work asks “why the world—which could be paradise here and now—can become hell itself tomorrow” not only by projecting a world in which things could be otherwise (1998a, 14), but by unearthing how they have so stubbornly remained the same.

This essay begins in the immediacy of the postwar with a letter from Adorno to his parents. Folding past and future potential for collective murder into a complex of guilt, this letter points to how those who feel responsible for past catastrophes come to accept such violence as a preordained outcome of historical processes. Turning to *Minima Moralia*, in which Adorno identified this fatefulness with the entry of perpetual war into the rhythm of everyday life, it explores how Adorno’s representations of totality locate hope for its transformation in the realm of banal matters of fact, rather than in that of transcendent possibility. Opposed to the global scale in which nuclear war and climate change continue to be thought, Adorno offered a theorization of regression that shows that, if the world were to really end, the processes that would finally bring it about would have had to have been rationalized long ago. Against a return to traditional metaphysics at the end of the world, Adorno’s critical sociology takes aim at the philosophic resignation that pervaded German thought of the postwar and answers the work of contemporary thinkers like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Bruno Latour, and Timothy Morton.

Writing to his parents in the aftermath of the Second World War, Adorno referred to the atom bomb’s potential in a way that may surprise us:

My dears, your letter made me unspeakably happy, and I am equally grateful for the newspaper cuttings. Ley’s will, for example, which is extremely interesting, was not printed in its original wording in any of

the papers here. And the poor Hahns! What a horrific world! When one hears such things one can only regret that the atomic bomb was not tried out on Germany. (2006a, 237)⁵

Although we must keep in mind that this is a fleeting and private moment of anger, Adorno's wish for such a brutal form of retribution is a haunting one. To understand the implication of this sentiment for Adorno's postwar work is to understand the role that Ley played in enabling the rise of Hitler. Adorno would have been acutely aware that it was Ley who, as leader of the Nazi *Deutsche Arbeitsfront*, used the antisemitism of German workers to win them over to the side of National Socialism and to silence dissent. Reading the suicide note *qua* manifesto that he left while awaiting trial at Nuremberg sheds light, then, on how quickly postwar appeals to reconciliation could turn into demands that inequity be forgotten for the sake of the future.

Given his role in the Nazi regime, it is unsurprising that Ley framed his postwar call for a seemingly progressive "organization for education" that he envisioned would reunite Jews and Germans in a shared postwar political project, within the antisemitic trope of the "Jewish question." In Ley's view, the Jews remain a problem and must be answerable for the crisis that *they* have created for Europe's future. In a cruel parody of Hegelian supersession, Ley argued that "one must have first been an anti-semite" (4) to come to the notion that antisemitism must be abolished. As if the onus of responsibility were on the Jews for not ceasing to exist, Ley's writing implies that their not being a part of the Nazi vision for a unified Germany freed every German of complicity in their deaths. Far from coming to an awareness of the contradictions inherent to National Socialism, Ley's manifesto begins with an appeal to the ultranationalist vision of a "People's Community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*) whose elimination of those whom its members deemed undesirable was understood simply as an unintended consequence (2).

Ley's insistence that antisemitism and German nationalism were unavoidable historical facts makes certain that the enemy of Germany remains the "triumphant" Jew, who now threatens to make the "German youth be lost as Carthage was lost." Appealing to the total destruction of Carthage at the hands of its Roman captors, Ley made the rise and fall of the Third Reich a simple question of national survival. By

leveling the terms of responsibility, Ley envisioned the reconstruction of postwar Germany as a project that required sacrifice on the part of the Jews, who must reintegrate themselves into German society. This attitude implies a human nature for which conflict is an essential quality and a future that demands the victims of history assume the responsibility of the perpetrators. As Ley's writing makes clear, it is the Jews, who must accept *his* plan.

In his attempts to justify genocide through the idea that the German "people" could not have acted otherwise, Ley in his manifesto provides a template for the societal forces that Adorno would later identify as guilt and defensiveness. As outlined in his 1959 address, *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* [The Meaning of Working through the Past], guilt and defensiveness build off a "collective narcissism" (1998b, 96) that casts a façade of fatedness over complicity in past atrocities. The appeal of this alibi resides in its ability to assuage individual powerlessness through a collective lack of remembrance. By looking to future reconciliation alone, this reactive tendency effaces the need to think through the ideological commitments, or material interests that would call for expiation in the first instance. In its displacement of responsibility onto a past that could not have been different and a future whose course is preordained, this "guilt complex" instantiates a process through which "the terribly real past is trivialized into merely a figment of the imagination of those who are affected by it" (91).

However, Adorno saw that in its disappearance, the past also creates the conditions for a present that can never be equal to the scale of what has transpired. In other words, the subject experiences the absence of reparations for the past as an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility that cannot be appeased. Thinking back to Adorno's wish that the bomb had been used against Germany, it becomes clear that his violent projection encodes an impasse that would pervade his postwar work. Finding an alternative to the all-or-nothing view of political agency that guilt and defensiveness instill formed the impetus for much of Adorno's interrogations of culture and society in the 1950s and '60s. As unlikely as it may seem at first, it is through his affinity with Ley's writing on German guilt that Karl Jaspers became a crucial counterpoint to Adorno's political thought. In particular, Jaspers's lectures of 1945–46, published as *Die Schuldfrage* (The Question

of German Guilt), attempt to make the question of collective responsibility a metaphysical one and, in so doing, mirror his later efforts to make the “nuclear age” reaffirm the ends of “man.”

While the tone that Jaspers took in this text was measured, to read his lectures on German guilt today is to notice how quickly Jaspers abandoned questions surrounding German atrocities in favor of an appeal to national sovereignty. As he wrote, Germany found itself caught between continued survival and “an authoritarian government set up by the allies” (2001, 9). Whereas Germany as a whole may have been complicit in Nazi crimes, Jaspers maintained that the individual must be the locus of responsibility for what had occurred. Through his division of guilt into the criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical, he displaced judgment from the juridical, to the whim of the victors, to the individual, and finally to the Christian God. While Jaspers was careful not to draw a direct moral equivalence between the Allied powers and National Socialist Germany, he took pains to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of who gets to pass judgment.⁶ Making the search for earthly justice an ever-receding goal, Jaspers’s writing leaves his readers with the eternal project of perfecting “what we hold most precious, the eternal essence of our soul” (75). Through theological appeals like this one, Jaspers rendered responsibility for the Holocaust a matter of private faith.

Assuaging collective guilt through his appeals to personal salvation, Jaspers made the case for Germany’s place in the emerging post-war order. Out of the destruction brought on by the Second World War came what Jaspers called “the ambiguous harbinger of a world order” that existed so that it could be the “German who might become aware of the extraordinary import of this harbinger” (54). Though “ambiguous” to Jaspers, it is now clear what form this order would take. As Robert Meister argued in *After Evil*, the twentieth-century response to genocide was a rhetoric of past evil that foreclosed the possibility of a radical redress of the lives lost. By placing each German citizen before God, Jaspers neutralized future efforts to understand how Germans materially benefited from the Third Reich.⁷ Refusing the idea that Germany, or the Western world, must transform itself in the wake of the Second World War, Jaspers’s writing warns that future catastrophes could create the conditions in which “the freedom fought for and won by Western man over hundreds, thousands of years would be a thing

of the past" (93). Continuing this project a decade later, Jaspers began his book on the atom bomb, tellingly titled *The Future of Mankind*, by writing that "we are dealing not only with recognizable, inexorable necessities of nature but with the future acts of men, with the potential of their freedom" (1961, 3). Insofar as Jaspers made the potential for planetary destruction a question of human freedom over and against nature, he makes the nuclear age a "gold assay"⁸ of timeless Western values.

Responding to Jaspers's attempt to make freedom dependent on humanity's mastery of nature, Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964) makes clear how this notion of freedom depends upon a definition of the human that can abide in the wake Auschwitz and Hiroshima, to say nothing of colonialism and chattel slavery. Adorno's writing helps us to see that behind the typical Jasperian formulation, "Europe is where the reality of the present rests upon the inner voice of thirty centuries, where men, despite all divergencies, are linked by this age-old common past," there lies a form of "autonomous thought" whose humanistic affirmation encodes an appeal to the 'enlightened' West that repeats colonial tropes about the 'barbaric' East in the resistance to nuclear war (85). As Adorno reminded his readers in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, the facile humanism upon which this thinking depends is only more explicit, though not structurally different, in a writer like O. F. Bollnow, whose loyalty oath to the Nazis and academic success in the postwar period linked Adorno's present to a moment of time in which "Jews who had not been completely killed by the gas were thrown living into the fire, where they regained consciousness and screamed" (23–24). Adorno's critique of Jaspers, then, is vigilant toward the violence latent in a concept like "man" and warns of how the insistence that "we" inhabit a "nuclear age" runs the risk of eclipsing the lives taken in its name.

The impasse between the search for justice for past catastrophes and the political demands of the present served as raw material for Adorno's reflections on war and survival in *Minima Moralia* (1951). Caught between the revelation of the true extent of the Holocaust and the expanding scale of destruction opened by technology in the last months of the Second World War, Adorno began to formulate the idea that the guilt attendant on complicity in the events of the past could foreclose the possibility of action in the face of their repetition in the

future. Instead of working through and processing the effects that these catastrophes have had, Adorno noticed that society seeks distance by offloading them onto a future that uncannily mirrors the past from which it sought escape.

Written as the Allied armies were closing in on Germany, the section of *Minima Moralia* titled “Out of the Firing Line” intimates that this self-justifying projection of history was already authorizing future atrocities. Unlike Jaspers, Adorno voiced concern with the coming international order precisely around the question of “what is to be done with defeated Germany” and came to the “unsatisfactory” paradox that he could wish neither to serve “as their executioner” nor “to stay the hand of anyone who was avenging past misdeeds” (56). Finding fault in the clinical coldness of the question’s implicit insistence that violence be controlled rather than refused, Adorno drew his readers’ attention to the worldview it implies. Assuming the global perspective of newsreel images that promised perpetual peace in the postwar, this section concludes by comparing modern warfare to “civil engineering and blasting operations” and “insect-extermination” that sold its viewers on the promise of “war without hatred” in which every possible enemy (human or otherwise) has been transformed into the “Jew under fascism.”

Adorno grounded these stark remarks in his analysis of how, during the war, the “mechanism for reproducing life, for dominating and for destroying it,” became “exactly the same” in an amalgamation of “industry, state, and advertising.” From the din of this “mechanical rhythm” embedded “in the most hidden cells of experience,” Adorno argued that if modern warfare appeared to a latter-day Hegel, it would have done so as one of Hitler’s robot bombs, “on wings and without a head,” rather than in the living image of Napoleon. For Adorno, these avenging angels of history, drones *avant la lettre*, pantomime the particularity of life that has become the repetition of a violence “totally divorced from experience” and in which “trauma” manifests itself as a “timeless succession of shocks” mistaken for memory (53–54).

At stake in these pages is the physiognomy of state violence. Taking inspiration, in part, from this section of *Minima Moralia*, Grégoire Chamayou has shown that the drone establishes a specular regime. In particular, Chamayou tells his readers how “the drone dreams of achieving through technology a miniature equivalence to that fictional

eye of God" (37). The drone, like the atomic bomb, mirrors and mediates a relationship between the individual and the absolute that serves, also, as an alibi. Both objects promise a future in which wars without hatred will no longer provoke a sense of loss generative of guilt. To read Adorno in the present is to see that if something like the doctrine of mutually assured destruction averted nuclear holocaust, it did so only insofar as it instrumentalized civilian populations into zones of fungibility whose deaths continue to be calculated in terms of acceptable losses in a perpetual war.

Written before the detonation of the atom bomb, the first part of *Minima Moralia* displays a sensitivity to all that had to exist for it to come into being in the first place. This awareness finds realization not only in terms of the rocket bombs that would become ICBMs but also in the patterns of thought that authorized the scale of destruction that they made possible. It is indicative of the politics of Adorno's style that the absence of the bomb in his writing correlates to ever richer theorizations of everything around it. This reluctance to speak in the face of catastrophes to come does not evince the *Bilderverbot* ("ban on images") that Adorno imposed on utopia. Rather, it brings the bomb into focus as an object with no greater urgency than that of the lives it would claim.

In terms of scale, totality and the objects that stand in for it resonate most intensely in the private reflections of the complete individual that serves as its measure. We should keep in mind, then, that when Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia* "the whole is the false" (2005, 50), he had in mind the individual who can imagine only a future that would guarantee their own survival. The writing that precedes this dictum makes this perspective clear in its emphasis on the particularity of catastrophe:

We can tell whether we are happy by the sound of the wind. It warns the unhappy man of the fragility of his house, hounding him from shallow sleep and violent dreams. To the happy man it is the song of his protectedness: its furious howling concedes that it has power over him no longer. (49)

The image of the sublime as storm that Adorno constructs borrows its topos from Kant's discussion of "the dynamical sublime" in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. From the distance of the shore, the deadly storm allows us to understand our own scale in relation to it.

Yet, in this framing, that aesthetic distance is collapsed. The howling winds are as much a “song” as they are a force of nature whose power reverberates through the trembling walls that separate our dreams from waking life. In the next line, the changing scale of these threats focalizes the porousness of this boundary and paratactically reminds us that “the noiseless din that we have long known in dreams, booms at us in waking hours from newspaper headlines.” In this sense, the sublime is something double. At the same time that it reminds those who experience it of the potential for life free of domination, it does so by presenting them with the stillness of a world in which all activity has ceased. Rather than yielding a means by which to understand humanity’s relationship to nature, the sublime empties out into a place where any attempt at comparison is drowned out by the constant din of the small exchanges through which the world itself becomes fungible.⁹

Responding directly to Jaspers in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno went on to draw out the connection between the sublime and humanism by writing that, through the former, the latter “becomes affirmed and eternalized at the same time. In this way the jargon plunders the concept of Man, who is to be sublime because of his nothingness” (1973, 65). Here, Adorno’s argument wagers that the more spectacular the image of humanity, the more the agency of the individual becomes lost in its wake. The truth of these sublime ideations is the yearning for a great individual who can redeem the past and present in the same instant. This desire appears pointedly in Martin Heidegger’s well-known statement that “only a god can save us” in the face of a “technicity” that cannot be “mastered” and a philosophy that can effect no change in the world. At the heart of this planetary crisis, Heidegger saw an “uprooting of man” that “we do not need atom bombs” to accomplish. Rather, the very fact that the earth could be made visible from space served as proof enough that we can only recollect that humanity once “had a home and was rooted in tradition” (1981, 56–57). In these reflections, as elsewhere, Heidegger mourns a unified human experience that could find redemption only through the threat of its destruction.

In his Tanner Lectures, “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene,” Dipesh Chakrabarty has called for a return to Jasper’s concept of an “epochal consciousness” that is “prepolitical” in its orientation

toward a shared perspective from which humanity can view its present (2015, 142). Following Heidegger in his use of the Apollo images of Earth, he evokes the world both with and “without us” to pose again the question of the human on a planetary scale. In so doing, he makes explicit the tensions that trouble his influential essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” While Chakrabarty concluded this essay by rejecting universalism in favor of what he identified as Adorno and Walter Benjamin’s concept of “negative universal history” (2009, 222), his argument that our species finds itself unified in the face of impending catastrophe affirms a universalist viewpoint. Reading Adorno through Hans-Georg Gadamer, Chakrabarty offered the hope that the fragmented subjectivity engendered by climate change will be experienced universally and create a new global “collectivity.” The displacement of agency that this crisis affords Chakrabarty has allowed him to draw a clear political divide between nuclear war and climate change:

The anxiety global warming gives rise to is reminiscent of the days when many feared a global nuclear war. But there is a very important difference. A nuclear war would have been a conscious decision on the part of the powers that be. Climate change is an unintended consequence of human actions and shows, only through scientific analysis, the effects of our actions as a species. (220–221)

To follow Chakrabarty’s argument on its own terms would be to acknowledge that human beings have ceased to be one species among many and have become a force of nature whose effects can be measured only on a geological scale. However, this passage enjoins its readers to think of nuclear war in terms of the actions of a few select individuals that stand in contrast to the unmotivated choices that have led to climate change—a catastrophe for which, presumably, no one is responsible.

Adorno’s own articulation of the concept of universal history in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) calls this very tendency to quarantine violence as a necessary outcome of past events into question. In one of the few moments in which Adorno directly referenced the atom bomb, he made the point that while “no universal history leads from the wild to humanity,” there is “surely one [that leads] from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (312).¹⁰ Whereas Chakrabarty reads Adorno’s “negative universal history” as yielding an inverted image of a “we” that

could act, Adorno demonstrated in his “History and Freedom” lectures of 1964–65 that “negative universal history” is more than simply a history that is not universal. Rejecting the search for even a negative subject of history, Adorno’s writing on universality complicates the desire for history to culminate in anything at all by asking, “what can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the level of objects” (2006b, 8). In this passage, Adorno echoed his claim in “The Meaning of Working through the Past” that the politics of a historical method that displaces violence onto a past that it can look beyond promises nothing other than the “prospect of a third Punic war” (1998b, 103). Revising Ley’s anachronism, Adorno insisted that what has been perceived as the course of history represents nothing other than shifts in the scale of possible violence. For Adorno, philosophy must rebel against the notion of a subject that would be adequate to its history. Rather than trying to fill this absence, Adorno’s writing counts the determinations that cannot be conceptualized, regardless of how negatively.

Less circumspect about universalism than he was in his earlier work, Chakrabarty’s “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene” follows the United Nations in its commitment to the idea of “common but differentiated responsibilities” that focus on the continuities, rather than the differences, between human communities (139, *passim*). Building off of the work of Bruno Latour, Chakrabarty uses the figure of Gaia to level agency and responsibility in the face of climate change. In their appeal the self-regulation of the earth over and against the economic system that has carved it up, both thinkers use Gaia to name the sublime infinity of the relations between things that could return us to an earth of which “we” are all a part. Although Chakrabarty concedes that the “Gaia hypothesis” has been critiqued as metaphysical, he quickly looks past this and toward the future possibilities that such a worldview enables (167). Conversely, Latour remains committed to metaphysics as a ground from which to offer sweeping claims about the way things have been and will be. Moved by the prose of James E. Lovelock, the hero of *Facing Gaia*, Latour tells his readers how the inventor of the Gaia hypothesis reversed the “background of the majestic cycles of nature, against which human history had always stood out” by focalizing “new invisible characters capable of reversing the order and the hierarchy of the agents” (2017, 92–93).

It is indicative of the limits of Latour's eschatology that the new world promised by Lovelock's Gaia is nothing more than a looking-glass image of history as he understands it. Although Latour has rejected the universalizing implications that his "return to earth" may imply, it is hard to read these "invisible characters" as anything other than transcendental agents capable of reversing the order of the given world, while leaving unchanged all relations of exploitation. Latour makes clear his hope for a terrestrial *status quo ante* in the connection he draws between the threat of nuclear war and climate change. Citing Adorno's contemporary and fellow exile Günther Anders, Latour recommends his "'prophylactic' use of the Apocalypse" as "*a call to be rational at last, to have one's feet on the ground*" (italics in the original). With this rhetoric, Latour raises the prospect that the Anthropocene could mean the end of everything in order to call humanity back to its proper sense of belonging on Earth (218–19). A strikingly ahistorical return to history, the climate crisis grants Latour the opportunity to reveal a new universality that was always hidden in plain sight.

In distinction to Latour's mirroring of past and future, Adorno saw that capitalist ideology is often at its most stagnant where it imagines itself to be at its most dynamic. Adorno's "History and Freedom" lectures tie this rationalization of "mythical eternal sameness" to the exchangeability of signs upon which the commodity depends. Setting the groundwork for *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argued that faith in progress demands a future that can only exist at the expense of the past. As Adorno wrote, progress implies a "tit for tat of every exchange" through which "each act revokes the other" in "a zero-sum game" (2006b, 170). Against this commodification of the future, radical freedom implies a working through the past that sees its relationship to the political present as something other than "a zero-sum game" in which the inequities of the latter must be relegated to the exigencies of the former.

These patterns of historical repetition stand at the heart of Latour's foundational *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991). Indeed, its first chapter, titled "Crisis," positions itself between the triumphalism of an ascendant West and the looming threat of climate change. In Latour's worldview, 1989 marked an *annus mirabilis* that pitted the forward march of Western civilization against contingencies that might cause

his readers to “look back on our enthusiastic and right-thinking youth as young Germans look to their greying parents and ask: ‘What criminal orders did we follow?’ ‘Will we say that we didn’t know?’” (9). Yet, rather than thinking through the ways in which such a crisis could have come to be, he attempts in the remainder of the book to redeem the idea that technological progress can manage and profit from these risks. As Benjamin Noys has pointed out, Latour’s faith in the autonomy of scientific fact authorizes “the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima . . . in terms of comparative casualties that would have resulted from the ground invasion of mainland Japan” in a “quasi-Leibnizian theodicy” through which “any present violence or subtraction can be traded off against some future gain or addition” (91). For Latour, all attempts to change the world are bound to repeat what he calls “the modern constitution” that follows Hobbes in viewing nature and society as two distinct spheres each of whose relative independence guarantees the existence of the other. While the amodern cannot deimbricate themselves from the modern world, they have in Latour’s view the advantage of understanding that to make a claim on justice would be to violate the separation of nature and culture that enabled such a claim to be made in the first place. The implication of this argument is that the amodern must be apolitical as well.

Although Latour has promised a radical revision of democracy oriented toward a “Parliament of Things,” his presuppositions ratify the current state of affairs:

We were born after the war, with the black camps and then the red camps behind us, with famines below us, the nuclear apocalypse over our heads, and the global destruction of the planet ahead of us. It is indeed difficult for us to deny the effects of scale, but it is still more difficult to believe unhesitatingly in the incomparable virtues of the political, medical, scientific or economic revolutions. Yet we were born amid sciences, we have known only peace and prosperity, and we love—should we admit it?—the technologies and consumer objects that the philosophers and moralists of earlier generations advise us to abhor. (1993, 126)

Minimizing skepticism toward the complicity of technology in “the global destruction of the planet” as mere moralism, Latour’s futurism offers a politics of universal equivalence through which the interests of Wells Fargo could matter as much as those of the Dakota and Lakota, survivors of an ongoing genocide at Standing Rock.¹¹

Finding this equivalence in the structure of ecological deep-time, Timothy Morton cedes any possibility of political action to its indifference. From the very beginning of his Wellek Lectures, published as *Dark Ecology* (2016), Morton places the potential for ecological action *sub specie aeternitatis* in relation to nature, which serves as the “slowest and perhaps most effective weapon of mass destruction yet devised” (5). In the face of such immense destruction, Morton’s writing offers up a pastoral topos in which faerie and fate meet in a happy nihilism. While, for Chakrabarty and Latour, humans once felicitously imagined that they could control the movement of history, for Morton human agency is always and already eclipsed by the things to which it would lay claim. Adding an eschatological dimension to this worldview, Morton’s lectures open with Michel Foucault’s conclusion of *The Order of Things*, in which humankind appears as a face drawn in the sand that waits to be wiped away by the rising tide (13).

Yet, far from negating the human, Morton’s argument calls for its return at the zero degree of history. Morton’s golden age exists in the “dreaming” that he appropriates from the Aboriginal peoples and through which he finds new and better ways to consume (86).¹² Identifying consumption with desire in all of its atemporal irreducibility, Morton asserts that guilt is the residue of our dissatisfaction at being something rather than anything. Here, Morton borrows Adorno’s concept of the “the shudder” to posit a form of revised “consumption” of reality through which, “as Adorno pointed out, the exit route looks like a regression” (156). For those who have learned how to consume even their sense of shame and disgust, the world may become repopulated and renewed by “toys” that are all equally sublime, yet accessible, in their “weird weirdness.”

Although Morton’s eclecticism should not be dismissed in and of itself, in this instance he gets Adorno exactly wrong. As early as his 1935 correspondence with Walter Benjamin, Adorno posed his concept of regression as a way of accounting for how the “archaic merges with the modern” under the heading of “catastrophe” far more than under that of a “Golden Age” (2002, 55). Offering revisions to Benjamin’s essay “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Adorno emphasized the tendency of the dialectical image to posit utopia as a latent and inverted image of the present. With attention to the imbrication of dreams in waking life, Adorno’s letter stresses that the unconscious

is not prior to reflection. Exploring the temporality of this state, Adorno wrote "I once noted that the recent past always presents itself as if it had been annihilated by catastrophes. I would say now: but it therefore presents itself as primal history." Bound up with the commodity, modern consciousness's regressive tendencies speak to how the object assumes permanence through its consumption. If, as Jason W. Moore has argued, capitalism comes into being only through the commodification of the earth as "cheap nature" (109), then regression speaks to how the image of the earth's fungibility can so easily be used to justify its continued exhaustion.

Averse to this nostalgic afterlife of consumption, Adorno positioned his prewar writing wholly against regression. However, after the Second World War, Adorno became interested in how regression can also scale politics back down to the particular sites of suffering through which capitalism continues to subsist. Throughout this period, Adorno used regression not only in reference to a return to a previous state, but to an impasse between past and future.¹³ An early example of Adorno's ambivalent theorization of regression plays itself out in a section of *Minima Moralia* titled "Theses against Occultism." Analyzing the kind of mass-produced horoscopes that populated American newspapers of the 1940s, Adorno was troubled that something as ostensibly natural as the night sky could be commodified as an intractable limit of thought. A counterpoint to the sublime, regression here speaks to the ways in which the possibility of freedom becomes lost in the immensity of collective projections about what such a condition could entail. In Adorno's words, "the tendency to occultism is a symptom of regression in consciousness. This has lost the power to think the unconditional and to endure the conditional" (2005, 238).¹⁴

By externalizing the private fears of the subject as universal laws of fate, the market's appropriation of the occult offers its consumers a false sense of security in the face of catastrophes to come. Masking the events of the past in a sense of terror that pervades the present, mass-produced astrology reduces past and future to a mythology that assures its viewing public that the current state of affairs can never be altered. However, in their attempt to make even the possibility of planetary destruction consumable, these ideations break down into a sense of "panic" that looms "over a humanity whose control of nature as control of men far exceeds in horror anything men ever had to fear

from nature." As if stretched to maximal torsion, the appearance of society's complete rationalization as myth collapses in its attempt to translate every aspect of the given world into its "sublime realm." Through the occult, the "mind groans under its own spell like someone in a nightmare, whose torment grows with the feeling that he is dreaming yet cannot wake up" (239–40).

If the twinned sense of mastery and helplessness that Adorno indexed as regression exists for the individual through the occult, it does so on the level of society, as a whole, through the political party program. This parallelism is clear in Adorno's marginal notes on his copy of the Social Democratic Party's moderate *Godesberger Programm* of 1959. In response to the very first line of the document, "this the contradiction of our time, that men have unleashed the power of the Atom and now fear the consequences," Adorno made clear the reading he would have offered, had he followed through on the critique he planned to write, by using the laconic rejoinder "regression to 'man'" (qtd. in Müller-Doohm, 417–18). For Adorno, there is nothing surprising in the fact that the instrumentalization on a global scale implied by Enlightenment notions of progress has caused humanity "to fear the consequences" of a nature that it has made in its image.¹⁵

It is in this sense that Adorno went on to write that "they point to contradictions, not the contradiction." Adorno had already begun to formulate *the* contradiction in "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," delivered in 1956. Invoking Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, he explained how Marx unearthed Hegel's insight that value resides not in labor power alone but in labor's relation to the nature that it has produced. What Hegel understood most clearly, in Adorno's view, is the universal aspect of domination under capitalism. Far from being a transcendental ideal, the Absolute refers to the objective fact that the "very world in which nothing exists for its own sake is also the world of an unleashed production that forgets its human aims" (1993, 28). Reflecting further on this forgetting of "human aims," Adorno argued that it is through the idea of the whole, and the possibility of its passing away, that liberation may yet be possible.

Against any attempt to renew metaphysics, Adorno salvaged from Hegel the fact that he "denounced the world, whose theodicy constitutes his program, in its totality as well; he denounced it as a web of guilt [*Schuldzusammenhang*] in which, as Mephistopheles says in Faust,

everything that exists deserves to perish" (30). Pointing again to the self-destructive tendencies of guilt, Adorno denounced the concept of the world as abstraction in order to preserve the world as the aggregate of lives that such abstractions make fungible. In drawing this distinction, Adorno left space for the speculative thought of the whole as a way of coming to terms with the immensity of what would have to be worked through for reconciliation to be possible at all. While the whole cannot be dispensed with, it is in the realization of the impossibility of laying claim to such a viewpoint that it becomes clear that "human beings can be realized only through what is estranged, only through the world's domination, as it were, of human beings."

In dialectical fashion, Adorno offered another form of regression that, in words he attributes to Max Horkheimer, retains "an element of childhood, the courage to be weak that gives the child the idea that it will ultimately overcome even what is most difficult" (42–43). The possibility of recollecting a time before our incorporation into society was complete points to a reparative concept of need at play in regression. This idea finds clarification in a section of *Minima Moralia* neatly titled "Regressions," in which Adorno recalls a treasured childhood song. Within the song's idyllic landscape, two rabbits fall with such swiftness at the crack of a hunter's rifle that they survive the bullets' trajectory. Having realized that they survived, the rabbits leap to their safety. Although, as a child, Adorno experienced nothing but joy at the conclusion of this story, from the perspective of adulthood Adorno wrote that the lesson it taught was that the rabbits had, in their mere survival, the power to redeem "with them, even the hunter, whose guilt they purloin" (200). Rather than measuring youth against adulthood, or the hunter against the hunted, regression here points to where guilt retains within it the slimmest possibility of indeterminacy, and extends the possibility of reconciliation without extortion.

One of the ways in which these regressions become visible is through the dreams that Adorno recorded throughout the postwar period and that were published posthumously as *Dream Notes*. In a particularly apocalyptic entry, dated December 1964, Adorno writes:

The world was about to end. . . . I found myself in a large crowd on a kind of ramp, with hills on the horizon. Everyone stared at the sky. . . . I asked whether the world would really come to an end now. People

confirmed that it was so, talking just as people talk who are technically in the know; they were all experts. In the sky three huge, menacing stars could be seen; they formed an isosceles triangle. They were due to collide with the earth shortly after 11 a.m. Then a loudspeaker announced that at 8.20 a.m. Werner Heisenberg would speak once again. I thought that that couldn't be him acting as commentator on the end of the world. It could only be the repetition of a tape recording that had often been played. I awoke with the feeling that, if the world really were to come to an end, this is how it would happen. (2007, 71)

In this excerpt, Adorno gives us a glimpse into how our dreams can speak to the concrete realities that allow a nuclear imaginary to exist in the first place.¹⁶ It is precisely the uncanny collision of the banal detail of the time at which the end would come and the very possibility that time could end that makes his dream so haunting. Throughout the *Dream Notes*, the reader gets the sense that the newsprint that surrounds our daily lives already encodes the fateful messages that were sought in the stars. To read Adorno in this light is to feel that it is not the mere possibility of death and apocalypse that neutralizes a collective capacity to experience them but the way in which they have become conceptualized as knowledge of what will have already been. The world can only really end, in Adorno's mind, with the tinny sound of a Nazi physicist turned celebrity offering another lesson in what everyone already knows to be true.¹⁷

Conversely, as Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*, by generating "empiria through empirical deformation," the artwork, in its "affinity" to "the dream," exposes contradictions that exist within common sense assumptions about the world (2002, 86). Although Adorno resisted etymologies, his identification of the work of art with "empirical deformation" draws attention to its origin in the *peîra* ("attempt") that is exemplified by the essay. Throughout his writing on aesthetics, Adorno reminds his readers that an act as simple as caring to recollect and reflect upon their dreams can teach that the subject does not always attend on where the thing once was, but where their entwinement has been essentialized as the false limit of its freedom. Like philosophy, art asks "why the world—which could be paradise here and now—can become hell itself tomorrow" (1998a, 14) by putting pressure on the intellectual mechanisms that bind its victims to it.

It is with this end in mind that Adorno recanted his ban on poetry after Auschwitz in *Negative Dialectics* and made the qualification that what he had really wished to draw attention to is how society can too easily smooth over the difficulty of living on for those survivors “who accidentally escaped and should have, by all rights, been snuffed out” (1966, 353). Far from a call to nihilism, this moment opens up onto the frail, yet persistent, potential of our being able to still register “guilt” toward the fact that “a life that, as purely a matter of fact, will strangle other life, according to statistics that supplement an overwhelming number killed with a minimal number rescued, as if this were destined by the theory of probabilities, is to be reconciled with life no more.” It is at this point, when life becomes totally irreconcilable with its ideations, that speculation encounters its limit and regresses, with a childlike fascination, at “carriage” (das Aas), whose raw materiality symbolizes the fate of all flesh that has already been resigned to the ends of an absolute to come (355–56).¹⁸ Adorno built these observations off what he called Beckett’s “most hazardous [*exponierteste*] dictum from *Endgame*,” that “there would not be so very much to fear” in the face of future catastrophes. For Adorno, Beckett’s dictum speaks to the fact that the “beyond” that Western metaphysics had long posited found its material truth as “absolute negativity” in “the camps” where the “once venerable concept—the annihilation of the not identical—already lurked teleologically.” Here, Adorno dwells on the fact that society has already and horrifically brought metaphysics down to earth. Whereas it was once possible to idly speculate about a world stripped of every contingent thing, Western technoscience had, by the 1960s, made this prospect a concrete possibility (353).

In concert with aesthetic experience, these hopes take the form of a transformed metaphysics that would reorient philosophy’s relationship to nature and culture by making human need its object. Proceeding by negative example, Adorno argued in his lectures *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* that nature and culture have too often come together in philosophies that posit the former as a pristine place in which “no progress has yet taken place.” In their obsession with “primal questions” these cutting-edge philosophies weave logics of self-preservation into the originary state that they seek to conserve. In consuming philosophies of this sort, their readers mistake alibis for transcendence and learn to overlook the devastating changes that have already occurred

in the present. Repudiating the unmediated categories of experience in which these systems trade, Adorno pessimistically concludes, “in a world arranged like ours, in which, whether in South Africa or Vietnam, things happen of which we know and only with difficulty repress the knowledge that they happen—in such a world culture and all the noble and sublime things in which we take delight are like a lid over refuse” (2000, 130).

With these “noble and sublime things” in mind, Adorno went on to tie the philosophies of Jaspers and Heidegger together in what he called a “metaphysics of death” (*Todesmetaphysik*).¹⁹ The starkness of Adorno’s phrasing focalizes how the centrality of death to each thinker serves to estrange the experience of dying from everyday life. Jaspers and Heidegger accomplish this aim, in Adorno’s view, by making death a metaphor through which the end of the species mirrors that of the individual in that it must justify all that has come before its finality. Following this way of thinking back to the genesis of modernity, Adorno located it in Voltaire’s reflections on the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. In its transition from Leibnizian theodicy to Lockean empiricism, Voltaire’s response to this catastrophe became emblematic of the metaphysical desire to smuggle meaning back into moments of absolute terror. Moving from the massive scale of an earthquake to the personal one of torture, Adorno cites the then recently published Jean Améry essay “Die Tortur” in the service of illustrating the impossibility of theorizing death in the present. Speaking to the total reification of social existence, of which torture is the exception that proves the rule, Adorno focalizes how the physicality of death has become a parody of life under capitalism. From blacksites to Amazon warehouses, death comes from the outside into lives that should have been autonomous. However, rather than drawing his students’ attention to these still exemplary sites of torture and exploitation, Adorno emphasizes how Western society has begun to treat the elderly. Lamenting that the aged have been relegated to the status of patients of the nascent science of gerontology, Adorno warns that now “age is seen as a kind of second minority, so that something like a programme of euthanasia carried out by some future form of inhumanity, of no matter what provenance, becomes foreseeable” (107–8).

In “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” Adorno identified this shift in philosophical object with Hegel’s insistence on the position of “simply

looking on" (*reines zusehen*), through which "things themselves speak in a philosophy that focuses its energies on proving that it is itself one with them" (1993, 7). Not often the subject of critical theory, nursing homes revealed for Adorno that the search for utopia rests not in finding a place beyond these catastrophes but in rooting our thought ever more fully within them. To work through the past, then, requires a regression away from recuperation and toward a feeling of guilt that cannot be reconciled with any philosophic concept. Yet from the sense of loss that this recognition engenders, the sublime consumability of catastrophe decomposes. From this shock, philosophy poses the question not of whether the threat of nuclear annihilation has been eclipsed by that of the total exhaustion of nature in the Anthropocene but of how resistances to these catastrophes risk repeating the assumptive logic that enabled them. Staging moments in which thought cannot proceed as it was, Adorno's work focalizes how the spectacular objects that we have been taught to fear eclipse those that we have been accustomed to overlook.

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Notes

1. For more work on the ideological connection between ecological and nuclear catastrophe see Masco; Hurley. The connection between these two terms is vivified by the fact that Paul Crutzen, who popularized the term “Anthropocene,” also championed the term “nuclear winter” (1982). Yet, Crutzen remains optimistic that “without major catastrophes like an enormous volcanic eruption, an unexpected epidemic, a largescale nuclear war, an asteroid impact, a new ice age, or continued plundering of Earth’s resources by partially still primitive technology (the last four dangers can, however, be prevented in a real functioning noösphere) mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come.” At the genesis of the term “Anthropocene,” it is apparent how these fantasies of the end of the world can so easily lend themselves to those of humanity’s domination of nature through “the exciting, but difficult task” of “environmental management” (2002, 4).

2. Of all the “-cenes” that have proliferated in critical theory, the Capitalocene has the most to offer in its attempt to measure geological temporalities with and against those of the working day. However, its world-systemic scope runs the risk of flattening out the specific role that gender and race have played and continues to play in the evolution of capital. Daniel Hartley explores these tensions and argues that “one possible development of [Jason W.] Moore’s work would be to argue that culture is a constitutive moment of abstract social nature, and vice versa, and hence, more broadly, that it is the dialectical interrelation of abstract social nature and culture which is a constitutive moment of the value relation.”

3. On risk management and its relationship to the scale in which a catastrophe is thought, see Johnson. Published after this article was in the process of publication, Johnson’s work argues that the Anthropocene can ultimately help us to see how the “planetary universal plays out through local particulars and world histories that have not been marked uniformly by freedom and equality but colonialism, enslavement and material inequality” (48).

4. This is clearly pointed out in the entry on *Welt* in *The Dictionary of Untranslatables*, which states that, “The Germanic etymon is a compound word that combines an element signifying ‘man’ (from the Latin *vir*) and a second element signifying ‘age’ (cf. English ‘old’). The resulting meaning would be something like ‘where man finds himself as long as he is alive’” (1217). This is a beautiful example of how what can appear as the newest and so most urgent formulations of humanity’s relationship to nature unthinkingly repeat the oldest assumptions about that relationship.

5. Although the editors tell us that “it could not be ascertained what happened to the Hahns,” a search of the database of the United States Holocaust Museum indicates that these are likely the relatives of Adorno’s family friends from Frankfurt, the Hahns, who never returned from the camps and ghettos to which they were deported.

6. Constantin Gosciler has drawn daylight between Jaspers and the “radical conservatives” like Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger who helped make the intellectual

climate of postwar Germany in their image. From these ranks, which Ley might have joined had he not been indicted at Nuremberg, there emerged a narcissism *qua* nihilism that argued that, in the words of Schmidt, “there exist crimes against and crimes for humanity. Crimes against humanity are committed by Germans. Crimes for humanity are committed against Germans” (entry from December 6, 1949, *Glossarium*, 282, qtd. at Goschler 5). While it is to Jaspers’s credit that he does not deflect the question of guilt to the “victors” themselves, this paper follows Adorno in arguing that the tendency to see history in terms of gains and losses serves to foreclose the question of collective complicity in the present.

7. Anson Rabinbach’s chapter on Jaspers from *In the Shadow of Catastrophe* offers a telling response to his program from Hannah Arendt, who wrote to him in August 1946 about the possibility of “a constitutional guarantee that any Jew, regardless of birth or residence, could become an equal citizen of any future German Republic” (150). The fact that even such a modest, yet profound, action could not come to fruition speaks eloquently to how unwilling Germany and the rest of the Western world were to work through their past.

8. “Gold Essay” is the title of a section of *Minima Moralia* in which Peter E. Gordon sees the roots of Adorno’s critique of the concept of authenticity in post-war German, existentialist thought (2016, 86).

9. Deborah Cook has also written on the sublime in Adorno’s work. For Cook, Adorno’s sublime speaks to our total domination of nature at the same time that it extends the hope of our reconciliation with it. Yet, if the sublime can do so, it does so only by exhausting at the same time that it elevates this hope. More recently, Marah Nagelhout has tied Adorno’s theory of the sublime to Anthropocene aesthetics. Acknowledging that Adorno does not elevate the sublime experience in nature, Nagelhout argues that the sublime in art may yet point to “the type of historical consciousness the Anthropocene requires” (125). However, in taking the Anthropocene as given, Nagelhout misses the regressive aspect of play inherent to Adorno’s reading of the sublime artwork. As Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*, “what parades as sublimity rings hollow, whereas what plays imperturbably regresses to the triviality from which it was born.” It is in this sense that Adorno asserted “the sublime ultimately reverses into its opposite” to the point that “tragedy and comedy perish in modern art and preserve themselves in it as perishing” (2002, 198–99).

10. Translations from *Negative Dialektik* (1966) will be my own.

11. From Latour’s description of the parliament of things, “let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another represent the Monsanto chemical industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions; let still another speak in the name of the State; what does it matter, so long as they are all talking about the same thing” (1993, 144). It is interesting to note that Latour has more recently admitted that the Capitalocene could be an adequate substitute for the term “Anthropocene” (2014, 7). However (see note 2 on the Capitalocene), his agenda here as elsewhere is to render humanity as unified in its diversity in a way that demands a planetary scale.

12. In Morton's own words, "Consumerism is the specter of ecology. When thought fully, ecological awareness includes the essence of consumerism, rather than shunning it. Ecological awareness must embrace its specter" (125).

13. These reflections on regression should be taken alongside Robert Hullot-Kentor's theorization of the indeterminacy of regression and progress in his reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is especially so of his clarification in the "Introduction" to his collected essays that "regression . . . as Adorno occasionally points out, is not to be understood concretely, as traveling back to an earlier period, but as the manifestation of conflicts that were never resolved in the first place" (9).

14. Here, it is important to distinguish the mass-produced occult from other, traditional forms of divination. While these other forms might have spoken to the possibility of collective life and alternative forms of knowledge, its mass production as "star charts" offers only a mirror image of the current state of affairs.

15. Jameson is eloquent on the question of natural history in *Late Marxism*, where he writes, "what is involved here is a reciprocal defamiliarization of the two incommensurable poles of the dualism of Nature and History, but clearly enough—and on Adorno's own formulation—this must be a perpetual process in which neither term ever comes to rest, any more than any ultimate synthesis emerges" (99).

16. Critiquing the Cold War specter of the "population bomb" as a means by which to devalue the lives and futures of populations that did not figure into the West's vision of progress, Michelle Murphy has written, "as a collective dreamscape, the conjugation of population and economy did not just come from a single model or equation but from a dispersed global cacophony of equations and simulations drawing in experts of many kinds and exceeding them. Technoscience dreams the world it makes sense in" (53). Insofar as dreams structure the reality of which they are often viewed as merely parasitic, they can also reveal moments of rupture and discontinuity in the world that technoscience has made.

17. In his article "Poetry after Hiroshima?," Drew Milne has turned to Adorno's *Dream Notes* in order to draw attention to how the innumerable lived threats encoded by Cold War paranoia "render surrealism historical" by allowing us to see, in the atom bomb's blast, "unnatural but scientifically intelligible rainbows of destruction" (96). Yet, in addition to being "local and lived," Milne's nuclear objects are "ontological and metaphysical" in a way that recedes from consciousness. By standing in excess of what "we" can represent, the bomb becomes a point of negation that registers as an eschatological fixation in the "nuclear songs" that he offers.

18. In an influential reading of Adorno's political thought, Jane Bennett has argued that Adorno's theory of reification draws our attention to "the preponderance of the object" as something that vexes our common sense assumptions about individual agency. However, Bennett also asserts that in seeing nature as something "dead," Adorno remained blind to "thing-power" latent in the world around us. By resigning these natural forces to a "human concept" like reification, Bennett warned of an eschatological dimension in Adorno's thought that opens itself up to the "messianic promise" of "an absolute-to-come" (16–17). However, this critique

misses Adorno's urgent point that things already have the power not only "to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" but also to exterminate those lives that are already lived as objects (Bennett 2009, 6).

19. For a detailed reading of Adorno's rethinking of metaphysics see Hammer. Since this article has been in press, more has been published on Adorno and metaphysics. Of particular interest is Gordon (2020). Here, Gordon ties Adorno's theorization of metaphysical experience to regression without making it thematic to Adorno's work. Nevertheless, he concludes this essay with the evocative claim that the cartoon animal themed pet names that Adorno shared with his family and close friends "are, of course, forms of affection. But they are also political. Where fascism reduces the human to the animal, love responds to the animal in the human, the nature within human nature" (562). In this spirit, the attention that Adorno gave to regression shows that he was interested in unearthing not only the violence that lurks under the edifice of culture but also what of human life remains fragile and plastic within it.

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