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Adorno: Never Again Auschwitz

The texts of Theodor Adorno urge the consideration of only one imperative for philosophy: never again Auschwitz. Auschwitz represents, to all who acknowledge its destruction, the ultimate disaster of man. The horror of the Shoah is often explained as a *temporary lapse* of humanity fueled by exceptional conditions: anti-Semitism, economic desperation, and the sheer evil of Hitler and National Socialism. For Adorno confronting such representations of the Shoah proves inseparable from confronting experience itself because he considers such attempts to make sense of the trauma as wiping out memory. Without memory, understanding remains impossible; without understanding, repetition remains inevitable. Adorno examines the pathology of destruction, and draws upon this understanding to critique notions of progress and to propose what he views as the only method of preventing another Auschwitz, education.

Before embarking upon a critical discussion concerning the root and afterlife of Auschwitz, the defining characteristics of Auschwitz must be distinguished. That is, why Auschwitz as the catalyst for this discussion? After all, had willful killing of fellow humans not occurred before Auschwitz? The answer lies in the fact that never before had millions of people been categorized and annihilated as things rather than humans. The

Shoah, unrivaled in its grotesque brutality, aimed not to conquer a wartime enemy, but to erase an entire people from the Earth. Military operations “are scarcely comparable to the administrative murder of millions of innocent people” (Adorno 90). Auschwitz was the origin of genocide. Incidentally when analyzing individuality, Adorno writes “it is worthless to be ‘the only one’...to be ‘the first’ is everything” (Adorno 151). In a similar vein, if a repetition of Auschwitz were not a legitimate and dire concern perhaps survivors such as Adorno could ‘just get over it.’

The breadth of trauma administered during the Shoah is beyond deplorable, yet citizens of Nazi Germany were unable to recognize their own collective and individual barbarism. The use of reason, both in rationally justifying and scientifically carrying out the mass extermination of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals should haunt civilization like no other disaster in history. Auschwitz represents the sad pinnacle of reason, and thus beckons philosophy and the world to critical reflection about, among other things, the dangers of unchecked reason.

With a notion of why Auschwitz is of supreme concern, the conditions under which Auschwitz was possible become the focus of Adorno’s analysis. The first necessary recognition is that the conditions were not exceptional in the sense of being coincidental. The “desktop murderers and ideologues” rallied support by simply appealing to certain aspects of human culture as it had developed (Adorno 204). Conditional speculation over whether or not the Shoah would have occurred without Hitler fails to realize that the conditions responsible for the Shoah brewed over time and were not the product of one man or even a party.

Adorno cites “identification with power” as being an important condition for Auschwitz because of the domination of a “power politics” “based on the fear of the voting masses.” The twin political forces of hope and fear are both distinctly uncritical but it was fear that yielded the dangerous lack of criticism in Nazi Germany. Adorno attributes the roots of “critique’s lack of consequence in Germany” to “military hierarchies” which suppressed criticism through their closing ranks and defending their members against complaints (Adorno 286). Lack of critical assessment within society drains democratic systems of their deliberative power, making room for abusive power. A passive polis contributed to the legitimizing support base of National Socialism and to the silence of the opposition.

Something deeper in society than zeal for authority drove the trains to concentration camps. Adorno describes the force that numbs people to pain and suffering as playing “a considerable role in the traditional education: the ideal of being hard.” Adorno vehemently rejects the “alleged ideal” of “education instilling discipline through hardness” as “utterly wrong” (Adorno 197). Encouraging hardness as a principle, Adorno argues, leads not only to numbness in regard to one’s own pain but also in relation to the pain of others. The suppression of emotion concerning pain fosters a desire within an individual to effect pain in others.

The “destructive effect” of the steely temperament is compounded when people “blindly slot themselves into the collective.” Adorno indicates a connection between people resigning themselves to a group identity and their “willingness to treat others as an amorphous mass.” Just as bottling up pain leads people to exercise pain upon others, giving up one’s autonomy in favor of identifying with the group leads to the

objectification of others. Adorno refers to those of this form as “manipulative characters” because of their thorough indifference towards the pain of others. The Nazi leaders are the prime example of ‘manipulative characters,’ “distinguished by a rage for organization, by the inability to have any immediate human experiences at all, by a certain lack of emotion, by an overvalued realism” (Adorno 198). These four characteristics are indeed the curses which allowed Nazi persons, in their state of bankrupt souls and sold selves, to commit without “the least sentiment of guilt” the atrocities of Auschwitz (Adorno 199).

“The lack of self-reflection, and ultimately an overall inability to experience” highlights life departed from consciousness. Power attracts people with weak egos and “authoritarian personalities” who “require the compensation of identifying themselves with, and finding security in, great collectives” (Adorno 94). Self-interests governed the decisions of Germans, and they responded to the Hitler’s protection of them “from the natural catastrophes of society to which they had been abandoned” (Adorno 95). This rationale represents the ‘barbarism at the heart of culture;’ decisions are fueled by *self-interests* but in joining the collective people discard their very *selves*. Adorno focuses on this phenomenon of self-interest as the governing principle of human culture, seizing its influence in his plan for prevention. Rather than “invoking ideals or even the suffering of others, which is always relatively easy to get over,” Adorno suggests the way to get people concerned about the suffering of others is by reminding them that it is in their own best interests to avoid a “politics of catastrophe” (Adorno 102).

With an appreciation for the conditions that allowed Auschwitz, Adorno makes it abundantly clear that such a ‘politics of catastrophe’ could develop again given that these

conditions for disaster remain today. He writes “the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken” (Adorno 103). One of these remaining conditions is the coldness perpetuating in current ideologies that Adorno recognizes as the same coldness that enabled the Nazis. He describes coldness as being “a fundamental trait of anthropology.” If coldness were not the actual “the constitution of people...then Auschwitz would not have been possible, people would not have accepted it” (Adorno 201).

He analyzes this presence of coldness as he finds it exists in sports and our culture of technology. In sports, specifically from the aspect of fans, he finds the same promotion of “aggression, brutality, and sadism” exemplified in “those who regularly shout from the sidelines” (Adorno 197) that characterized the personalities of “the bureaucratic desktop murderers and ideologues” (Adorno 204). The lust for technology also plagues society with coldness. “A series of fetishes, homemade concepts instead of their longed for things” (Adorno 13) plagues society just as it does philosophy, by concealing “the ends—a life of human dignity” from focus. People become “thoroughly cold” behind the “veil of technology.” “The fetishization of technology” replaces the possibility of loving other people (Adorno 200). The “nexus of deception” constructed by the “culture industry” produces this love for technology and disables man’s capacity to love other people (Adorno 98).

Systematic reason, a critical feature of our civilization, goes hand in hand with coldness. Systematic reason also relates to the “idea of nation, which...alone has sufficient force to mobilize hundreds of millions of people for goals they cannot

immediately identify as their own” (Adorno 97). Adorno describes nationalism entrenched with barbarism, and warns “genocide has its roots in this resurrection of aggressive nationalism that has developed in many countries since the end of the nineteenth century” (Adorno 192). “Pathological nationalism” (Adorno 98) applies to the Shoah, and Adorno sees the same fascism surviving today in the form of capitalist economic systems which deludes the powerless “to throw themselves into the melting pot of the collective ego” (Adorno 99), precisely the origin of barbarism. The collective, “administered world has the tendency to strangle all spontaneity, or at least to channel it into pseudo-activities.” (Adorno 292) Man must not resign his freedom in the name of a nationalist culture of industry, for doing so leads to objectifying people, which leads to destruction.

Adorno utilizes memory to arrive at conclusions regarding the conditions that allowed for the Shoah. He argues that these same conditions persist today, and that therefore, we cannot allow ourselves to forget the horror they led to. “The past that one would like to evade is still very much alive” (Adorno 89). In his *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*, Adorno begins to formulate a plan for prevention. At the heart of what it will take to never again allow the horrors lies education. “Enlightenment about what has happened must work against a forgetfulness” about what happened (Adorno 99). ‘Working through the past’ represents enlightenment, “essentially a turn toward the subject” (Adorno 102). Reinforcing the self and establishing self-consciousness in society will come from such a ‘turn toward the subject.’ Enlightenment thus results in an erosion of the subjective conditions behind a potential repetition of Auschwitz. “Only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated” have

we succeeded in working through the past, thereby breaking the “captivating spell of the past” (Adorno 103).

Adorno outlines the appropriate methodology for spreading enlightenment in *Education After Auschwitz*. Here he writes “the only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection” (Adorno 193). In plain language Adorno designates the “single ideal: never again Auschwitz” as the priority of education (Adorno 191). Barbarism persists while the conditions of Auschwitz still exist. Education must address and reverse the conditions of coldness, nationalism, and systematic reason. A reorientation of self-interest must be developed to combat these features of society. The self and in turn a sense of humanity must be born to stave off coldness and its embodiments.

The first step toward understanding requires moving beyond guilt. Adorno emphasizes the distinction between the people of Germany and the conditions that produced the Shoah. That is, with relation to guilt we must look beyond individual perpetrators and concentrate on the dynamic that made them. He decrees that “there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence” (Adorno 89). Adorno assigns the responsibility for the atrocities to people who supported Hitler, but he stresses the irrational implications of “drawing up a balance sheet of guilt” (Adorno 90). Guilt in that sense is stagnant because it fails to carry remembrance to the present. In *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*, Adorno recalls the line in Goethe’s *Faust*: ““And it’s as good as if it never happened’...uttered by the devil in order to reveal his innermost principle, the destruction of memory” (Adorno 91).

When we truly remember beyond a history of the victors, our understanding of history will morph from “a chain of events” to see “one single catastrophe” as “the angel of history” does in Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* (Benjamin 257). With this understanding our culture should be termed destruction. The only thing we can draw out of this destruction is remembrance: “the single remaining thing that our powerlessness can offer” to the murdered (Adorno 91). Without remembrance, history is lost and thus will surely repeat itself. Remembrance carries a deeper significance than simply knowing the statistics and methods of the Shoah, it warrants the development for a perspective that will ensure that Auschwitz never happens again. Understanding is predicated on memory in the sense that understanding comes through confronting experience

Effecting change in the conditions turns understanding about Auschwitz into the prevention of repetition. “Since the possibility of changing—namely societal and political—conditions is extremely limited today, attempts to work against the repetition of Auschwitz are necessarily restricted to the subjective dimension” (Adorno 192). The coldness in individuals represents the root subjective condition for catastrophe. Preventing catastrophe is progress and “progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place” (Adorno 145). So to prevent catastrophe, the subjective condition of coldness must be replaced, through education, by a notion of humanity. The possibility for humanity surfaces in the shadow of Auschwitz. In *Progress* Adorno refers to Spinoza: “the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better” (Adorno 288).

Replacing the “indifference to the fate of others” (Adorno 201), known as coldness, with love was “one of the greatest impulses of Christianity” (Adorno 202).

Adorno recognizes the failure of this attempt, explaining that “it did not reach into the societal order that produces and reproduces this coldness” (Adorno 202). Any notion of bonds suffers the same failure because people are “profoundly indifferent toward whatever happens to everyone else” except family, friends, and those they have “tangible interests with” (Adorno 201). This is because love itself is exclusive by nature, in that to love someone means to not love another. To not have a connection to a group of people contributes to regarding them as less than human (i.e. Anti-Semitism). The connection between all people, therefore cannot be a human one. Adorno considers “it an illusion to think that the appeal to bonds...would help in any serious way” (Adorno 194). Not only does Adorno dismiss the concept of bonds as dysfunctional, he considers them “fatal” (Adorno 195). The “foolish and naïve people” who advocate bonds ignore that their underlying characteristic is a “permanent compulsion to obey orders,” which violates autonomy, “the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz” (Adorno 195).

With the idea of universal bonds of love preventing another Shoah tossed out as fantastical and paradoxically dangerous, Adorno proposes his model of education work from inside an existing societal and psychological framework of self-interest to reform subjective conditions. “When I speak of education after Auschwitz, then, I mean two areas: first children’s education in early childhood; then general enlightenment that provides an intellectual, cultural, and social climate in which a recurrence would no longer be possible” (Adorno 194). In educating children, Adorno suggests introducing children to the “idea of the cruelty and hardness of life” rather than pampering them, so as to fight the conditions “in the domain of the individual” (Adorno 202). This method

hopes to produce citizens devoid of barbarism, unlike their cold and hardened parents. Adorno notes the necessity to “educate the educators themselves” (Adorno 101). This is a decree straight out of Marx’s third thesis in Theses on Feuerbach, which states “it is essential to educate the educator himself” (Marx 108). The education for the educator which Adorno stresses concerns the behavioral sciences: sociology, criminology, and above psychoanalysis. The principle of “critical self-reflection” central to psychoanalysis is at the heart of Adorno’s education designed to prevent another Auschwitz.

In addressing “trust in authority” as an explanation for Auschwitz, Adorno specifies that the type of government has less to do with “authoritarian behavior and blind authority” than the psychological unreadiness of a people for freedom. He points out similar conditions exist under democracies, only without the “destructive and... insane dimension.” Adorno focuses on the psychological “only because the other, more essential aspects lie so far out of reach of the influence of education.” This is his reasoning for concentrating on reforming subjective conditions rather than objective conditions (Adorno 194).

The subjective conditions he targets with education include “mechanisms that cause racial prejudice” and ignorance “of the few durable propaganda tricks” (Adorno 103). Education that spawns self-consciousness and warns people of the danger of hope and fear as ‘propaganda tricks’ targets these conditions. Adorno adds that simply reminding people of the suffering “will impress people more deeply than invoking ideals or even the suffering of others, which is always relatively easy to get over.” To make people wake up to the dangers of fascism and discrimination, the danger must be warned

of on a personal level. The objective notion of “freedom and humanitarianism...in its abstract form does not mean very much to people” (Adorno 102).

One inconsistency in Adorno’s *Education After Auschwitz* is his claim “I cannot presume to sketch out the plan for such an education even in rough outline” (Adorno 194). After claiming “that one of the most important goals of education is the debarbarization of the countryside,” Adorno outlines exactly such a plan (Adorno 196). His plan is to evolve “the state of those who have not completely kept up with culture” by using television programs and “mobile educational groups” as supplementary education. The concept makes sense, but the notion that keeping up with the culture acts to counter barbarism rings foreign, at first glance, to his previous sentiment of barbarism at the heart of culture. However, the culture Adorno relates to debarbarization is one of education, and this distinction actually exemplifies his view towards progress.

“Too little of what is good has power in the world for progress to be expressed in a predicative judgment about the world, but there can be no good, not a trace of it, without progress” (Adorno 147). Adorno does not accept that progress has occurred, but he also does not agree with the theory of decline or decadence voiced by Nietzsche. To Adorno “Decadence was the *fata moragana* of this progress that has not yet begun” (Adorno 151). He sees through this mirage to realize “that the conditions for the possibility of freedom are unfreedom” (Adorno 149), while decadence sees only the lack of realized humanity and interprets it as the impossibility for progress. This belief is “sustained by the false inference that because there has been no progress up until now, there never will be any” (Adorno 153). Adorno sees a possibility of progress even after Auschwitz, or maybe because of Auschwitz. The urgency for progress, however fleeting

the possibility, enabled him to live after the catastrophe that should have taken his life. His commentary about the “progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” leading to a time, in the age of the bomb, “in which violence might vanish altogether” (Adorno 153), is indicative of the most destructive moments creating “an index of what is right and better” (Adorno 288). Adorno considers anyone who doubts the possibility for progress after Auschwitz as having resigned. Adorno describes those who have resigned: “by leaving the conditions untouched, he condones them without admitting it” (Adorno 289). Adorno refuses to resign himself to believing progress is impossible, but he just as powerfully refuses to resign himself to accepting the view that progress is easy.

The imperative ‘never again Auschwitz’ presents a challenge for philosophy, one that requires an emphasis on critique. Critique of the conditions allowing catastrophe will lead to an understanding and appreciation of the subjective self and the necessity of remembrance. Education must not try to indoctrinate, because “simply posing... questions already contains a potential for enlightenment” (Adorno 200). This Platonic method is the only way to bring about humanity on a subjective level. In the shadow of Auschwitz there is potential for illumination. The birth of humanity will come when we realize that the spiral of destruction can only be straightened by calling “in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers” (Benjamin 255). The imperative goes beyond insuring concentration camps are never again constructed; it sees Auschwitz as the eruption of coldness and systematic reason that worsened as our remembrance vanished. The recognition and reversal of this phenomenon represents the progress necessary to ensure ‘never again Auschwitz.’

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