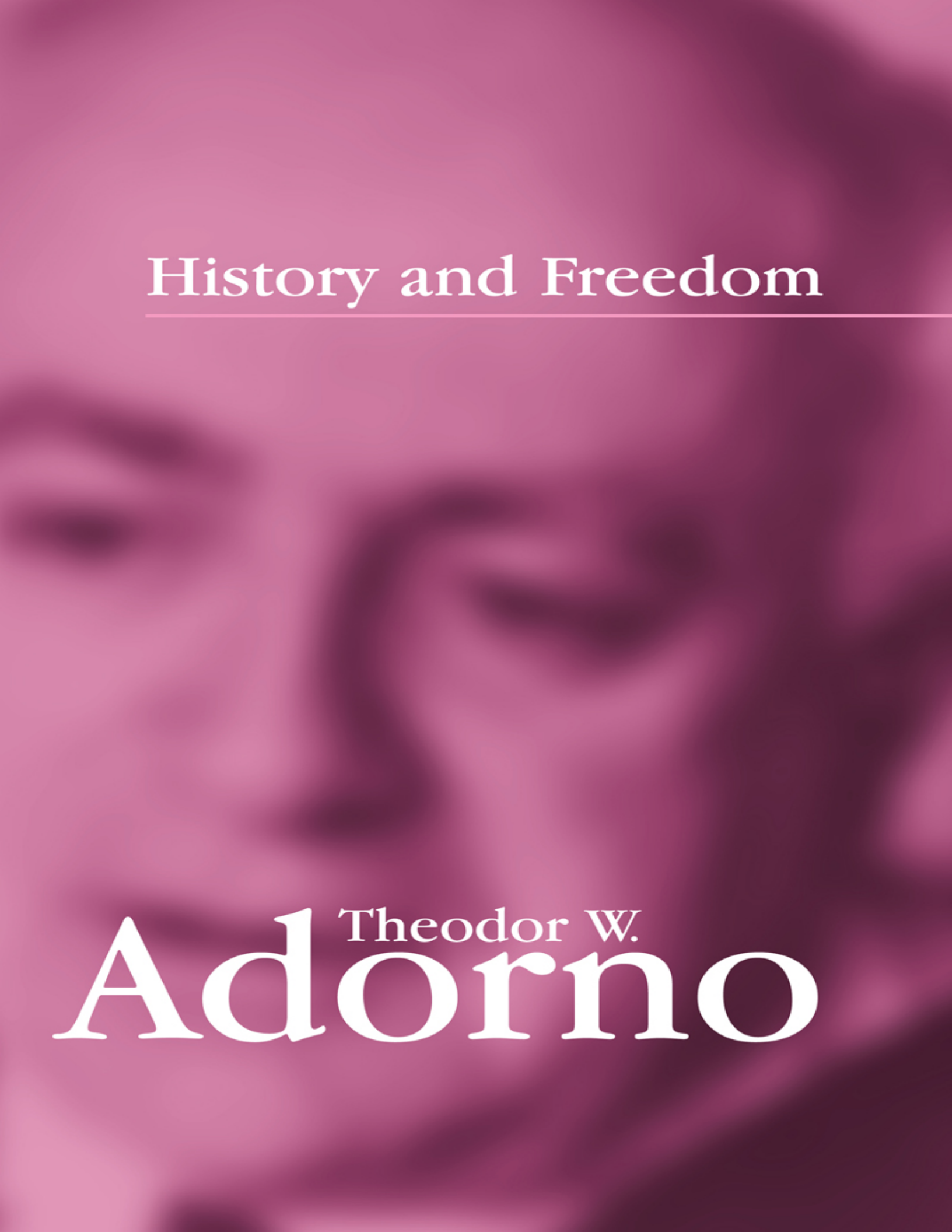
History and Freedom



Theodor W. Adorno

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HISTORY AND FREEDOM

Lectures 1964–1965

Theodor W. Adorno

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Nietzsche produced his ‘observations out of season’ in order to register his abandonment of history in favour of ‘life’. It may appear to be similarly ‘unseasonal’ now to publish a course of lectures of Adorno's in which he insists on the importance of history and its philosophy, as if for the sake of survival in the future. Once it became obvious that the communist project of mapping out the future path of history had collapsed, books began to pile up whose authors took it more or less for granted that history was now at an end and that the human race had now arrived at an ominous-sounding *post-histoire*. Not infrequently it was assumed that Adorno's name would be found among those who shared this conservative contempt for history. In fact he was not to be discovered there, as can be seen from the course of lectures he gave in the middle of the 1960s on *History and Freedom*. Admittedly, like Adorno's philosophy as a whole, these lectures convey the message that hitherto the concept of history as progress had been a failure and that consequently the historical process represented a continuation of the same thing, a stasis that was still the stasis of myth. However, to Adorno's mind this insight did not imply an apologia for the immutability of the mythic state: post-history cannot exist where there has not even been any history because prehistory still persists.

The end of history had already been announced once before, in Hegel's theory of universal history, although with a slightly different emphasis. In the last part of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel had said that ‘the Christian world was the world of completion; the grand principle of being is realized, consequently the end of days

is fully come. The Idea’ (by which he means philosophy) ‘can discover in Christianity no point in the aspirations of Spirit that is not satisfied’ (*The Philosophy of History*, p. 342). For this reason, Hegel understood his own study as a ‘Theodicæa, a justification of the ways of God … so that the ill that is found in the World may be comprehended, and the thinking Spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil. Indeed, nowhere is such a harmonizing view more pressingly demanded than in Universal History’ (ibid., p. 15). For Adorno's philosophy ‘after Auschwitz’ this way of thinking was no longer viable. Just as Voltaire had been cured of Leibniz's theodicy by the natural catastrophe [of the Lisbon earthquake] (cf. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 361), Adorno was cured of Hegel's version of theodicy by the social catastrophes of the twentieth century. Adorno defined his own thought as an anti-system, and it is scarcely an exaggeration to regard it as a complete anti-theodicy. Where Hegel had declared that truth and history were one and the same, that the rational was actual and the actual rational, Marx had maintained that it was the insulted and the injured, their existence and sufferings, that signified the negation of Hegel's theory. However, while today Hegel's actualized reason seems like sheer mockery, Marx's ‘realization of philosophy’ has not taken place, the opportunity has been ‘missed’, to use Adorno's term (ibid., p. 3). The catastrophes that have occurred and those that are to come make any further waiting seem absurd. There is no ‘reconciling knowledge’ of history: ‘the One and All that keeps rolling on to this day – with occasional breathing spells – [would] teleologically [be] the absolute of suffering. … The world spirit, a worthy object of definition, would have to be defined as permanent catastrophe’ (ibid., p. 320).

Once he had returned from exile, and after all that had taken place in Auschwitz and elsewhere, it was anything

but obvious to Adorno that philosophy could continue as before, as if nothing had changed. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that he and Horkheimer had written in the 1940s, the authors had set themselves the task of discovering ‘why humanity instead of entering into a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism’ (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xiv). This question never ceased to trouble them; it became the focal point of their thinking, by the side of which the traditional problems of philosophy had become irrelevant. Philosophy, which in Hegel's words is supposed to ‘grasp its own age in thought’, fails abjectly in the attempt to comprehend the rupture in civilization that has taken place. To a great extent it does not even bother trying, but contents itself either with vague reflections on the meaning of Being or with the analysis of the linguistic assumptions of thought as such and in general. Adorno criticized both these trends, both Heidegger and his associates and positivism. His criticism was by no means free of emotion. Recently we have seen the emergence of thinkers who see themselves as part of a post-metaphysical trend or who assume the vague role of a discussant, but who in fact are concerned with the abolition of their own role as philosophers. Adorno declined to play any of these games, but doggedly continued to reflect the actual processes of history and its rejects. In *Negative Dialectics* he inquired whether it is still possible to live after Auschwitz. The impossibility of an authoritative answer coincided in his thought with the impossibility of philosophy after Auschwitz.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that he ceased to be a philosopher; indeed, he insisted that philosophy was an indispensable activity, even if he had no illusions about the indifference with which it is commonly regarded by the rest of the world. What was crucial to Adorno's philosophy was the intention of memorialization, of taking things to heart

[*Eingedenken*], something it shared with modern works of art such as Picasso's *Guernica*, Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, or Beckett's *The Unnameable*, works wrested from their own historical and philosophical impossibility. Books such as *Negative Dialectics* and the *Aesthetic Theory* have their legitimate place alongside these. If Adorno's practice of memorializing the recent past during the two decades after 1945 was not entirely without effect, its place meanwhile has since been occupied by a renewed interest in chthonic origins, the ideology of a ‘new’ mythology resurrected once again, as this was expressed in the revival of a misunderstood Nietzsche and in the impressive comeback of Heideggerian ideas. This return of theory to the Pre-Socratics went hand in hand with a retreat from actual history that blots out memory and negates experience. It ratifies trends that were anyway becoming prevalent in society. But the end of history celebrated or bewailed by the postmodernists has failed to arrive; instead it is historical consciousness that appears programmed to disappear. This will deprive philosophy not just of its best part, but of everything. From Adorno, in contrast, we could still learn today that without memory, without Kant's ‘reproduction in the imagination’, there can be no knowledge worth having. Memory, however, in contradiction of a theory that had been dominant ever since Plato and which Kant too accepted, is no transcendental synthesis, but something that possesses the ‘kernel of time’ of which Walter Benjamin was the first to speak. For philosophy in the age after Auschwitz, this ‘kernel of time’ is to be found in the screams of the victims. Since then, as Adorno has written, ‘the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth’ (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 17f.). If philosophy is still possible today, then – and this is the message of Adorno's own – it can only be one that retains in every one of its statements the memory of the sufferings of human beings in the death camps. It will be a philosophy

that recalls not the shadow of the tall plane trees on the banks of the Ilissos, like Plato's *Phaedrus*, but the ‘shadow / of the scar up in the air’ of which Paul Celan speaks.[*]

Adorno's philosophy constantly worked away at the interpretation of history so that one day the moment of its fulfilment might arrive. From almost the very beginning of his philosophical labours he displayed this interest in history and the historical. In the summer semester of 1932 he gave a seminar on Lessing's ‘Education of the Human Race’ together with Paul Tillich, who had supervised his second doctoral dissertation, his *Habilitation*. In Lessing's essay the *res cogitans* no longer stands opposed to the *res extensa*, but instead reason becomes conscious of itself through the unfolding of history. Even earlier, in his inaugural lecture of 1931, Adorno had declared that the question of Being as the idea of existing things was ‘impervious to questioning’, and floated the suggestion that ‘it has perhaps faded from view for all time … ever since the images of our lives have been guaranteed through history alone’ (‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, in *The Adorno Reader*, p. 24). From that time on Adorno's material works were dedicated to the interpretation of such ‘historical images’ as he called them, borrowing the term from Benjamin. His method, if we can call it that, was very close to Lessing's own, one that Ernst Cassirer had described as a ‘“micrological” immersion in the smallest detail’ – this too a description that Adorno liked to use to characterize Benjamin but which fits his own writing even better.

As a topic, Adorno lectured on the philosophy of history on two occasions, in courses that he gave in Frankfurt in 1957 and then again in 1964–5. The first, the ‘Introduction to the Philosophy of History’, has survived only as the fair copy, probably made by Gretel Adorno, of a shorthand record. Although hardly complete, it nevertheless gives us a good idea of his lectures. His intention had been, he says, to

attempt ‘to establish the history of philosophy as the centre of philosophy in a radical sense’ (Theodor W. Adorno Archive, Vo 1941). Although still slightly academic when treating traditional philosophies of history, from St Augustine via Vico and Condorcet to Dilthey and Simmel, the lecture course of 1957 presents all the important motifs and themes of Adorno's own philosophy of history: the key phenomenon of the domination of nature, the criticism of the existentializing of ‘historicity’, the mystical relevance of inner temporality for the Absolute and, lastly, the opposition to a conception of truth as something permanent, immutable, ahistorical. Everything which philosophy concerns itself with under the primacy of the philosophy of history remains, ‘a changing, virtually transient thing’ (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 307). These ideas are only fully developed eight years later in the present lecture series, as well as in the first two ‘models’ of *Negative Dialectics*, where they are given their final form.

History in the sense used by Adorno is not the abstract other of nature, but what human beings make of nature. As long as this ‘making’ is unplanned and anarchic, humans remain in the ‘kingdom of necessity’ and there is no such a thing as a consciously created history alone worthy of the name. Freedom is one of the preconditions of such history: the free will of mankind to dispose of their own circumstances as they wish. It is this factor that has justified the inclusion of freedom in the philosophy of history, rather than in moral philosophy where it has traditionally been found. Adorno remarks halfway through these lectures, not entirely tongue in cheek, that ‘almost without my having been fully aware of this when I set out – the concept that has turned out to be crucial for the theory of history, and incidentally also for the theory of progress, has been that of the *spell*’ (p. 172f.). And he defines this spell that governs life as a whole as ‘the eternal sameness

of the historical process' (p. 183). History, however, was not an eternal sameness, but a process in which the new constantly begins. In the view of antiquity and its myths, eternal sameness was history seen as cyclical, the idea that history does not progress, but that, when it has run its course, it is back where it started. Cyclical views of history have repeatedly returned to haunt the history of the philosophy of history. They can be found in Vico and Spengler, and even in Toynbee, as well as dominating the theories of contemporary diagnosticians of the end of history. Opposed to such ideas is the Christian view, expounded most powerfully by St Augustine, that history represents a progress towards Christ, and that in Him there is redemption and history will be fulfilled. If cyclical theories are ruled out by the hopes of human beings who are unwilling to accept that Sisyphus is the last man, redemption through Christ is refuted by that 'immediate view' of history as a 'slaughterhouse in which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed', as Hegel, a good Christian, summed it up (*The Philosophy of History*, p. 21).

Marx thought of the history that, strictly speaking, had not yet begun as 'prehistory'. Adorno adopted this term. 'What Marx with a mixture of melancholy and hope calls prehistory is nothing less than the epitome of all known history up to now, the kingdom of unfreedom' (*GS*, vol. 8, p. 234). The spell that still presides over everything is prehistorical in nature, it is the spell of myth. Adorno's subject, one that he pursued with infinite persistence, is the afterlife of this mythical dimension in a world that seems to have been entirely denuded of myth, the 'prehistorical world of the present' that he rediscovered throughout the works of someone such as Goethe. At the heart of the persistence of myth Adorno discerned the exchange relation of a commodity-producing society, and in

this respect too he follows Marx, who on occasion described the sphere of circulation as an archaic fate, as ‘a power over … individuals which has become autonomous, whether conceived as a natural force, as chance or in whatever other form’ (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 197). Adorno refused to abandon the belief that, despite all the frustrations of the past, history was not doomed to remain futile for all eternity. Not least, it was the catacombs of the victims that prevented him from finalizing the construction of history in his philosophy once and for all. He held open the door for history to enter into the future; instead of an ending he believed that history should flow into a Hölderlinesque *openness*. For all the differences that separated him from Ernst Bloch, he agreed with him on one point; he never played off a wretched reality against the idea of utopia, nor did he ever show the least desire to sabotage the concept of utopia. In his thought, utopia, the trace of the messianic, had what he called ‘the colour of the concrete’ (see p. 253) not that of abstract possibility.

In the winter of 1964, when Adorno gave his last series of lectures on the philosophy of history, the first signs of future disagreements with his students could already be seen on the horizon. The general disquiet of the post-Adenauer years was symbolized by the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt, the proposed legislation on the Emergency Laws and, most acutely, the American war in Vietnam. Against the background of these restorative, reactionary developments, a powerful opposition, dominated by students, emerged for the first time in the history of Germany. Admittedly, from 1967 on this opposition in part adopted forms of protest that Adorno was to condemn emphatically as ‘pseudo-activity’ (cf. the contributions in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VI, Munich, 2000). Not content with merely interpreting the world, the students called for social change, and Adorno's lectures represented

something of an attempt to provide a theoretical analysis of this situation by refocusing attention on the relations between theory and practice. At the time, this aspect of his lecture course passed more or less unnoticed. The idea that the philosophy of history should be studied in the interests of practical intervention had always been implicit in Adorno's philosophy. As a programme, it could be derived from Marxist theory. However, Adorno dates what might be regarded as its anticipated critique back to the early modern age and, more specifically, to the problematic situation of Hamlet, whom he often called upon in support of his argument. In Shakespeare's hero ‘we find the divergence of insight and action paradigmatically laid down’ (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 228). And Adorno found himself confronted by the same divergence when the students demanded guidance for political practice. It was for this reason that he wanted to discuss the question of theory and practice yet again, quite explicitly, in the summer semester of 1969, at the height of the student protest movement. This was to have been in a course with the title ‘Introduction to Dialectical Thinking’, but he never gave more than a few lectures because it was repeatedly disrupted and he was finally forced to cancel it. All that survives of the course is his notes for three lectures (cf. *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VI, p. 173ff.). Nevertheless, at least some of what he would have said to the students, had they let him, has survived in two essays: ‘On Subject and Object’ and ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’ (in *Critical Models*, pp. 245–78). These essays preserve his thoughts; they are a kind of epilogue to the student movement and at the same time an epitaph that the philosopher wrote for himself.

The text of the present lecture course is based on tape recordings that were transcribed in the Institute of Social Research directly after each lecture. Once the lectures had

been transcribed, the tapes were erased and reused. The transcriptions are lodged today in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive with the classification numbers Vo 9735–10314.

In order to produce the present text, the editor has attempted to adopt the same methods as those used by Adorno when editing talks given spontaneously. Where, that is, he agreed to publish them at all. In particular, the attempt has been made to preserve their spontaneous character. The editor has introduced as few or as many changes into the text as were essential. Anacolutha and elliptical formulations have been eliminated, as well as other errors of grammar and excessive repetitions, and a number of syntactical constructions have been simplified. Adorno used to speak fairly quickly and this often led to slips of the tongue; wherever it has been possible to make definite decisions about which words belonged where, the syntax has been retouched. Fillers, particularly particles such as '*nun*', '*also*', '*ja*', have been omitted where they added nothing to the meaning. Punctuation of course had to be inserted, and the editor felt that here he had the greatest licence to ignore the rules Adorno normally applied to his own written texts and to concentrate on making sure that Adorno's spoken words should be rendered as unambiguously and clearly as possible. Needless to say, no attempt has been made to 'improve' the original, but only to convey *his* text as faithfully as the editor knew how.

The notes provide sources for the quotations used in the lectures as well as citing texts that Adorno was referring to or might have had in mind. In addition, parallel passages from his writings have been provided where they help to clarify what he was saying in the lectures, but also to show the close links between his lectures and his published writings. 'One needs to develop a faculty for discerning the emphases and accents peculiar to a philosophy in order to

discover their relationships within the philosophical context, and thus to understand the philosophy itself – that is at least as important as knowing unequivocally: such and such is …' – let us say, the philosophy of history or freedom (*Metaphysics*, p. 51). The notes are provided to assist a reading in the spirit of Adorno's remarks. In general, they are intended to bring to life the cultural sphere that is inhabited by Adorno's lectures but that can hardly be taken for granted any more today. Wherever they give the impression that they are coming close to offering an interpretation, this is entirely in tune with the editor's intentions.

*

Thanks are due to Michael Schwarz for his help in dealing with all sorts of problems that arose during editing.

July 2000

Note

*See Paul Celan, 'To stand in the shadow / of the scar up in the air …' in *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, pp. 232–3.

PART I
HISTORY

LECTURE 1
PROGRESS OR REGRESSION?[1]

10 November 1964

Adorno's notes for this lecture:

Refer to the special situation of this lecture course.[2]

From a book on dialectics, i.e., to be treated as completed sections of a dialectical philosophy; that is to say, *not* as individual phenomena independent of the overall conception.

Legitimate in the sense that the two complexes to be treated have always been at the core of a dialectical philosophy.

Thus in *Kant* the relation of the realm of freedom to history is mediated by conflict [*Antagonismus*].

While in *Hegel* history is regarded immediately as progress in the consciousness of freedom, such that consciousness for Hegel amounts to a *realized* freedom.[3]

This doctrine is extremely precarious. Shall concentrate on its problematic nature, i.e., the actual historical relation of universal and particular.

Even with the greatest generosity and with the aid of a spiral theory,[4] it is no longer possible to make the case for such progress *directly*:

objectively, because of the increasingly dense texture of society both in the East and in the West, the intensification of the process of concentration and of bureaucratization which has the effect of reducing people more and more to the status of functions. Freedom is limited to self-

preservation. Even the most highly placed are merely functions of their function.

subjectively, because of ego-weakness, addiction to consumption, conformism. Nothing seems less plausible than the claim that there is progress *in the consciousness* of freedom, even allowing for the progressive democratization of *formal* political institutions, since these find themselves opposed by both the substance of social power and human apathy. Indifference to freedom. Neutralization of mind. Depoliticization of science.

After Auschwitz, a regression that has already *taken place* and is not merely expected à la Spengler, not only every positive doctrine of progress but also even every assertion that history has a *meaning* has become problematic and affirmative. There is here a transformation of quantity into quality. Even if the murder of millions could be described as an exception and not the expression of a trend (the atom bomb), any appeal to the idea of progress would seem absurd given the scale of the catastrophe.*

[Interpolation] *Problem: what is the relation of progress to the *individual* – a question brushed aside by the philosophy of history.

Simply by asking what history is over and above the facts, the history of philosophy seems inexorably to end up in a theory of the *meaning* of history.

This applies even to so-called negative or pessimistic histories of philosophy such as Spengler's.[5]

Cultural morphology – overarching patterns = organic teleologies; cultures would then have at least as much purpose – 'meaning' – as the plants to which Spengler compares them; they would be living beings in their own right, a solace for individual subjects.[6]

Incidentally, where Spengler attributes the unity of a cultural sphere to its soul, it would be more logical to ascribe it to the unity of its modes of production.

Even in Spengler, the anti-idealist, there is a latent idealism in his explanation of history as arising from within human beings.

Question: is the philosophy of history possible *without* such latent idealism, without the guarantee of meaning?

10 November 1964[7]

[From Hilmar Tillack's notes][8] When one grows older and is forced to choose between one's duty as professor to give lectures and the desire to follow one's own philosophical bent, one develops a certain peasant cunning. In the case of this course of lectures, I shall focus on two complexes taken from a philosophical work in progress[9] that I have been engaged on for years, two core themes, samples of dialectical philosophy, concerned, on the one hand, with the relation of world spirit to the history of nature, and on the other, with the doctrine of freedom.

In Kant's philosophy of history, the essence of which is distilled in the 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', the realm of freedom into which individuals might hope to enter is brought together with history. For his part admittedly, in his practical philosophy, Kant is inclined to think of this freedom as existing in the here and now. It is supposed to arise as a result of conflict [*Antagonismus*]. This resembles Hobbes's earlier view of a war of all against all, the savage conflicts in which mankind has nothing to gain and that result in the famous contracts founding the states.[10] Objectively, Hegel takes over the idea of working one's way forward through conflict but, by adding the idea of the cunning of reason, he intensifies it into a metaphysics, a theory of progress in the

consciousness of freedom. History becomes a radical movement in the direction of freedom. ‘Consciousness of freedom’ does not refer to individual, subjective consciousness, but to the spirit that objectively realizes itself through history, thus making freedom a reality. This theory of progress, as an advance in freedom, is highly vulnerable.

I do not propose to give you a general introduction to the philosophy of history of the kind you will find in writers such as Mehlis,[11] Bernheim[12] or Georg Simmel.[13] Instead, my specific approach focuses on the relationship between freedom and the individual. This is in large part identical with the relation of the universal, the great objective trend, to the particular. This dialectical and logical approach is almost more important than the direct discussion of the structural problems of history. I may note, incidentally, that I agree with Liebrucks[14] here that Hegel's authentic statement of this dialectical philosophy of history is to be found in his *Logic* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit* rather than elsewhere. Without wasting time on the overworked notion of a spiral development in history, it can be said that a direct progress towards freedom cannot be discerned. Objectively, such progress is impossible because of the increasingly dense texture of society in both East and West; the growing concentration of the economy, the executive and the bureaucracy has advanced to such an extent that people are reduced more and more to the status of functions. What freedom remains is superficial, part of the cherished private life, and lacks substance as far as people's ability to determine their own lives is concerned. In reality they are only given free rein in limited activities because they could not stand it otherwise, and all such licence is subject to cancellation. Even in the sphere of consumption – significantly, this term has displaced what used to be called enjoyment – they have become

appendages of the machinery. Goods are not produced for their sake and their consumption satisfies people's own desires only very indirectly and to a very limited extent. Instead, they have to make do with what the production line spews out. Freedom becomes impoverished, jejune, and is reduced to the possibility of sustaining one's own life. Mankind has reached a point today where even those on the commanding heights cannot enjoy their positions because even these have been whittled away to the point where they are merely functions of their own function. Even captains of industry spend their time working through mountains of documents and shifting them from one side of their desk to the other, instead of ignoring office hours and reflecting in freedom. Were they to pursue the latter course, their businesses would collapse in chaos. Where an optimum of freedom seems to have survived people cannot avail themselves of it. If you were to sit down, reflect, and make decisions, you would soon fall behind and become an eccentric, like the Savage in Huxley's *Brave New World*.[15]

Freedom is also a realm of subjective experience; that is to say, it is not just to be assessed by some objective standard. Where a subjective interest, a consciousness, is absent, there can be no freedom. Where objective conditions cease to favour a person or a category, or even obstruct and undermine them, there will be a corresponding loss of interest in them, and hence of the strength and the ability required to help them to prosper. Spengler says that Rousseau is starting to be a bore, and Marx even more so.[16] We need not discuss the truth of this claim here, but we can concede that the pathos of freedom in 1789 had its purely decorative side, one that continued to reverberate down to the middle of the nineteenth century. Nowadays, people are unable to get excited about it. They may fear losing the opportunities for consumption, but their interest in expanding freedom is absent. It is an illusion to imagine

that freedom is a substantial value merely because words are long-lived. Freedom survives only in remote mountainous regions where there is still resistance to totalitarian tyranny. Elsewhere, it has long since acquired the odium of obsolescence. What is of significance for the internal structure of individuals today is a phenomenon identified by psychoanalysis. This is the phenomenon of ego weakness. David Riesman speaks of inner-directed and other-directed characters.[17] By the latter, the predominant type today, he means the social character whose actions are guided by outside influences. In his case the discrepancy between the development of his ego and the power of the forces that bear down on him has the effect that his ego does not reach the point of a dialectic between his internal and external powers. In consequence he simply conforms. The chaining of people to consumption is an index of this. Political apathy has also become the universal rule in all countries now, as long as direct personal interests are not affected. It should be thought of in the same context. The progressive democratization of political institutions will do nothing to mitigate the loss of a sense of freedom, the growing indifference or the enfeeblement of the desire for freedom because the socio-economic reality of even the freest political institutions stands in the way of such a sense of freedom.

People are not as bound to authority as was supposed as recently as some thirty years ago because of their identification with their father imago. What we are witnessing is rather a neutralizing effect resulting from the pressure to conform. This leads to a closing off of the entire horizon of freedom and dependency. Where no freedom is experienced, there can no longer be any authority. The vanishing of this conceptual pair, freedom and authority, is more significant today than the growing apathy. This process of neutralization is what we must be concerned

with. Resistance to the routinization of science is another task that still remains to philosophy.

This process of neutralization should not be thought of as harmless. The loss of a sense of freedom tends to flip over into immediate terror, as is all too evident in Auschwitz. The catastrophe there was not just a disaster predicted by Spengler, but an actual reality, one that makes all talk of progress towards freedom seem ludicrous. The concept of the autonomous human subject is refuted by reality. By the same token, if freedom and autonomy still had any substance, Auschwitz could not have happened. And by Auschwitz I mean of course the entire system. Confronted with the fact that Auschwitz was possible, that politics could merge directly with mass murder, the affirmative mentality becomes the mere assertion of a mind that is incapable of looking horror in the face and that thereby perpetuates it.

What we see here is the transformation of quantity into quality – monstrous though it is to try to operate with the concept of quality in order to grasp the murder of millions. In fact, even to attempt to withstand such events mentally, to shed light on them with the aid of concepts, is to fix them with concepts. To speak of genocide as if it were an institution is to institutionalize it. We thereby assume a second burden of guilt. The change from quantity to quality here has this meaning: in bygone days exceptional situations were exceptions to the main trend. Alternatively, we might treat men such as Tamburlane and Genghis Khan as great natural calamities. Nowadays that has all changed. The horror of our day has arisen from the intrinsic dynamics of our own history; it cannot be described as exceptional. And even if we do think of it as an exception and not the expression of a trend – although this latter is not implausible, given that the atom bomb and the gas chamber have certain catastrophic similarities – to do so is

somehow absurd in the light of the scale of the disaster. What can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the level of objects?

Such things have a kind of retroactive force and demonstrate the extreme precariousness of the affirmative view of history. It raises the question whether the view of history as a continuous progression towards higher forms does not include the catastrophes that we are experiencing today; whether the predominance of the universal, the broad tendency, over the particular is not a delusion; whether the consolation of philosophy that the death of individuals is the price paid by the great movement of history was not always the swindle it is today; whether the sufferings of a single human being can be compensated for [*aufgehoben*] by the triumphal march of progress.

In so far as the philosophy of history sets out to show something more than the facts, it implicitly contains the search for meaning, formally at least – without the need for philosophy to explain it. In the same way, negative, cyclical theories of history also have this affirmative side despite themselves, even though they do not claim that history has a definite meaning but instead substitute nature for history.[18] Spengler disastrously encouraged people to insert themselves into the machinery of history within the general framework of historical necessity at the same time as predicting the victory of that machinery. Frobenius's cultural morphology is an organic teleology that preaches the idea of an all-encompassing, coherent totality.[19] This implies at least as much meaning or purpose within cultures as the plants to which Spengler compares them. This leaves the poor unfortunate individuals with the consolation that they are part of a higher living being, which has the benefit of conferring some meaning on their otherwise pointless existence. The fact that Spengler later developed a political point of view is not inconsistent with

his cultural pessimism. This is connected with the affirmative element in his teaching. Where pessimism is a general proposition, where it has a totalizing view, it implies that everything is fundamentally flawed, as Schopenhauer believed. Paradoxically, this means that it tends to leap to the assistance of individual evil in the world. It does so by arguing that attempts to change the world as a whole are doomed. This is also implicit in a negative philosophy of history.

It would be more logical to attribute the unity of a cultural sphere to the unity of a mode of production than – as with Spengler – to purely internal factors. It is not easy to see how something internal could put its stamp on an external form, like the 'shape that has been impressed upon evolving life'.[20] Spengler the anti-idealist becomes an idealist when he argues that the totality arises out of something internal to human beings, to the essence of humanity, without noticing that history is for the most part something that is done to people. He fails to realize that institutions have become so independent that individuals are scarcely in a position to impinge on them and are able to express their opinions about them only indirectly, through art, for example.

The question we must ask, therefore, is whether a theory of history is possible without a latent idealism; whether we can construct history without committing the cardinal sin of insinuating meaning where none exists.

Notes

1 Four of the twenty-eight lectures given in the winter semester 1964/5 have no audiotape transcriptions, but only the notes made by Adorno as the basis of his lecture. No doubt the tape recorder failed to function in

the case of the missing tapes – these were for lectures 1, 11, 13 and 20. At all events, the draft of the transcriptions (Theodor W. Adorno Archive, Vo 9735-10314) explicitly states that these lectures were ‘missing’. While Adorno was still alive, the drafts of the first three missing lectures were augmented by the notes taken by Hilmar Tillack, who had attended Adorno's lectures over a number of years. The present volume prints both Adorno's own notes (Vo 10315ff.) and those of Tillack in full, whereas for lecture 20 only Adorno's own notes have survived. These have been supplemented by an extract from an early version of the chapter on freedom from *Negative Dialectics*, to which the notes refer.

2 Between 1964 and 1966 Adorno discussed in three successive lecture courses topics that would figure centrally in his book *Negative Dialectics*. That book, which appeared first in 1966, is the ‘book on dialectics’ to which he refers in the next sentence in his notes. The present lecture course addresses the questions concerning morality and the philosophy of history that would form the subject of the chapters on Kant and Hegel in *Negative Dialectics*. This was the ‘special situation’ to which he refers, and he does so because as a rule his lectures and his research interests ran on parallel lines without intersecting. He commented on the ‘special’ factors that led him to proceed differently in the case of *Negative Dialectics* at the beginning of the lectures on that very subject in the winter semester 1965/6. What he had to say on this subject sheds light on the climate in which he had to teach in the university:

You are aware that the traditional definition of a university calls for the unity of teaching and research. You will also know how problematic this idea has become even though people still cling to the idea. My own work has suffered considerably in this situation, since the increase in both teaching and administrative duties that have fallen to me bit by bit makes it almost impossible for me to carry out my research obligations in term time – if indeed we can speak of research in connection with philosophy – as conscientiously as is called for objectively, and above all as would correspond to my own inclination and disposition. In such a situation, and under such pressures and compulsion, one tends to develop certain qualities that might best be described as peasant cunning. I am therefore attempting to do the situation justice by … taking much of the material for my lectures from the extensive and really quite burdensome [*belasteten*] book I have been working on for the past six years and that will bear the title of *Negative Dialectics*. … I am fully aware that this procedure might well be objected to, in particular by those with a positivist cast of mind. Such critics might well argue that as an academic teacher I should present you only with secure knowledge that is genuinely cast-iron and watertight. I have no wish to make a virtue of necessity, but my own view is that such ideas do not quite fit philosophy. Philosophy consists of ideas in a permanent state of flux, and, as Hegel, the great progenitor of dialectics, has argued, in philosophy the process is as important as the result; process and result are … really the same thing. Moreover, I believe that what characterizes philosophical thought is its tentative, experimental, inconclusive nature and it is this that distinguishes philosophy from the positive sciences. … In consequence, the arguments I shall present to you