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## **Adorno and Social Physiognomics**

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# Adorno and Social Physiognomics



## Towards a Reconstruction of Theodor W. Adorno's Dialectical Sociology

MSc Thesis in Sociology by Claus Dalsgaard Hansen

Aalborg University, 2003

## Preface

*Mit dem Glück ist es nicht anders als mit der Wahrheit: Man hat es nicht, sondern ist darin. Ja, Glück ist nicht anderes als da Umfange sein, Nachbild der Geborgenheit in der Mutter. Darum kann kein Glücklicher je wissen, daß er er ist. Um das Glück zu sehen, müßte er aus ihm heraustreten: er wäre wie ein Geborener. Wer sagt, er sei glücklich, lügt, indem er es beschwört, und sündigt so an dem Glück. Treue hält ihm bloß, der spricht: ich war glücklich. Das einzige Verhältnis des Bewußtseins zum Glück ist der Dank: das macht dessen unvergleichliche Würde aus. (Adorno, Minima Moralia)*

The thesis presented here marks a turning point in several respects. First of all, it was completed almost exactly 100 years after Adorno was born in Frankfurt am Main September 11<sup>th</sup> 1903. Much has been said and written on this occasion, and while I do not claim to have found the philosopher's stone, nor to be able to present a radically new perspective on Adorno, I believe that what I have to say about him in this thesis is based on a far more thorough analysis of his work than most of the nonsense to be found in the standard Danish accounts. The image of Adorno as an arrogant old man who hated jazz and wrote in a deliberately obscure style in order to appear sophisticated has been replaced here by a much more sympathetic treatment. Where other readings of Adorno highlight all the weaknesses in his thinking, I will try in this thesis to defend every defensible element in his work. My bias is therefore quite evident, but I feel that it is appropriate given the numerous stereotyped criticisms to which his thought has been subjected since his death, especially in Denmark. Exactly five years ago I started reading Adorno, having wearied by then of Habermas' apologies for the obvious (but to him inevitable) injustices of the modern world. In this respect the thesis also marks a turning point for me personally. In his lectures on sociology Adorno states that the discipline is founded on a dilemma between 'making sense of the world' and doing 'socially useful work'. Having written this thesis I believe I have finally made some sense of the world (or at least arrived at a far more satisfactory position than I would have done by sticking with Habermas). Only the future will show whether I have also learned how to perform 'socially useful work' as part of my endeavour to make sense of our society.

While writing this thesis I have been fortunate in receiving help from a variety of people without whom it would not have been possible. I would like first of all to thank Antje Gimmler for many interesting discussions on Adorno's thought and for helping me to structure the argument of the thesis in a more fruitful way. It has been satisfying finally to have a supervisor who shares my commitment to and appreciation of abstract philosophical and sociological discussions. Secondly, I want to thank my family for always supporting me, and especially my brother Anders who has been a loyal companion during our studies of sociology. Without the support of my family I would have never been able to finish this degree. Also a thank you goes to Sally Laird who has helped me eradicate some of the most obvious linguistic errors that have arisen due to my lack of proficiency in English. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my spouse Karungyi Ajule Buga for putting up with me when things got a little out of hand with the thesis and for not growing too tired of hearing about Adorno. Needless to say I am solely responsible for any remaining errors and mistakes in the thesis.

Claus D. Hansen  
December 31<sup>st</sup> 2003  
Aalborg

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## Introduction

### Adorno and Empirical Sociology

Fredric Jameson's statement, that Adorno's philosophy would be 'a dialectical model for the 1990s' (Jameson 1990:251) turned out to be prophetic. During the 1990s the German philosopher and sociologist Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno became the object of renewed interest among scholars in a variety of disciplines, most notably in Anglo-Saxon academic circles.<sup>1</sup> Some have considered this to be a highly surprising 'comeback', but Adorno's views on art and aesthetics in particular have undoubtedly gained in importance. However, his thoughts have influenced contemporary discussions in ethics, cultural and postcolonial studies as well (Gibson & Rubin 2001).

Unfortunately, this revival has not made any noticeable impact on sociology in general or on Danish sociology in particular. Although Adorno is mentioned in many non-Danish introductions to sociology and social theory (for instance Ritzer 1996; Swingewood 2000; Ray 1999; Elliot & Ray 2003), as well as in one of the few Danish ones (see Andersen & Kaspersen 2000), the treatment of his ideas is often both superficial and riddled with misunderstandings. It appears that few, if any, sociologists have discovered the new insights gained into Adorno's very complex and intriguing ideas. For this reason, existing interpretations of his contribution to social theory and sociology are misleading and often dismiss his approach as a mere stepping-stone towards the more fruitful ideas of his former assistant Jürgen Habermas. In these interpretations Adorno's thought is considered important only for historical reasons, i.e. in helping to clarify the motives behind Habermas' magnum opus: *The Theory of Communicative Action* (see for instance Greisman 1986, Morrow 1994 and Bottomore 2002). This is hardly surprising considering the impact Habermas has had in many areas of social theory, including sociology. But what is often forgotten is that Habermas' reading of Adorno is governed by systematic purposes. By reconstructing the points of critique raised by Adorno, Habermas seeks to show how his proposed paradigm change casts new light on these and related issues while remaining true to the original goals of the Frankfurt School (TCA, 1:xli-xlii; 366-398). For this reason, the Habermasian interpretation should be treated with utmost caution and anyone wanting to engage seriously with Adorno's thought would be wise to look elsewhere (for an elaboration of the problematic elements in the Habermasian reading see for instance Tiedemann 1997; Hammer 2000b; Bernstein 2001; Morris 2001). Habermas' influence over social theory has unfortunately meant that, despite its shortcomings, his reading of Adorno has tended to prevail (Morris 2001:3-11).

A few examples may help to illustrate the most common views of Adorno's thought in general and his sociological ideas in particular. These views have led to grave misunderstandings of Adorno's aims

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<sup>1</sup> This interest should not of course be attributed solely to Jameson's book, although he certainly influenced Adorno scholars such as Robert Hullot-Kentor and Peter Osborne (see Hullot-Kentor 1991; Osborne 1992). The most important interpretations to appear in the 1990s are primarily concerned with Adorno's aesthetic thought and include among others Bernstein (1992), Hohendahl (1995), Paddison (1993) and Nicholson (1997). However, books that try to cover other aspects of Adorno's work include Jarvis' (1998) excellent overall introduction to his thought, Morris' (2001) elaboration of Adorno's alternative to Habermas' communicative theory, Bernstein's (2001) extraordinary explication of Adorno's latent ethical thought and Sherratt's (2002) elaboration of the positive sides of Adorno's 'negative dialectics'. The increased attention to Adorno's thought has had only minimal influence in Denmark, the only exception being Paul Ferland's elaboration of the importance of identity in Adorno's 'negative dialectics' (Ferland 2002).

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and aspirations and his relationship to sociology. As will become apparent below, these views often take some elements from the Habermasian reading for granted.

“...Adorno’s thought introduces several important modifications of the Frankfurt School theory as Horkheimer had expounded it. In the first place, *critical theory is now represented as being purely critical, incapable of formulating any positive conceptions at all* (for example, a positive alternative to the existing society) *since any such formulation would involve ‘identity-thinking’* (i.e. the assertion of an absolute starting point for philosophy, and more particularly with regard to epistemology, a conception of the world as *a constellation of empirical objects which can be adequately grasped by means of appropriate concepts*)” (Bottomore 2002:31, my emphasis).

“In the post-war years Horkheimer abandoned Marxism altogether, while *Adorno rejected the concept of totality*, arguing that far from constituting the key to scientific knowledge ‘the whole was untrue’...*In general the first generation of critical theorists failed to develop an adequate sociology of modern society...*” (Swingewood 2000:132-133, my emphasis).

“Likewise, *empirical sociology has generally found little in critical theory worth preserving...*” (Pecora 1997, my emphasis).

“But *the practical failure of revolutionary movements in the 1930s led the central critical theorists...to abandon their original conception of combining research and practice in an interdisciplinary research project...*The decline of the institute research program can be attributed to several interrelated factors: (a) the organizational consequences of exile, (b) *the heavily positivists climate of the United States, which mitigated the further development of the methodological strategy that originally inspired critical theory*, and (c) *the disillusionment of the inner group with the potentially liberating effects of empirical research...*The revitalization of critical theory required, as we shall see, a fundamental reconstruction of the metatheory of critical theory...initiated by Habermas and Giddens in 1960s and 1970s” (Morrow 1994:108-110, my emphasis).

“On all three levels Adorno works with a [reductive] concept of domination...The result, however paradoxical it may sound is *the definitive repression of the social from the social analysis of critical theory...*he falls into a social-theoretic reductionism that simply passes over the level of the cultural accomplishments of social groups, the sphere of social action in general...*The wrong track of his social theory* announced therein *culminates in the paradoxical attempt in his later sociological writings to gradually deny within the medium of social-scientific analysis the possibility of a distinct social science*” (Honneth 1991:72,95, my emphasis).

“From the beginning, *critical theory labored over the problem of giving an account of its own normative foundations*; since Horkheimer and Adorno made their turn in the 1940s, this problem has become drastically apparent...I want to maintain that *the program of early critical theory foundered not on this or that contingent circumstance, but from the exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness*. I shall argue that a change of paradigm to the theory of communication makes it possible to return to the undertaking that was *interrupted* with the critique of instrumental reason; and this will permit us to take up once again the since neglected tasks of a critical theory of society...*The critique of instrumental reason...lacks a conceptual framework sufficiently flexible to capture the integrity of what is destroyed through instrumental reason*” (TCA, 1:374,386, my emphasis).

The quotations cited above suggest that there are *four* key points that characterise the stereotyped views of Adorno’s relationship to sociology and social theory, which range from a complete rejection of his thought to the view that only minimal theoretical inspiration or a set of criticisms can be found in his works: At the most fundamental level, 1) Adorno is accused of failing to provide a normative foundation for his philosophy, from which it follows that his conceptual apparatus is unsuitable for analysing modern societies (Habermas). Another equally serious charge 2) is that the realm of the social and of sociology is completely absent from his ‘sociological writings’ (Honneth). 3) His lack of interest in *empirical* sociology, and failure to produce ideas relevant to it, is also often mentioned by critics who regard his work as irrelevant to sociology (Morrow & Swingewood) and 4) likewise, mention is made of his ‘negativity’ (i.e. the fact that most of his work consists of critiques, and that he allegedly fails to offer

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positive alternatives to the ideas that he criticises) (Bottomore). Let me briefly comment on each of these claims in order to show that, if not completely erroneous, they are at least very one-sided and therefore unreliable in the account they present of Adorno's relationship to sociology in general.

1. Habermas claims, first of all, that Adorno radicalises Weber's analysis of modernity and his thesis of rationalisation to include (conceptual) thinking, thereby making his critique self-defeating and totalising, because it is not based on any normative foundation and therefore fails to provide an adequate conceptual framework for analysing contemporary society. Secondly, according to Habermas, this happens only because Adorno did not 'choose the right way out' of the dilemmas imbued in what Habermas terms 'subject-centred reason' (on this issue see Habermas 1987b:294-326). In other words, substituting the ideas bound to the 'philosophy of consciousness' for a concept of communicative rationality would make possible a new normative foundation for Critical Theory and thus eliminate the contradictions inherent in Adorno's 'negative dialectics'. As I will seek to show, the charge that Habermas raises against Adorno on this score is itself problematic, since it fails to consider the ideals implicit in Adorno's analyses. Although Adorno does not at any point systematically clarify the foundation for his critique of 'instrumental reason', he nevertheless alludes to an idea of reconciliation that constitutes the implicit normative foundation for it. This reconciliation requires a completely different relationship between human beings and nature, a type of relation Adorno calls *mimesis*. According to Habermas, this altered relationship 'would...entail the demand that nature open up its eyes, that in the condition of reconciliation we talk with animals, plants, and rocks' (Habermas 2000:195). If this is to be any more than a hopeless utopian dream, however, Adorno would need 'to put forward a *theory* of mimesis, which, according to [Adorno's] own ideas, is impossible' (TCA, 1:382). Any such theory would be incompatible with the critique of reason, science and conceptual thinking that Adorno presents in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Scientific thought contributes to this 'dialectic of enlightenment' by producing the conceptual knowledge needed to bring about emancipation and simultaneously subsuming phenomena under universal concepts, regardless of their particular qualities. What is forgotten in this process is that 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder' (ND:5). By identifying objects completely with their concepts, scientific thought renders that which is 'non-identical' to the concept, the 'remainder', unimportant and irrelevant. It is exactly this aspect of science, and conceptual thinking in general, that leads Adorno to the belief that a completely different relationship between human beings and nature (or in philosophical terminology between subject and object) is essential. However, this cannot be brought about by outlining a *theory* of mimesis, since this would amount to an attempt (reductively) to *identify* the kinds of relations between human beings and nature that would overcome the negative consequences of 'reductive' identification. In other words, a *theory* of mimesis would not itself be *mimetic*. To Habermas, the problems arising from Adorno's stance towards theory and science are all too evident: by seeking to criticise conceptual thinking (language) using the very tools that are criticised (language) Adorno entangles himself in untenable contradictions, or what Habermas in a later critique calls 'performative contradictions' (Habermas 1987b:106-130). Although Adorno acknowledges the contradictions inherent in his thought, Habermas argues that these contradictions result from the limitations of a way of thinking that is still tied to the 'philosophy of consciousness' rather than arising, as Adorno

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would claim, from the contradictions and antagonisms inherent in society. What Habermas does not acknowledge, however, is that the ideal of non-contradictoriness is not as neutral as may appear at first sight. In order to avoid such contradictions an ideal of *determinacy* would have to be invoked. It is exactly the compulsion to comply to the ideal of determinacy inherent in conceptual thinking ('identity thinking') that Adorno seeks to overcome by refusing to be constrained by having to decide unequivocally between 'either/or'. Contradictions (or the 'non-identical', to use Adorno's term) are 'opaque only for identity's claim to be total' (ND:163); the 'performative contradictions' that can be found in Adorno's philosophy are problematic only because of Habermas' insistence on full determinacy (i.e. the possibility of taking a 'yes' or 'no' stance towards *all* particular problems).<sup>2</sup> What must be remembered is that Adorno's thought is *dialectical*, meaning that he seeks to accept and work through the aporias of thought (and, ultimately, those of society as well). As Morris notes:

"For Adorno, critique *is* performative contradiction, and this is part of its point. Adorno's effort is to show that such new self-consciousness need not be thought as incoherent in a theory that operates according to determinate negation and does not require or desire the identity of the Absolute" (Morris 2001:56-57).

A dialectical sociology would, for these reasons, have to accept that the structure of society itself, and hence any theory of society, is inherently contradictory. Thus, these contradictions are not, as Habermas would have us believe, the product of a 'bad' theory that can be removed only by shifting from one paradigm to another. Furthermore, such contradictions do not necessarily mean that the theory is incoherent, since the ideal of determinacy upon which Habermas' critique is founded is itself deeply problematic. The interpretation and the conceptual apparatus that Habermas develops as an alternative represent in several respects a genuine improvement on early Critical Theory. At the same time, however, one cannot help feeling that some of Adorno's insights have been sacrificed in the attempt to transform Critical Theory, and that central passages throughout his oeuvre become impossible to understand. If Habermas is right in stating that the problems of Critical Theory can be solved by carrying out a change of paradigm, then how are we to understand what Adorno writes in an important essay on 'Subject and Object'?

"If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. Not until then would the concept of communication as an objective concept, come into its own. The present one is so infamous because the best there is, the potential agreement between people and things, is betrayed to an interchange between subjects according to the requirements of subjective reason. In its proper place, even epistemologically, the

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<sup>2</sup> If one reads Habermas closely it will become evident that it is not so much the mere existence of contradictions that troubles him as their self-defeating character when employed in the coordinating functions of everyday language use. Either one would have to accept the rules of argumentation and hence act communicatively or else one would be acting strategically, a course that in the long run would corrode our norms and way of living. What Habermas forgets is that "I can quite consistently regard myself and others as autonomous, and further acknowledge our reciprocal dependency on one another and nonetheless believe that the best way to vindicate disputed validity claims over moral norms is by means of, for example, self-expressive forms of action...that exemplify the adoption of different moral norms...Hence, it is false to claim, as Habermas routinely does...that our choice is between acting communicatively in order to reach an understanding and acting strategically" (Bernstein 1995:186). For a more thorough analysis of Habermas' use of 'performative contradictions' in his critique of Adorno see Bernstein (1995:180-190) and Morris (2001:118-141).



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relationship of subject and object would lie in the realization of peace among men as well as between men and their Other” (SO:499-500).

Adorno cannot accept the ideal of ‘communicative rationality’ because it disregards the relationship between human beings and nature, and, since humans are always already part of nature, it disregards the domination that follows from neglecting this. In this essay, Adorno continually emphasises the fact that ‘the subject...is as an object also a subject’ (SO:502). Thus, the Subject is *always also* an Object. By disregarding this, Habermas not only misses a central point in Adorno’s thought, he also makes it difficult to treat certain issues in his own theory: If the domination of nature is inevitable, which is the *logical* consequence of Habermas’ insistence that we can only assume an *instrumental* relation to nature (on this point see Habermas 1987a), how are we to understand the damage done to nature through pollution, or deal with issues of animal welfare? Certainly, this type of domination cannot be understood as an example of the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld’ as this would entail that some ‘original’, *non-instrumental* relationship had once existed between human beings and nature. In other words, Habermas’ ‘grand theory’ fails to give an adequate account of *why* this widely debated problem of animal welfare can become a moral issue in our times or *how* we could consider pollution a pathology of modernity if the only relation we can have to nature is instrumental (i.e. the very type of relation that causes pollution). Thus, while Habermas’ transformation of Critical Theory does away with the contradictions inherent in ‘negative dialectics’ it makes it impossible to address questions that were of great importance to Adorno. What should be clear by now is that Adorno’s version of critical theory cannot be refuted on the grounds presented here, for Habermas’ critique is based on premises that Adorno himself would have rejected and miss the very points to which Adorno sought to alert us. In other words, his conceptual apparatus is not inadequate, but merely different from that of Habermas’, because it is based on other premises. Furthermore, although Adorno does not provide us with a normative foundation as rigorous and thoroughly worked out as Habermas’ idea of communicative rationality, it would be wrong to take this as a sign that he does not have any normative foundation whatsoever.

2. In many respects, Honneth’s criticisms resemble those raised by Habermas. Honneth’s critique, however, is more detailed and concentrates on issues that are more central to sociology. A key postulate of his critique is that Adorno’s diagnosis of contemporary society implies ‘the definitive repression of the social from the social analysis of critical theory’ (Honneth 1991:72). This ‘paradoxical claim’, as Honneth puts it, leads Adorno to ‘deny within the medium of social-scientific analysis the possibility of a distinct social science’ (Ibid:95). Thus, according to Honneth, it would be futile to discuss Adorno’s sociological approach, since Adorno in any case would be inclined to dismiss the relevance of sociology in contemporary society. The problematic aspect in Adorno’s thinking is that his concept of *social* conflict (or domination between people) is ‘modelled upon’ the concept of the domination of *nature* developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

“Adorno remained so captured by the concept of the domination of nature throughout his life that, in his analysis of the modes of integration in late-capitalist societies, he falls into a social-theoretic reductionism that simply passes over the level of the cultural accomplishments of social groups, the

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sphere of social action in general, and thus is confined to the two poles of 'individual and organisation'" (Honneth 1991:95).

Only by conflating these two different types of domination is it possible to draw the conclusions Adorno reaches in his diagnosis of the times. In the end this conflation has the effect of making sociology irrelevant: If what was formerly the proper arena for social action (the market) has disappeared and all that is left is 'individuals and organisations', it becomes clear that a critical theory of society only needs 'a systems analysis suited to the techniques of administrative domination and a psychoanalysis fitted to the fate of the individual instincts' (Honneth 1991:96). Social action and thus sociology itself lose their significance for Critical Theory. Honneth's criticism does indeed raise serious questions as to whether Adorno was really interested in sociology at all. Lack of interest would certainly explain why Adorno apparently never provided anything more than a *negative* conception of sociology, such as that outlined in his critique of positivism (cf. Ritzer 1996; Bottomore 2002). However, Honneth's critique begs the question on a number of issues: If Adorno was indeed uninterested in sociology, how do we explain his commitment to the discipline right up to his death, as demonstrated by his directorship of the Institute for Social Research (from 1958 until his death), his chairmanship of the German Sociological Association (1963-1967), the fact that from 1954 onwards he always ran at least one seminar each year on a sociological topic and that he was preparing a new volume of sociological essays with the title 'Integration-Desintegration' just before he died (Tiedemann et al. 1975:404).<sup>3</sup> Adorno was thus far from uninterested in sociological questions although he certainly had a different view of *what* sociology as an independent science should be. This might explain why Honneth believes sociology loses its importance in Adorno's writings. Closely connected to this confusion is Honneth's claim that Adorno models social conflict on the conflict between humans and nature thereby reducing and disregarding the particular qualities of the former. While this is correct to a certain extent we should bear in mind that 'for a materialist theory, to dominate other humans – since humans are not pure culture – is *already* domination of nature as well as social domination, not social domination instead of or 'modelled upon' domination of nature' (Jarvis 1998:35). This is what Adorno means when he insists that subjects are also always objects. While there may be – as Adorno would surely agree – distinct features that characterise *social* domination, one cannot maintain an absolute separation between the two 'types' without thereby indirectly accepting that the domination of nature is inevitable. What is important in this context is that Adorno neither dismisses sociology as an important discipline for Critical Theory (see for instance AoP:130-131; OLS:119) nor does he deny distinctive features of social domination. However, his conception of sociology and sociality does differ radically from Honneth's, which helps to explain the grave misunderstandings of his work.

3. Another equally misleading idea is that Adorno was mainly to blame for the abandonment of the idea of an empirically-founded interdisciplinary research programme that Horkheimer had outlined in the early 1930s (on Horkheimer's original idea see Horkheimer 1993). The statement in the foreword to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that '[t]he fragments we have collected here show...that we

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of Adorno's commitment to sociology and sociological questions see for instance Wiggershaus (1994) and Müller-Doohm (1996; 2000; 2003:554-567;638-651).

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had to abandon th[e] trust [in the traditional disciplines: sociology, psychology, and epistemology]' (DoE:xiv) is often interpreted as evidence of this, since the book was written *after* Adorno joined the Institute full time, and when his thinking had thereby gained greater influence (for such a view see Dubiel 1985; Honneth 1991; Morrow 1994; Nielsen 2001; TCA, 2:378-383). The belief that Adorno was 'against' empirical sociological research and exclusively interested in social philosophy (a view that follows implicitly from this) is equally misleading (for a discussion of such a criticism of his work see Meja, Misgeld & Stehr 1987:23n10), and to a large extent stems from the misreading of his works by Habermas and others committed to the 'linguistic turn' in Critical Theory. This view is based on a failure to consider many of his central *sociological* works, as well as the place of (empirical) sociology in his philosophical works. Thus he writes that philosophy must 'take [the] specific scientific material [that it is to interpret] preponderantly from sociology' (AoP:130). As we will see this misunderstanding arose from the complex relationship between sociology, philosophy, history and psychology that Adorno envisaged, a relationship that led Adorno to the conviction that an *interdisciplinary* approach could not grasp reality but should be replaced by a *transdisciplinary* approach that would however be no less empirically-founded.

4. Finally, it is widely believed that Adorno's sociological thought is purely *negative* (cf. Ritzer 1996; Bech 1999; Bottomore 2002) His discussions with Karl R. Popper and his advocacy of the idea of a *critical* theory support the impression that the only thing Adorno offered sociology was an insight into the obvious weaknesses of positivism and 'scientistic' sociologies in general. Although it is certainly true that Adorno on several occasions criticised other sociologists, the view that his sociology is purely negative is one-sided, because it fails to take into account some of his most important sociological essays and his empirical studies. What is left out in this account is that in these works Adorno implicitly provides the outlines for a *positive* conception of an empirically-founded dialectical sociology, which he termed *Social Physiognomics*.

Let me briefly sum up the main points in these commonly-held views by considering them in the reverse order (i.e. treating those points of criticism that are least serious first) in order to put forward certain claims concerning Adorno's sociological thought that run counter to those discussed so far. Thus it is true that Adorno's sociological essays provide the grounds for formulating a number of 'principles of caution', and are therefore often critical and negative (4). However, he also develops a number of ideas for doing empirical sociological research and he grants empirical research an important place in the social sciences as such, although his ideas in this respect are very different from those of Habermas, Honneth and even Horkheimer (3). Far from considering it irrelevant, Adorno regarded sociology as the single most important science because it aims to circumvent certain tendencies in scientific thinking that hinder the accumulation of knowledge (2). In fact, Adorno's thoughts on sociology considered as a whole constitute an alternative to the Critical Theory of Habermas and Honneth that is as fruitful as theirs (1). There may be issues that are better dealt with within the frameworks offered by the latter, but Adorno *does* provide a normative foundation for Critical Theory, as well as answers to a number of questions that cannot be dealt with adequately by the second generation Frankfurt School (most notably concerning our relationship to nature and our bodies).

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It is in the light of these common (mis)understandings of Adorno, and the postulates I proposed above that run counter to these, that this thesis has been undertaken, its aim being: *To provide a rigorous defence of an Adornian approach to sociology focusing mainly on the positive conception of the 'methodology of sociology' that can be found latently in his various sociological works.* By focusing on methodological issues and empirical sociology I have chosen a field that is often considered remote from Adorno's concerns. Thus, if I can succeed in showing how his thought and philosophy provide positive suggestions for doing empirical research, and that he indeed considered it an indispensable part not only of sociology but of philosophy, my defence of his alternative will be all the stronger. One of the fundamental claims of this thesis is that Social Physiognomics can be reconstructed to offer an original and competitive alternative to traditional views on both epistemological and methodological issues in sociology. Given the constraints of space and time this postulate can be made plausible only on a relatively high level of abstraction, which means that it has not been possible to engage in detailed discussions of epistemological and methodological issues. However, it must be remembered that the most important purpose of this thesis is to defend the idea that Adorno does offer a *positive* alternative that can fruitfully be used in empirical sociology.

Although much of the neglect of Adorno's contribution to sociology is due to the (mis)readings of his work, it would be unreasonable to attribute it solely to this. Of equal importance is the fact that Adorno's style of writing was very esoteric and that he refused to define the concepts he used unequivocally, thus leaving room for numerous different interpretations.<sup>4</sup> At the same time Adorno never made any effort to set out his thoughts systematically in order to render them more intelligible. For Adorno, however, there was a good reason for this, since 'philosophy is not expoundable [referierbar]. If it were, it would be superfluous; the fact that most of it can be expounded speaks against it' (ND:33-34). Adorno considered it impossible to provide a systematic account of his epistemology and methodology as a basis for empirical research, and his denial of the possibility of expounding philosophy (sociology, history etc.) speaks against the very aim of this thesis. Problematic and paradoxical though it may be to provide a systematic reconstruction of his approach – an approach that explicitly rejects any attempt to create new 'thought systems' – we must nevertheless attempt to do so if Adorno's contribution to sociology is to be appreciated. It might be added, in any case, that this attempt is no more problematic and paradoxical than Adorno's own attempt to criticise conceptuality: 'The utopia of cognition would be to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it their equal' (ND:10, translation altered). To sum up, there are two major obstacles that confront our attempt to reconstruct Adorno's approach to empirical sociology and to demonstrate its originality and contemporary relevance: First of all, the many stereotypical views of Adorno need to be dismantled in order to provide room for a new and altered understanding of his work, and second, Adorno's sociological works must be considered as a whole in order to reveal the potential that lies hidden behind the obscure jargon and ironic remarks that characterise most of his published works. In the three chapters that follow, I aim to reconstruct Adorno's approach to empirical sociology and in so

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<sup>4</sup> In the English-speaking world another problem stems from the very unreliable translations of Adorno's most important works. This has only recently been remedied by the retranslation of *Aesthetic Theory* in 1997 and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 2002 (for a discussion of the problems regarding the first translation of *Aesthetic Theory* see Hullot-Kentor 1985).

doing eventually to arrive at a set of 'Dialectical Rules of Sociological Method'. Before turning to this task let me briefly summarise the main arguments of the thesis.

### **Outline of the Argument**

Although the criticism of Adorno presented above may be misguided, and Habermas' reframing of critical theory is so comprehensive that it becomes problematic to consider him an heir to the 'Frankfurt School', he nevertheless points to weak spots in Adorno's thinking (on the discussion of Habermas' relation to early critical theory see for instance Dubiel 1992; Anderson 2000). This raises the question as to whether the 'linguistic turn' in critical theory may not after all be the best approach to analysing contemporary societies, even though it involves discarding some of Adorno's crucial insights? By returning to Adorno, do we not also return to metaphysical questions that are by their nature unanswerable and were therefore abandoned when the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy gained in importance? Taking into account the interpretations (and the criticism raised above) and the misunderstandings they have given rise to, Chapter 1 presents an alternative understanding of Adorno's 'negative dialectics'.<sup>5</sup> Over the last decade a number of new and very insightful readings of Adorno have been published that manage to bring together his highly diverse writings, providing new insights into these difficult texts (see for instance Jarvis 1998; Bernstein 2001; Morris 2001; Sherratt 2002). However, most of these interpretations have not considered Adorno's sociological works as a separate issue. Instead they have focused on issues relating to ethics (Hammer 2000a; Bernstein 2001; Morris 2001; Finlayson 2002), or on Adorno's stance on political questions (Morris 2001; Berman 2002; Pickford 2002), or else they have offered more general introductions to his thought (Jarvis 1998; Sherratt 2002). The question of Adorno's sociological ideas and his 'methodology' has been considered in a few recent publications, but it has never been connected to the wealth of new interpretations mentioned above (see for instance Müller-Doohm 1996; 2000; Drake 2000).<sup>6</sup> Many of these new interpretations deal with Adorno's critique of epistemology and thus outline the epistemological foundation upon which an Adornian approach to empirical sociology must be built. One of the central theses of 'negative dialectics' is the impossibility of separating questions of ontology from epistemology (see for instance Hammer 2000b; Sherratt 2002). For this reason, it is important to sketch Adorno's diagnosis of contemporary society, since in his view our way of gaining knowledge and relating to the world (epistemology) changes as the social world changes (ontology). Without such an understanding it becomes impossible to know what measures must be taken in order to develop a sociology that can deal adequately with the problems confronting modern societies. In offering his diagnosis of modern societies, Adorno argues that, because of what Weber called the 'disenchantment of the world' (see for instance Weber 1946), our linguistic practices are not wholly rational. This means that people living in

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'negative dialectics' is used here to refer to Adorno's *general* philosophical approach, not to his book of the same name. References to the book are given in the standard form, in italics and without inverted commas.

<sup>6</sup> There is thus still a need for a clarification of the links between Adorno's methodological ideas and its Hegelian origins (for an elaboration of this see Ritsert 1983). While I cannot hope in this thesis to resolve this matter, I do aim to draw the connection between the philosophical and epistemological foundations for Adorno's sociology, in a way that other accounts of his sociology have failed to do (for an account of the Hegelian influence on Adorno's sociological thought, that do not, however, put it into the framework of his aesthetic theory see Reußwig & Scharping 1988; Ritsert 1988).

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modern societies are unable to experience and engage in certain forms of relations towards other people and objects. Insufficiently rationalised linguistic practices have this effect because all our experiences are mediated by language. Adorno's philosophical project could therefore be interpreted as an attempt to resurrect a broader concept of experience that would enable us to overcome (most of) the 'negative' consequence of the 'dialectic of enlightenment'. If our concept of experience is reductive this has profound consequences for epistemological issues as well. In order to construct a more rational sociology, we need to identify those aspects of modern scientific thought that contribute to a reduction of experience and explain how this problem might be overcome. For Adorno this meant rescuing the 'aesthetic experiences' that can be found in modernistic works of art, but which are also immanent in certain everyday 'critical situations', the latter of course being of greatest interest to sociology. We can effect this rescue only by 'granting primacy to the object' of study. It is also this primacy that constitutes the presupposition for Adorno's normative foundation. Although it is not possible to provide a thorough account of the implicit normative foundation implied by Adorno's philosophy, Chapter 1 will indicate that there *is* an alternative to Habermas' 'linguistic turn' in Critical Theory which can be used as a basis for concrete sociological studies.

Having clarified the epistemological foundation of Adorno's 'negative dialectics', it will be time to concentrate, in Chapters 2 and 3, on methodological issues associated directly with sociology. This discussion will be divided into two: a negative and a positive elaboration of his methodology. Central passages from Adorno's sociological writings need to be explained and interpreted in the light of the epistemological foundation offered in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, this will be done by contrasting Adorno's *dialectical sociology* with two traditional and commonly used methodologies in contemporary sociology: the inductive approach of Glaser & Strauss, which they referred to as 'Grounded Theory', and the hypothetical-deductive approach of Karl R. Popper. While each of these approaches is insufficient in the sense that, according to Adorno, they emphasise only one half of the scientific process (e.g. either induction or deduction, theory-testing or theory-generation, quantitative or qualitative research methods), they are nevertheless instructive as targets for critical analysis. Thus they provide an excellent opportunity to sketch a *negative* outline of Social Physiognomics, i.e. an elaboration of the problems that arise for sociological methodology if the disenchantment of the world is not taken into consideration. Only through the dialectical interplay of these opposed and contradictory approaches can we hope to 'grant primacy to the object' so as to circumvent the reduction of experience. By focusing on four distinct issues relating to sociological methodology, I identify several problematic aspects of Grounded Theory and Critical Rationalism respectively, most notably their concept of objectivity, their ideals of knowledge, the task they attribute to sociology and finally their failure to employ a concept of societal totality. From these points of criticism there emerges a conception of the sociological and methodological ideas central to Social Physiognomics, for instance thinking in 'constellations' and the reworking of the concept of interpretation as '*deutung*' (best translated as 'deciphering'). Despite the originality of Adorno's ideas on these issues it will be clear from my preliminary exposition of them in this chapter that they require a major reconstructive effort, since Adorno never set them out systematically.

For this reason, Chapter 3 will be devoted to the task of reconstructing and elaborating *positively* on the ideas mentioned and elucidated in Chapter 2. Bringing together the clues Adorno provided in his

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various sociological works will enable us to provide an outline of how to conduct actual empirical studies under the banner of Social Physiognomics. At the same time we will aim to elaborate on those elements of Adorno's thought that are inadequately discussed in his own works and therefore needs to be reconstructed. The reconstruction will be divided into two distinct yet interrelated parts, the first of which will deal with the 'formal sociological' issues of Social Physiognomics, for instance the relationship between sociology and other disciplines, the tasks of sociology and a consideration of the relationship between the individual and society. This discussion will be enhanced by drawing on and contrasting Adorno's views with those of other sociologists whose thinking most closely resembles his, notably Georg Simmel and Anthony Giddens. The last part will concentrate on the methodological issues that follow from these 'formal sociological' principles and the epistemological considerations presented in Chapter 1. A few contemporary sociologists can be said to have been inspired by Adorno's thoughts on 'methodology', in particular the Danish sociologist Henning Bech, whose ideas it will therefore be instructive to draw on. An outline and reconstruction of an Adornian approach to empirical sociology would not be complete without an attempt to make use of his ideas in an empirical study. In order to support my claim that the physiognomic approach can be of real benefit in empirical research, I will refer to an empirical study that has made use of some of these ideas. This illustration will, it is hoped, make clear how Adorno's often highly abstract ideas can be utilised for empirical purposes.

The thesis will end with a presentation of a set of some 'Dialectical Rules of Sociological Method' inspired by Durkheim and Giddens' attempts to provide the 'blueprint' for conducting empirical studies. Bearing in mind Adorno's contempt for complete closure of thought, and his claim that 'philosophy in its essence is not expoundable', these rules can be said only to have the status of 'regulative ideals' that need to be (re)applied every time a new empirical study is conceived in order to 'grant primacy to the object' being studied.

## Chapter 1

### The Idea of a 'Negative Dialectics'

In explicating Adorno's 'negative dialectics' one could begin - depending on one's purpose - by considering any one of his major works. However, in order to gain a better understanding of the epistemological and ontological presuppositions underlying 'negative dialectics', it would be natural to embark from Adorno's and Horkheimer's joint publication, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and from Adorno's subsequent attempt to provide 'a revised conception of the dialectic' (HTS:xxxvi) in *Negative Dialectics*. In the joint publication, the two authors provide a (philosophical) analysis of the history and development of modern societies by criticising the enlightenment, science and the 'culture industry'. At first sight, this may seem beside the point, since it has nothing to do with the epistemological issues that must be addressed in order to develop a new methodology for the social sciences. For Adorno, however, this was not the case. The following remarks by Horkheimer serve well to illustrate the philosophical approach underpinning both his and Adorno's thinking, and explain why historical questions are relevant for epistemological issues as well:

"The objects we perceive in our surroundings – cities, villages, fields, and woods – bear the mark of having been worked on by man. It is not only in clothing and appearance, in outward form and emotional make-up that men are the product of history. Even the way they see and hear is inseparable from the social life-process as it has evolved over the millennia. The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ" (Horkheimer 1972:200).

Inspired, as they both were, by Hegel, Marx and Lukács they saw the issues of ontology and epistemology as being inextricably intertwined. Because what exists (ontology) changes fundamentally through the course of history, so must the way we can and ought to study the world (epistemology) (for an explication of the Hegelian-Marxist influence on Adorno's understanding of epistemology see Reußwig & Scharping 1988; Sherratt 2002:114-115). Thus, there are no ahistorical, *a priori* categories of the understanding, as Kant believed (see Kant 1995), because these categories are themselves the product of history. This is precisely why *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is so important, because it provides an interpretation of those historical circumstances that influence our way of relating to and studying the world (i.e. epistemological issues). Although it might seem redundant to rehearse the well-known argument of this book, this is by no means the case given the problematic interpretations of Adorno presented in the Introduction. A first task of this chapter, therefore, is to give an account of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (A) in an effort to understand what kinds of social circumstances, in Adorno's view, influence our ability to perceive and experience the world.

The interpretation of history offered in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can best be characterised as an attempt to radicalise the Weberian thesis of the rationalisation of all spheres of life (see Weber 1930). Adorno and Horkheimer seek to show how the 'disenchantment of the world' that follows from this rationalisation influences our language use and through this our 'ability' to experience. It is to the impact of this disenchantment on language and conceptuality (and therefore indirectly issues in epistemology) that Adorno turns to in *Negative Dialectics*; a work that can best be seen as a radical critique of our (historically constituted) conceptuality and as an attempt to revitalise our ability to



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experience. For Adorno, the contradictory relationship that exists between concepts and the objects they seek to grasp - a relationship which results in the 'non-identity' of concept and object - is thus due to the social circumstances surrounding disenchantment. The explication of *Negative Dialectics* (B) provides important clues to the epistemological presuppositions that are needed to reinvigorate a critical theory of society grounded in empirical research.

However, in order to make 'negative dialectics' a viable alternative to the reformulation of Critical Theory inaugurated by Habermas, we need a new normative foundation that can provide some kind of framework to ground the critique in. Although Adorno never alludes directly to such a foundation, he nevertheless offers reflections that make it possible to 'extract' a normative foundation from his theory. Central to these is his idea of 'granting primacy to the object', since it is the claims of the object that are in danger of being suppressed through the disenchantment of language and conceptuality. Thus, 'negative dialectics' can be seen as an attempt to provide a basis on which to continue philosophising and criticising (and even doing sociological research) despite the comprehensive disenchantment of all spheres of the world. In the last part of this chapter (C), I therefore turn to a brief elaboration of Adorno's normative foundation, and a discussion of its plausibility in the 'post-metaphysical' era, but I also try to show how the consequences of disenchantment may be alleviated, according to Adorno, by reframing the epistemological foundation for a critical sociology.

#### A. 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment': On *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Horkheimer's and Adorno's book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is probably best known for its paradoxical claim that 'Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology' (DoE:xviii). This phrase has been the object of intense debate and there is still great disagreement as to how it should be understood. Is it, for instance, to be interpreted as the central claim of what might be considered Horkheimer's and Adorno's 'philosophy of history'? This would imply that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was intended to sketch a 'developmental history' of Western Civilisation, describing how 'instrumental reason' came to be ever more dominant and thereby surrendered the positive achievements the enlightenment had produced for humanity. According to this interpretation, it is an *inescapable consequence* of Horkheimer's and Adorno's thesis that 'enlightenment reverts to mythology' (for such readings see for example Honneth 1991:32-56; Brunkhorst 1999:69-77; TCA, 1:366-386). To be sure, the bleakness of the book does encourage such a reading. However, as I will aim to show below, it is unconvincing for (at least) two reasons. Firstly, we need to bear in mind the genesis of the book because various circumstances, unintended by the authors, influenced the final version of the book. Secondly, Adorno's peculiar style of writing has given rise to a number of misunderstandings. His prose in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is esoteric to say the least and cannot be understood if taken literally. Thus, in order to understand the ideas presented in the book we need to consider 1) its origin and 2) its peculiar style.

Ad 1) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written between 1942 and 1944 when Adorno, after a period of cooperation with Paul Lazarsfeld at the University of Columbia, moved to the West coast of America in order to be nearer Horkheimer. Since the early 1930s Horkheimer had wanted to work on a new

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conception of 'dialectics', and he was increasingly convinced that Adorno alone had the necessary theoretical abilities to help him in this task.<sup>7</sup> This work on 'dialectical logic' was intended to replace and elaborate on Horkheimer's idea, developed a decade earlier, of an 'interdisciplinary research programme'. Despite the great ambitions underlying the work (i.e. it was to be a continuation of the interdisciplinary research programme by other means, and was to include empirical evidence for many of the claims being made in the book) it soon became evident that it would not be possible to complete the project in the time allotted. When the opportunity for external funding arose for a project on anti-semitism, Horkheimer immediately seized on it in order to secure the economic foundation of the Institute for a longer period. This, however, also meant that he and Adorno had to abandon 'the dialectics project' for the time being and return to it later, publishing only those drafts that adequately represented their thinking (for an extensive description of the work on the 'dialectics project' see Wiggershaus 1994:261-265; 302-326; 350-380).

*Philosophical Fragments*, as the first 500 copies of the book were called, was indeed a fragmentary work in several respects: only three of the chapters were properly completed while the others remained virtually unedited fragments from the discussions that had helped bring the book about. Moreover, several planned chapters were never completed at all. For this reason *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as the book was named when it was published in 1947 for a wider audience by a small publishing house in Amsterdam, appears far more negative and pessimistic than was originally intended, a fact that Horkheimer stressed in a letter to Marcuse when the work was still in progress (Wiggershaus 1994:321). That this was important to both Horkheimer's and Adorno's self-understanding can be seen in certain passages from the preface to the book:

"The critique of enlightenment given in this section (Chapter one, CH) is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination...Still more than the others, the section on the culture industry is fragmentary. Large parts, written long before, need only final editing. In them the positive aspects of mass culture will also be dealt with" (DoE:xviii-xix; 254n, my emphasis).

The omission of virtually any *positive* element of the dialectic cannot be disregarded when considering the arguments of the book, and while it contains (for instance in the passages concerned with the notion of *mimesis*) a few hints of what a 'positive concept of enlightenment' would look like, it must be stressed that 'on its own *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not possess the conceptual resources to adequately back [its] assumptions...on the contrary, a variety of confusions bedevil the text which

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<sup>7</sup> While this suggests that Horkheimer's influence on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* far surpassed Adorno's contributions to it, this was not in fact the case. Although there is no doubt that Horkheimer was the prime initiator of the project, it was no coincidence that he chose Adorno as his collaborator. Adorno – at least in Horkheimer's view – was by far the most original member of the Frankfurt circle. Adorno's move to the West coast finally permitted the two of them to start working on their joint publication. There is no need here to go into any detail concerning the relationship between Horkheimer and Adorno (on this discussion see Breuer 1993), but it is instructive to see how influential Walter Benjamin's thought was in determining what subsequently became of the 'dialectics project'. This certainly cast doubt on the notion, that it was the advent of the Second World War, Fascism and Stalinism that brought about the major change of philosophical orientation at the Institute (for such an interpretation see for instance Dubiel 1985). Instead this change 'was due far less to [The Frankfurt School's] own organic development than to the shift of power among its members after Adorno joined, and especially after he moved to California in 1941 and began working closely with Horkheimer' (Buck-Morss 1977:59). Buck-Morss also implicitly suggests, in this passage, that Adorno's influence on Horkheimer far exceeded the latter's on Adorno.

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prohibit it from satisfactorily achieving its intended end' (Bernstein 2001:76).<sup>8</sup> Thus, no one could disagree with Habermas who finds that it is 'an odd book', whose 'unperspicuous form of presentation renders the clear structure of its train of thought almost undiscernible' (Habermas 1987b:106-107). However, it is not only, as Habermas would believe, the form of presentation that makes the central arguments of the book difficult to understand. In seeking to understand these arguments, we must also bear in mind that the book is far more negative and pessimistic than originally intended. Habermas is right, though, to point out the unusual form of presentation. A discussion of this issue is also necessary in order to grasp the essential claims of the book.

Ad 2) As was seen in the very first interpretations of Adorno, Gillian Rose's *The Melancholy Science* and Susan Buck-Morss' *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, it is impossible to grasp Adorno's ideas without an insight into his style of writing. At first sight this point may seem irrelevant in a discussion of the relation between myth and enlightenment. However, Buck-Morss stresses Adorno's consistent use of 'antithetical concept-pairs' such as the juxtaposition of myth and enlightenment (Buck-Morss 1977:57-62). In order to understand what Adorno means when he describes the relationship between the two concepts central to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is thus important to see how he uses 'antithetical concepts' generally. While Rose calls such juxtapositions 'ironic inversions' (Rose 1978:16), what both authors agree on is that the apparently paradoxical claim regarding myth and enlightenment cannot be understood if taken literally.<sup>9</sup> Some kind of 'key' to Adorno's style of writing must be used if we are to 'unlock' the claims that he puts forward. Buck-Morss throws light on this in the following passage:

"...where nature confronted men as a mythic power, Adorno called for the control of that nature by reason; but where rational control of nature took the form of domination, Adorno exposed such instrumental reason as a new mythology. The fluctuating meanings of Adorno's concepts, their purposeful ambivalence, is a major source of the difficulty in interpreting his works. But it was precisely his intent to frustrate the categorizing, defining mentality which by the twentieth century had itself become 'second nature'" (Buck-Morss 1977:58-59).

By refusing to define the concepts he uses unequivocally, and instead relating them dialectically to their (apparent) opposites, Adorno seeks to reveal that part of the object that is 'non-identical' to the concept covering it. In seeking to show that enlightenment and myth share certain characteristics he is alerting our attention to tendencies in the social world that are not obvious at first sight, thus broadening our understanding. Thus Adorno should not be thought of as giving an accurate *theoretical description* of the relationship between myth and enlightenment, but rather as combining into constellations concepts (and phenomena) that we usually take for granted, in order to overcome the

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<sup>8</sup> In my interpretation of Adorno's work throughout the thesis I am heavily indebted to the reading provided by J. M. Bernstein in his explication of Adorno's latent ethical thought (see Bernstein 2001). However, as Bernstein's book is devoted mostly to issues in moral theory and ethics his interpretation cannot stand alone and must be related to other more social theoretically oriented interpretations.

<sup>9</sup> This, of course, holds equally true for most of Adorno's other statements, but it is particularly true of those works in which he is most polemical and in which he uses irony most obviously. However, as Adorno notes in a lecture devoted to metaphysics: "I once said that after Auschwitz one could no longer write poetry, and that gave rise to a discussion I did not anticipate when I wrote those words. I did not anticipate it because it is in the nature of philosophy – and everything I write is, unavoidably, philosophy, even if it is not concerned with so-called philosophical themes – that nothing is meant quite literally" (Adorno 2000b:110). To take Adorno at his word, then, would be mistaken and would make it impossible to understand the real intentions behind his statements. Unfortunately, this is what most traditional Adorno readings have done to date.

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illusions that they inadvertently come to support when we forget their origin. In the present case he seeks to show the way in which enlightenment, through being blind to other, non-scientific types of knowledge, itself becomes mythological. There are thus two aspects of Adorno's thought that makes it difficult to understand the claims he puts forward in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. First, they are more negative than intended, which means that the positive elements should be given greater emphasis. Second, his statements cannot be taken literally and must therefore be *interpreted* in the light of his overall philosophy. Having clarified this, we are now in a position to look at Adorno's and Horkheimer's statement about myth and enlightenment in more depth in order properly to understand what this claim amounts to. What is enlightenment and what is myth? How can they be said to be alike and in what respects do they differ?

#### Myth and Enlightenment

As mentioned above, Horkheimer and Adorno seek to alert us to the fact that we cannot take the self-understanding of the enlightenment for granted. In their account of myth and enlightenment what we think of as rational (enlightened) is shown to be irrational (mythological) and what is irrational is shown to possess a core of truth. This means that enlightenment is not only a process of societal rationalisation, but equally one of domination. The validity of these claims must of course be proved by argument. In order to evaluate them, we need to consider in turn 1) what characterises enlightenment, 2) what a myth is and what it has in common with enlightenment and 3) in what way enlightenment can be said to be mythological (irrational).

Ad 1) 'Enlightenment', Adorno and Horkheimer write, 'has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters' (DoE:1). These two goals were to be arrived at by 'disenchanted' the world, by dispelling 'myths' and through this process substituting solid (scientific) knowledge for supernatural beliefs and fantasies. Scientific knowledge is important for two reasons: first of all, it enables us to grasp those areas of the world that were formerly *unknown* to us and which therefore constituted a potential source of insecurity and anxiety.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, knowledge serves as an 'antidote' against anxiety not least because it is easier to counteract the negative consequences of an event if we are forewarned of them. The ability to counteract certain events brings us to the second important aspect of scientific knowledge: *technology*. In so far as we succeed in generating more and better knowledge of the workings of nature, we will gain control over an ever-increasing number of areas in the world where we will be able to 'install ourselves as masters'. In order to understand what this striving for control implies, it can be instructive to turn to Weber whose analysis of modernity Adorno and Horkheimer followed very closely:

"The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do *not*...indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It [is the] belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather

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<sup>10</sup> While Adorno and Horkheimer use the term 'fear' (Furcht) in this passage they use the term 'anxiety' (Angst) at other times and in my opinion it would be more appropriate to use the term anxiety exclusively. As Kierkegaard noted, the difference between the two moods is that whereas the former has a concrete object as its intention this is not the case with the latter (Kierkegaard 1980). In other words, anxiety refers to the state of being unable to cope with what is *unknown* per se, while fear is related to a known object (for a more thorough discussion of the difference between the two moods or 'tunings', as Bech calls them, see Bech 1998).

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that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculation perform the service" (Weber 1946:139).

Enlightenment as such is thus connected to the belief that there is no longer any objective reason for anything whatsoever to remain *unknown* to human beings; if we wanted we *could* gain exact knowledge of every natural (and social) phenomenon and thereby learn to control it (via calculation). Even if this possibility is most easily grasped in relation to the natural sciences there is in principle no obstacle to gaining control of the social world as well. Sociology in this vision of science becomes 'social technology'. To sum up: the positive aspects of enlightenment are 1) that it enables us to control our environment and 2) that it helps rescue us from anxiety over the unknown. In this respect enlightenment is rational and contributes to a rationalisation of society.

Ad 2) Before examining the (negative) consequences, for enlightenment and scientific thinking, of this 'obsession' with control and calculation, we need to examine what Adorno and Horkheimer mean by myths. 'Enlightenment', they say, 'has always regarded anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature, as the basis of myth' (DoE:4). Thus, myths arise from those 'subjective properties' that we as human beings 'project onto nature' as a result of our anxiety over unknown phenomena in the natural world. According to science, all our non-scientific beliefs belong to the subject and thus have little or no relation at all to the constitution of the natural world. For this reason, it is obvious that all our beliefs should be submitted to an unrelenting scrutiny in order to determine whether they are merely myths or whether they constitute 'real' (objective) knowledge of the world. In this respect myth and enlightenment stand in contradiction to one another: enlightenment seeks to overcome myths. In other respects, however, there are certain crucial similarities, as becomes evident if the respective aims of enlightenment and myths are compared:

"Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins – but therefore also to narrate, record, explain. This tendency was reinforced by the recording and collecting of myths. From a record, they soon became a teaching. Each ritual contains a representation of how things happen and of the specific process which is to be influenced by magic" (DoE:5).

What myth and enlightenment have in common is the effort to gain knowledge of 'how things happen' in order to give human beings the ability to control their natural environment, whether via magical rituals or through technology. It is in this sense that we should understand Adorno's and Horkheimer's claim that 'myth is already enlightenment', because myths and magical rituals were themselves an attempt to explain and control the world. However, myth remains mythological in the sense that its postulates are merely subjective projections and do not constitute genuinely objective knowledge of the object. Thus, in so far as the purpose of myth was to liberate us from anxiety and enable us to control our environment, it shares certain features with enlightened thought while at the same time remaining distinct.

Ad 3) While this might make plausible the first claim in Adorno and Horkheimer's 'ironic inversion', it does not shed light on the postulate that 'enlightenment reverts to mythology'. In other words we need to examine what aspects of enlightened thought are irrational. For Adorno this irrationality has three aspects: a) enlightenment becomes *dominating*, but b) *is dependent* on what it

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dominates; c) it cannot acknowledge this, and therefore becomes *sceptical*. Let us consider each of these claims in turn.

Ad a) We can best understand the claim that enlightenment is dominating by examining in more detail what Adorno and Horkheimer identified as the main characteristics of the enlightenment. In their view, three main features of modern enlightened reason can be identified, all sharing the same 'conceptual presupposition' that underlies its dominating nature: reason is at once *disenchanting*, *rationalising* and *universalist* (see Bernstein 2001:77-83). As mentioned above, the growth of scientific knowledge about the natural world not only enables human beings to exert greater control over their environment. It has also made us aware of the inadequacy of our views of morality and other crucial aspects of our social world. In other words, modern enlightened reason *disenchants* our traditional beliefs, rendering them illegitimate because it shows them to be merely subjective. At the same time, it fails to provide new beliefs to replace the old ones and therefore leads to an overall 'loss of meaning', a feature Weber found to be one of the most important characteristics of modernity (see Weber 1930). Both Weber and Adorno were thus thoroughly ambivalent about the consequences of disenchantment in the modern world.

Closely connected to this process are the *rationalising* efforts of modern enlightened reason: If our traditional beliefs become disenchanted and thereby lose their claim to offer an authoritative description of the world, since they lack (scientific) justification, then every new description, practice or norm must equally be justified by rational arguments if it is to be accepted as valid (or 'legitimate' in Weber's terminology; see Weber 1978:31-36). For this reason, 'Weber interprets this loss of meaning as an existential challenge to the individual to establish the unity which can no longer be established in the orders of society in the privacy of his own biography' (TCA, 1:247). The missing connection between societal rationalisation and the values that give meaning to the individual risks ending in a 'bureaucratisation of everyday life', ultimately causing a 'loss of freedom' (because the activities connected to the reproduction of society are disconnected from those that give meaning to the individual). Thus, even though rationalisation improves our lives in many respects (because it helps eliminate illegitimate authorities) it also contributes to a widespread nihilism because of the impossibility of truly grounding our values.

The erosion of traditional beliefs moreover means that there are progressively fewer shared values and norms, which in turn exacerbate the growing tendency towards individualism. Individualism presupposes a 'universalistic form of life'; a 'community' where 'everyone can take up the perspective of everyone else and count on reciprocal recognition by everybody'. 'Individualism', in Habermas' words, is thus 'the flipside of *universalism*' (Habermas 1992:186). However, the only true universals left are 'the shared presuppositions of language use' (i.e. the reaching of understanding through communication), something that is highly abstract and removed from the concerns and value orientations of our everyday life. In other words, the values we *choose* reflectively to follow can never be as apparently self-evident as the traditional beliefs of our ancestors or of children before the decentring of their subjectivity. Instead, the fact that we have to *argue* that our values are rational contributes further to the scepticism inherent in the supposedly rational way of life. In Adorno's interpretation, these three features constitute essential aspects of modern societies and are closely related because they share the same 'conceptual presupposition'.

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All of the above mentioned characteristics of modern enlightened reason have had tremendous *positive* effects, promoting the liberation of human beings both from their natural environment and from illegitimate traditions and supernatural beliefs. These are what we might call the 'progressive' (or rational) features of modern enlightened reason. At the same time, however, these features succumb to a form of *domination* inherent in them because of their shared 'conceptual presupposition'. This domination constitutes one of the *mythical* (or irrational) elements of modern enlightened reason. What enlightenment shares with myth is its adherence to 'the principle of immanence'. This principle Adorno and Horkheimer characterise as 'the explanation of every event as repetition' (DoE:8) and it constitutes the shared 'conceptual presupposition' of disenchantment, rationalism and universalism. Bernstein describes the principle as follows:

"The principle of immanence turns on a series of familiar platitudes: an item (object, event, property etc.) is neither known nor explained by giving it a proper name; rather, an empirical item is recognised, and so cognised, only when it is classified in some way, when it is shown, via subsumption, to share characteristics or features with other items. Analogously, and by extension, an event is explained if it can be shown to fall within the ambit of a known pattern of occurrence, if it falls within the ambit of a known rule or is deducible from (subsumable by) a known law" (Bernstein 2001:87).

From the fact that everything should be explained by reference to already existing 'rules' or 'laws', from what is *immanent* to reason, it follows that what remains outside these rules and cannot be subsumed under them is mere myth, mere 'projections of subjective properties onto nature'. In evidence of this one might cite Carnap's insistence that everything that cannot be verified according to the methods of the natural sciences represents a species of metaphysics and is therefore meaningless (or without 'cognitive meaning'; see for instance Carnap 1992). This dismissal of everything outside our current conceptual apparatus is a form of domination that completely disregards the features of that which we seek to cognise; the universal (concept) comes to dominate the particular (object) by subsuming it under abstract categories that are not necessarily adequate.

Ad b) While this may not be problematic in itself, it becomes so when taken in conjunction with the fact that modern enlightened reason is essentially negative. If the most essential feature of enlightenment is its critical scrutiny of everything, then it could be maintained that it lacks any content itself. In this sense 'enlightenment depends upon myths':

"Enlightenment *depends* upon myth, it depends upon the entire range of anthropomorphisms for the possibility of enacting its sceptical reflections. Without material to negate, there can be no enlightenment; without the material mediations of reason in sensory states and its objects, language and its social conditioning, reason could not rationalize itself" (Bernstein 2001:95).

In order to enlighten us about the world, enlightenment *needs* mythological views of the world: for thinking to generate knowledge it needs objects that can be subsumed under universal concepts. For this reason, the independence often attributed to reason and enlightenment is illusory (for a discussion of such views see Jarvis 1998:185-192; Bernstein 2001:212-218): reason and enlightenment are nothing without their Other.

Ad c) However, because of the 'principle of immanence' modern enlightened reason cannot even acknowledge this dependency. Since everything has to be explained by reference to what is immanent to the theory, because reason is therefore *self-sufficient*, 'it cannot avow its conditionality'. It is exactly

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because of its claim to self-sufficiency that 'enlightenment', in Adorno's view, necessarily 'reverts to mythology' (see, for instance, Carnap's claim that what cannot be examined according to the methods of science is a species of metaphysics, despite the fact that the verification principle cannot itself be verified and is therefore also metaphysical). To use Weber's example, science cannot be a rational activity without values to guide its research (for otherwise its only rationale would be the endless accumulation of knowledge that we did not know how to use), and when science itself contributes to the very eroding of these values it inevitably becomes sceptical and irrational. If the aim of enlightenment is to rid the world of all merely subjective properties projected onto nature then one may ask whether the ideals of the enlightenment are not themselves such merely subjective properties? If the values that orient us are chosen freely by reflective agents and therefore could in principle be different, can they really be binding and motivating for us *as* values? Are the ideas of truth and objectivity not merely, themselves, the product of human struggles, or the effect of power relations in society as Foucault would have us believe (see, for instance, Foucault 1978)? These sceptical questions are a symptom of the irrational features of enlightenment that follow from the 'principle of immanence'. Adorno gives the name 'identity-thinking' to any scheme of thought that presupposes this principle. Conceptual thinking that does not recognise its dependency upon the object being conceptualised, and in failing to do so 'suppresses the claims' of what is 'non-identical' to itself (the concept), is a version of 'identity thinking'. Reason is thus dominating, dependent and sceptical because of its adherence to 'the principle of immanence', and for this reason enlightenment is mythological (and irrational).<sup>11</sup>

However, contrary to a widely held view of Adorno and of the postulates to be found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he does not consider it inevitable that enlightenment should lead to domination and scepticism. Instead he sees these effects as the result of an *insufficient* rationalisation of reason, as the product of a *lack of rationality*. Domination is the outcome of the 'principle of immanence' not an inevitable feature of the development of society and history as such. But what are the epistemological consequences of the disenchantment of the world? In pursuing this question in the section that follows, we will need to shift the level of analysis from the development of modern societies to a discussion of language and especially conceptuality, since concepts are the smallest units of language. The question at issue is how this process of disenchantment, which brings about a loss of meaning, affects conceptuality and our language practices as such? Adorno sought to answer this question in his major epistemological work, *Negative Dialectics*, to which we turn now.

### B. The Objectivity of Subjectivity: On *Negative Dialectics*

*Negative Dialectics* was intended to be the first of a trilogy of works in which Adorno would parallel Kant's three Critiques. However, Adorno did not live to complete this project, and, apart from his

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Bernstein's reading of Adorno suggests that 'negative dialectics' should be understood in the light of Hegel's doctrine of the 'causality of fate' (see for instance Hegel 1967:166-230): Although the master is superior to the slave in several respects it is only through the slave's recognition of the master that the latter can gain self-consciousness. Thus, only by avowing its dependency on what is mythical can enlightenment escape its inherent scepticism, and only by recognising its dependency on that which is non-identical to the concept can identity become rational (for an elaboration of this see Bernstein 1995:159-196; 2001:203-204; 331-332).



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'revised conception of the dialectic', he left only a series of lectures on his moral philosophy and the incomplete *Aesthetic Theory* (see Adorno & Tiedemann 1997). *Negative Dialectics* was thus principally concerned with epistemology, albeit it approached the subject quite differently from other major works in the discipline. Although the germ of the idea of a 'negative dialectics' was already present in his inaugural lecture, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, it was not until 1959 that Adorno found time to begin writing on the project. While *Negative Dialectics* might appear to be a complete 'reversion to philosophy' (away from social research) this was not Adorno's intention, as he explained to Horkheimer in a letter following the publication of the book (Wiggershaus 1994:597-600). In fact, Adorno was keen to emphasise that 'philosophy should [not] give up or even slacken that contact with separate sciences which it has finally regained' (AoP:126) for in doing so it would risk becoming totally irrelevant. The aims of *Negative Dialectics* could only be reached by using empirical research and empirical research could only become relevant in the framework of 'negative dialectics'. Before examining the ways in which the ideas put forward in *Negative Dialectics* could be utilised for empirical research (and how they could provide a new normative foundation for critical theory) we need to gain a better understanding of these ideas, for this book, too, has been haunted by misunderstandings. The questions we need to ask are a) how 'the principle of immanence' through disenchantment affects conceptual thinking, rendering it dominating and self-sufficient and b) what is it that conceptual thinking depends on but cannot avow?

#### a. (Simple) Concepts and the Annihilation of Expression

Most interpretations of *Negative Dialectics* have assumed that Adorno's aim in the book is to level a critique against *all* conceptual thinking, and therefore that his concept of the 'non-identical' is *ontological*. Concepts will *always* be different from their objects and hence leave something behind that they cannot grasp: the 'non-identical'. A few examples of this type of reading will shed more light on this matter:

"Whereas Lukacs assumes that [the 'thing-in-itself' problematic] arises only for thinking at the level of the understanding, and that it can be resolved by way of a dialectical mediation of form and content, Adorno sees the same problem turn up again at the heart of dialectical thought. *All* conceptual thought that stands apart from mere *intuition* – and this includes dialectical thought – proceeds by way of identification and betrays the utopian element in cognition" (TCA, 1:373).

"Identifying thinking' or 'identity thinking' for Adorno *first* means the subsuming of single events or objects under general concepts. These concepts can never grasp the whole thing, the object or event in its concrete totality... Adorno interprets this as a very fundamental form of injustice which subjective thinking perpetrates against real objects, be it social or natural objects... As we never can reach full or comprehensive understanding of all sides of a single event in its totality, we always have to do some 'injustice' to an event or object. Identifying thought is unjust insofar as Adorno... claims that the object might have a moral right to be identified equally by all its aspects. This basic form of 'injustice' is unavoidable as long as we are beings who think and discuss" (Brunkhorst 1999:1-2).

It is no wonder that Habermas finds this perspective hopelessly pessimistic and lacking in any normative foundation. If 'identity is inherent in thought itself' and '[t]o think is to identify' (ND:5) the mere act of thinking will *always* 'do some injustice' to the event or object being conceptualised (i.e. it will always *dominate* the object). According to Habermas, we cannot escape from this impasse of

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Adorno's but are condemned to 'circle within this *performative contradiction* and indeed even remain there' (Habermas 1987b:119) without any hope of escape.

Although this reading seems convincing, it is nevertheless problematic for reasons that will become apparent in what follows. Bernstein's interpretation suggests that instead of reading Adorno in this way one should think of him as raising a critique of the *historically specific* type of conceptuality that is characteristic of contemporary societies (Bernstein 2001:266-268). In fact, Adorno criticises society by way of a critique of the concept, the smallest unit of language. However, language is important here not only because it serves as an exemplar of Adorno's critique of 'instrumental reason'. It is also important because all our experiences, our whole way of life, indeed our very possibility of having experiences are *mediated* by language and conceptuality. In this respect, conceptuality and experience are also crucial in relation to epistemology, since we cannot have any knowledge that is not mediated by concepts.

Our concepts are 'simple concepts', as Bernstein terms them, and they have been affected by the disenchantment of the world (and thus 'the principle of immanence'). Disenchantment has eliminated part of what constitutes (conceptual) thinking, or rather what ought to constitute it in the light of the *possibilities* inherent in the present state of society.<sup>12</sup> To accept that we must make do with 'simple concepts' is thus to accept the status quo and thereby squander the developmental potential of modern societies. Through language (and thus conceptuality), disenchantment affects our very ability to have certain experiences (i.e. our ability to form certain relationships to other human beings and objects). It is in this light that 'negative dialectics' should be understood: Adorno's philosophical thought can be seen as an attempt to 'restore' a more emphatic 'type' of experience than that which underlies science and our everyday lives (on this 'unregimented experience', as he terms it, see for instance ItPD:57). This is what Adorno means when he states that:

"I would not hesitate to define the idea of a dialectical theory of society as something like the restoration of, or – to put it more modestly – the effort to restore, the experience which is denied us both by the social system and by the rules of science. It might be said that what I am attempting to set out here is something like the basic principles of a rebellion of experience against empiricism" (ItS:51).

In other words, our 'ability' to experience is *reduced*: it could and ought to be more than it presently is. The result is that enlightenment and scientific thought, as noted above, do not suffer from an *excess* of rationality but rather from a *lack* of rationality. In order for our concepts to become more rational, we need to disenchant our idea of *identity* and the alleged self-sufficiency of reason that it is based on.

Before turning to an explication of what is 'lost' when we employ (simple) concepts it will be fruitful explain in more detail why the reduction of experience is problematic in relation to science. According to Adorno, the very possibility of having any form of experience is excluded by (traditional) science and enlightenment: An experience is something that happens to us which changes our way of perceiving and engaging with the world (e.g. we fall in love, someone dies, becomes sick etc.); so transformation and novelty are intrinsic to experience. This stands in contradiction to science, in which the truly new and unexpected is that which potentially threatens to falsify the theories we have of the

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<sup>12</sup> This does *not* mean that Adorno should be understood to be describing a *regression* of conceptuality, or to be claiming that our ancestors used 'complex concepts' to express themselves with (on this see Bernstein 2001:86). Instead, we should bear in mind that Adorno's philosophy is *critical* and that he is therefore evaluating existing society in terms of the potentiality inherent in it; that he is contrasting, in other words, the 'real and the possible'.

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world. If a situation arises that cannot be explained within the framework of our current theory, (i.e. a radically new experience), we are forced to seek a new paradigm that can incorporate these findings and relate them to what we already know (see Kuhn 1962). Yet the ultimate purpose of science is to create a 'final' theory that would explain *everything* so that we would have no need of further experiences in the future that might give rise to a change of paradigm. In other words, the ideal of science or 'identity-thinking' (as Adorno sees it) is to arrive at a position that is completely static or ever recurring, that is absolutely determined and in which in principle no novelty can occur that will challenge what we already know (see Bernstein 2001:111-115). Hence, science as we know it *excludes* genuine experience. If Adorno's view of science and enlightenment is correct, it thus has severe consequences for sociology as an *empirical* science (that is as a science based on *experiences* of the social world), a problem that we will return to below. If science excludes experience, this implies that science, like simple concepts, is *dominating* because it constantly overlooks that which is 'non-identical' in the object or situation being cognised.

But what is it that is 'missing' from the concept? Why does the disenchantment of language inevitably lead to domination? As mentioned above, Adorno considers disenchantment to be the eradication of all types of *anthropomorphism*, 'the projection of subjective properties onto nature' (DoE:4) in order to produce (true, objective and neutral) knowledge about the world. Only if it were possible to rid the world of all types of anthropomorphism would it be possible truly to emancipate human beings from nature and illegitimate authorities. This encounter with subjectivity finds its finest hour in the (natural) science(s) where the ideal is complete neutrality and *objectivity*. But such objectivity is also an ideal in the social sciences as well, as we can see in Weber's concept of 'value-neutrality' (Weber 1946). While this ideal seems plausible enough in view of all the myths about the world that prevent us from having truly 'objective' knowledge, it is founded on presuppositions that cannot survive closer scrutiny. For in order to prevent the anthropomorphism that leads to incorrect and subjective views of the world, human beings would have to be removed from the world altogether. Even Weber took the view that what distinguished the social (and human) sciences from the natural sciences was the fact that human beings apply meaning to (most of) their actions. In other words, the social world is always, by its very nature, subjective, in the sense that a crucial part of it is constituted by the meaning that actors ascribe to their everyday acts. A completely disenchanted world would be a world with no human beings at all:

"The final picture of a disenchanted world is projected by the presupposition that the human is a projecting animal caught in the mirror of itself, hence the 'true' world is a world without the human, the human becoming only a distorting perspective on a physical universe forever independent of it" (Bernstein 2001:92).

The realisation that all our descriptions of the world are 'theory-laden' posed a serious problem for empiricist philosophies of science, for it threw into doubt all the ideals of positivism (since they cannot be grounded in whatever principle is used to define science, be it verification or falsification).

The 'problem' inherent in the ideal of 'value-neutrality' has long been recognised and as such does not offer any new insight. For Adorno, however, this problem was of a more profound character because it pointed (as indicated in the Introduction) to what he recognised as the *objectivity* of subjectivity:

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“...by primacy of the object is meant that *the subject*, for its part an object in a qualitative different sense, in a sense more radical than the object, which is not known otherwise than through consciousness, *is as an object also a subject*” (SO:502, my emphasis).

Because human beings are also a part of nature their subjectivity must also be seen as ‘natural’, even though it is apt to change more quickly than other aspects of nature (such as ‘the law of gravity’). ‘The projection of subjective properties onto nature’ is also therefore an act that is ‘natural’ for human beings *as* animals, and as such is an ‘objective’ fact that the (natural) sciences must deal with if they are to produce an ‘objective’ account of the (natural) world. By aiming entirely to eliminate the subjective, science (and thinking in general) is in fact eliminating part of what is human.

However, the disenchantment of language has even more serious consequences: when we seek to remove from language every element that is subjective and therefore a potential source of error in our descriptions of the world, what we remove are in fact all the *expressive* features of language. While it is only in ‘worst case scenarios’ that such subjective expressions become distorting and thereby contribute to a mythological (mis)understanding of the world, they nevertheless do not essentially contribute to our knowledge and are therefore at best superfluous. Because of the risk that these subjective expressions may be mythological, it would be best to annihilate this aspect of language altogether when trying to produce (scientific) knowledge of the world - or so the story goes when told from the perspective of ‘traditional theory’. For Adorno, it is exactly this annihilation that makes our language use *dominating*. What is forgotten, according to Adorno, is that ‘simple concepts’ *need* and *depend* upon exactly this aspect of language. It is precisely the fact that concepts dominate that which it depends on without being able to acknowledge this dependency that explains how the ‘principle of immanence’ also affects conceptuality. But let us examine *why* (simple) concepts depend on the expressive aspects of language because that is not obvious at first sight.

#### b. Communication vs. Naming: The Disenchantment of Language

Now it may seem obvious that it is more neutral (and therefore better, because more objective) to state that ‘This chair is red’ instead of saying ‘This chair is red like a plum tomato!’ because the allusion to the tomato is merely subjective. However, for Adorno this ban on expressions ignores the fact that language has *two* distinct yet interrelated axes, the logical and the material, and likewise two different functions for human beings: *communication* and *naming*. On this distinction Adorno is unequivocal:

“As an expression of the thing itself, language is not fully reducible to communication with others. Nor, however...is it simply independent of communication. Otherwise it would elude all critique, even in its relationship to an arbitrary presumption. Language as expression of the thing itself and language as communication are interwoven. The ability to name the matter at hand is developed under the compulsion to communicate it; conversely, it could not communicate anything that it did not have as its own intention, undistracted by other considerations. This dialectic plays itself out within the medium of language itself” (HTS:105).

‘Language as expression of the thing itself’ or, to put it in more contemporary terms, language as a mean to ‘disclose the world’ (for such a view see for instance Taylor 1991), is a necessary part of language without which our communication with others (or in Habermas’ words language as a mean for ‘coordinating our actions’) would have no ‘intention’ (i.e. no ‘something’ to communicate about, or

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no situation on which we had to reach agreement in order to coordinate our actions). However, 'language as expression' could not exist without language also being communication: that is, we try to express the thing/situation encountered in order to communicate it to others. The two axes and functions of language are thus dialectically interwoven and depend on each other. However, in banning the merely subjective, our *expressions* of the world, science effectively severs the link between these two aspects of language and in this sense becomes dominating.

It is by no means obvious why we should consider our expressive uses of language, which are often considered merely 'subjective', to be an attempt to disclose the world or 'express the thing itself'. However, this can be explained with reference to Adorno's idea of 'granting primacy to the object': giving primacy to the object means (re)orienting our attention towards the objects of the world we are communicating about; and this effort at grasping the 'non-identical' can best be achieved by using our subjective expressions. Thus, in order for language not to be dominating it needs to acknowledge its dependency on *both* axes of the language. The idea that our expressive uses of language is a form of 'world-disclosure' can perhaps become more plausible if we turn our attention to two other philosophers: Kant and Wittgenstein. According to David Bell, the latter can be seen to be distinguishing indirectly between two types of understanding: transitive and intransitive. Bell explains:

"If we distinguish between what can be *articulated*, that is, said in assertoric, descriptive language, and what can merely be *expressed*, in the sense in which gestures, facial expressions, and forms of behaviour can be said to express feelings and emotions, then intrinsic meaning and intransitive or aesthetic understanding will be inarticulable, certainly, but not inexpressible" (Bell 1987:243).

The type of understanding that is called intransitive should be understood as an independent form of understanding and not only a metaphor for 'proper' (transitive) understanding. When our loved one smiles that special smile meant just for us we understand it perfectly well even though we could never describe this (intransitive) understanding through 'assertoric, descriptive language'. The same thing could be said when we come to understand a poem or a modernistic work of art. Because the understanding of the smile is intransitive we cannot *articulate* it without thereby 'loosing' a crucial part of the smile, but that does not mean that we cannot *express* it. In so far as the mission of science is to put a ban on all merely subjective expression, it thereby banishes intransitive understanding as an independent form of understanding, since by definition this can only be passed on by *expressions*.

At first sight this may seem irrelevant, since understanding a poem or the fact that your loved one loves you is not the concern of science, whose interest instead is to produce knowledge of the world in order to 'install human beings as masters', an aim to which understanding poems and smiles adds little if anything. However, as Bell points out, the Wittgensteinian distinction between transitive and intransitive understanding could be compared to the distinction Kant draws between determinative and reflective judgements and this means that intransitive understanding becomes as important as reflective judgements for cognitive processes. Kant distinguished between these two forms of judgement as follows:

"Judgement in general is the faculty of thinking the particular under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, or law,) is given, then the judgement which subsumes the particular under it *is determinative*...If, however, only the particular is given and the universal has to be found for it, then the judgement is simply *reflective*" (Kant 1952:18).

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From this distinction it follows that determinative judgements cannot stand alone: if these kinds of judgements were the only ones available to us it would be impossible to understand *how* a rule, principle, etc. comes into being in the first place, because it would set in motion an infinite regress of referrals (i.e. the rule is grounded in another rule which again is grounded in a third rule etc). For this reason, determinative judgements are *dependent* upon our capacity to make reflective judgements, or reflectively to construct universals in the first place. Both reflective judgements and intransitive understanding share the ability 'to see a regularity or significance or orderly patterning of a perceptual array' (Bernstein 2001:314) in the object, event or situation: 'And for both philosophers, it is to our criterialess, spontaneous, and 'blind' awareness of an intrinsic but inarticulable meaning that we must look for an understanding of the art, rather than the science, of judgement' (Bell 1987:244). If this brief elaboration shows that there are two types of understanding, two types of judgement, it does not yet indicate how this could be understood in terms of the two, interdependent axes of the language which Adorno invoked. In order to understand this we need to look at the way in which reflective and determinative judgements can be said to underlie our everyday use of concepts. Only if this can be shown will it be possible to understand why the expressive features of language should be seen as an attempt to 'grant primacy to the object'.

There are three types of situations in which our ability to make reflective judgements can be said to have a profound influence on our ability to understand a situation. First, there are situations in which we encounter previously unknown phenomena and therefore do not have to hand any ready-made universals that we can apply or rules that we can follow; we need to be able to construct these universals/rules: these could be called situations of *concept formation*. Second, there are situations in which we have to learn the concepts that adequately describe the situation (situations of *concept acquisition*), and, third, where we try to apply concepts that were learned in another context (situations of *concept application*). Where we have no concepts our attention must be oriented towards the object, event or situation in order 'to see a regularity or significance or orderly patterning of a perceptual array' that would enable us (reflectively) to construct/learn/apply concepts correctly. For Adorno this means that our ability to follow rules depends on our ability to learn/construct rules in the first place; from this it follows that determinative judgements depend on reflective judgements as Kant already was convinced of. However, if Bell is right in stating that intransitive understanding and reflective judgements are the same it also follows that our transitive understanding depends on our intransitive understanding. From this it also follows that concepts depend on the objects being conceptualised because the features of the object (i.e. the 'orderly patterning of a perceptual array' in Bernstein's words) are fundamental for any effort to form a concept. Because our subjective expressions can be seen as a response to the effects of this 'orderly patterning of a perceptual array' on our senses it follows that the function of the material axis of language is to attempt to express the object. From the above considerations this means that the logical axis of language (communication) depends on the material axis (expression).

The situations in which this dependency is not acknowledged are those that involve what Adorno terms 'identity thinking' (i.e. these situations are influenced by the 'principle of immanence' by dominating that which they depend on without our being able to acknowledge this dependency); and because of the disenchantment of language, the majority of situations in modern societies are like this. In ordinary everyday situations, where we already have a concept that (adequately) grasps the situation,

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our ability to perform reflective judgements does not seem to be called upon; the object does not appear to play any role in our understanding of the situation. While this is not (completely) true, since objects, by being 'perceptually present', function as an 'occasion for triggering the appropriate conceptual response' (Bernstein 2001:315) it is nevertheless a consequence of the disenchantment of the world that, during our routine concept applications (situations of *concept possession*), we 'forget' that our very ability to use a particular concept in a particular situation in the final analysis depends on concept application, concept acquisition and concept formation, and therefore on reflective judgements and intransitive understanding that bring about an awareness of the object (i.e. it depends on 'granting primacy to the object'). This 'forgetfulness' about the history of the concepts we use explains why Adorno at times claims that 'all reification is forgetting' (DoE:191). What is forgotten in situations of concept possession is that the (simple) concepts employed here depend on those situations of concept formation in which the concept originated. When we fail to acknowledge this, (simple) concepts come to dominate the objects they seek to grasp, since the concept may very well be inadequate to this particular situation.

Now that we have clarified how the 'principle of immanence' influences our language practices it will be fruitful to examine the opposition between science and art that we find in Adorno's account of modernity. By doing this we can see the problematic aspects of science (and therefore also of sociology) when using (simple) concepts without consideration of their dominating aspects. This opposition can be explained in terms of the dialectic of expression and communication (for an account of this see for instance Jarvis 1998:101-104,177-178). The ideal of communication, or the logical axis of the concept, is to be found in its purest form in abstract mathematical thinking and logic, two of the most important branches of the natural sciences. This dimension of language consistently tries to relate the object being conceptualised to other concepts. Adorno explains this in the following passage, where he distinguishes between two types of cognition:

"Dialectically, cognition of non-identity lies also in the fact that this very cognition identifies – that it identifies to a greater extent, and in other ways, than identitarian thinking. This [dialectical] cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself" (ND:149).

What is problematic with science ('identitarian thinking') is that it seeks only to 'say what something comes under'. In other words, 'normal science' (in Kuhn's understanding) is only an exercise in routine concept *possession*, in which the dependency on the 'exemplar' (the process of concept formation) that created the concepts currently being used (the 'paradigm') is only rarely, if ever, referred to, and in which the experience of radically new events would result in 'anomalies' that would potentially threaten to render the paradigm void. Thus, according to Adorno, concept formation is impossible in (normal) science, which amounts to saying that genuine experience is excluded. The result, again, is that the routine use of concepts cannot grasp the situation without leaving a remainder: that which is 'non-identical' to the concept in question (in other words, the concepts dominate the objects). While this 'ideal typical' notion of science constitutes one extreme of our language use, modernistic art constitutes the other. According to Adorno, art practices are the (systematic) effort to 'name the object', to say 'what something is' in contrast to attempting to say 'what something comes under'. Or to put it another

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way: it is the *continual* (or institutionalised) effort to construct universals that can serve as exemplars; art is 'the longing for the new' (AT:32). As Bernstein puts it:

"...the prosecution of the search for autonomy becomes just the negation of the tradition, that is, the negation of all that art *has been* determined to be. In this way the historical search for autonomy is transformed into a purely, and apparently therefore empty, temporal adventure; art is forced into a paradoxical search for novelty" (Bernstein 1992:191).

We can try to translate this passage into the terminology used above: if art is the 'paradoxical search for novelty' and 'the negation of tradition', this can only mean that art is the institutionalised attempt to deny the use of concepts we already possess ('all that art *has been*'), and instead give priority to the formation of new concepts ('the paradoxical search for novelty'). For a work of art to be authentic it cannot just be identical to another work, it cannot result merely from applying an established technique and thereby replicating what already exists in the tradition of art; art must continually renew itself to be art. By contrast, for (normal) science to be science it *must* be consistent with what is already thought to be science (the concepts and theories we possess); any inconsistency would result in anomalies that would threaten to reduce (normal) science to nothing more than the memory of failed attempts to describe our (natural) world. Thus, the relationship between art and science might be described in similar terms to the relationship between serious and popular music: 'Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other...' (Adorno & Benjamin 1999:130). Even though the two practices seek to refine two different processes that are mutually interdependent (concept formation in art and concept possession in science) the 'integral freedom' which would result from the fusion of art and science cannot be achieved merely by 'adding up' the two practices. The division of labour that forces art and science apart is *real*; it cannot be forcibly undone by artificially joining the two. However, the division should not be hypostatized and presented as inevitable or even desirable for human society. For Adorno, the ideal, however utopian it may seem, would be for the claims of science and art to converge without thereby returning to the myths of premodern societies. In themselves neither science nor art can be truly rational, the latter because it dominates what it seeks to cognise and the former because in striving for novelty it forfeits all possibility of accumulating knowledge. If science should escape the aspects of it that leads to domination it would have to grant more space to situations of concept formation and this is important to remember when discussing the methodological consequences of 'negative dialectics' in Chapters 2 and 3.

Another issue that can be revisited in the light of the dual axis conception of language was the discussion of Adorno's style of writing raised at the beginning of this chapter. It follows from the account of conceptuality given above that only by reorienting our attention towards the object, towards our intransitive understanding of the situation, is it possible to grasp those elements of the object that are 'non-identical' to the concept. This reorientation must proceed by giving primacy to those aspects of language that are closest to its material axis: its *expressive* features. Because our ordinary language practices overlook the 'non-identical', since they seek only to relate the object to what we already know, Adorno aims to provide us with an intransitive understanding of what he analyses. He does so by utilising language to its limits (i.e. expressively), thereby exceeding what are normally considered to be scientific or 'objective' descriptions of a situation or object.



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Let me try to summarise what we have discovered so far: in Adorno's view history can best be described as a process of rationalisation and disenchantment which renders traditional views and beliefs problematic. This has tremendous positive consequences, since it helps eliminate illegitimate authorities and mythological views of the world that prevent us from creating a more rational society. However, the process of disenchantment not only influences our beliefs. At the same time, it affects our language practices and conceptuality as such and through this our ability to have certain experiences. In other words, the historical development has a great impact on epistemological issues. By trying to eliminate everything subjective, science and enlightenment disavow their dependency on those (subjective) expressions that underlie our intransitive understanding and the reflective judgements that help us construe scientific concepts in the first place. The disenchantment of language thus leads to a reduction of our experience, because it makes us continually overlook that in the object which is 'non-identical' to the concepts we already possess rather than form new concepts that might more adequately describe or explain a given phenomenon. Although this interpretation of *Negative Dialectics* offers a different impression of Adorno than the traditional readings, there are still a range of questions that need to be asked as a consequence of this: 1) We must find out whether, and how, according to Adorno, we can circumvent the negative consequences of the disenchantment of language, i.e. whether it is possible to use concepts without suppressing the 'non-identical' (i.e. without dominating the object). 2) If so, does this mean that Adorno thinks he has found some kind of Archimedean point from which it would be possible to grasp what things are like 'in-themselves'? If this is indeed the case, Adorno might be accused of returning to an untenable metaphysical position that can no longer be accepted in our 'post-metaphysical' world. 3) Finally, we still need to show how this dual axis conception of language can serve as a normative foundation for a critical theory of society. To be sure, we have already touched upon the necessity of continually recognising the conditioned character of our knowledge and practices (i.e. that enlightenment *depends* on myth and concepts *depend* on objects), but can this idea of dependency in itself be employed as a normative foundation for a critical theory of society? It is to these questions that we now turn.

### C. Aesthetic Experience and Mimesis: The Normative Foundation of 'Negative Dialectics'

Although Adorno did not develop a '*method*' that could systematically grant access to the 'non-identical', we may nevertheless discern a distinct pattern in his approach to the analysis of texts and 'material of experience'.<sup>13</sup> At the most abstract level it is possible to distinguish between *two* different patterns (for an explication of this see Buck-Morss 1977:96-121): one whose main goal is to reveal the inadequacy of (simple) concepts and the problems that arise from using them, a 'technique' that could be called *immanent criticism*. This is primarily a 'negative' approach and that for which Adorno is most famous. Another distinct pattern lies in Adorno's use of radical linguistic techniques such as aphorisms, in his paratactic form of presentation and use of subjective judgements. We might refer to this pattern

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<sup>13</sup> 'Material of experience' [erfarungsmateriale] is Bech's term for 'empirical data' and is useful in this connection because it reminds us that we are in fact dealing with bits of experience and not some neutral and objective data that have no connections whatsoever to the *lived experience* of people (for an elaboration of his thoughts on this see Bech 1999).

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in terms of *critical models*.<sup>14</sup> Only the second of these patterns can be said to be a direct attempt to 'rescue' the 'non-identical', while the purpose of the first was only to display the limitations of 'identity-thinking'. Let us briefly discuss these techniques and the presuppositions underlying them by considering 1) the negative approach referred to as 'immanent criticism' and 2) the positive approach to which we have given the generic term critical models. This will enable us to answer the first of the questions raised at the end of the last section (i.e. how is it possible to escape the consequences of disenchantment using concepts).

1) In immanent criticism *contradictions* assume a crucial function as the point of embarkation for developing a critique. According to Adorno, 'contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity' (ND:5), by which he means that it is our striving for identity and full determinacy which is the primary reason for our experience of contradictions. Contradictions will prevail 'as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality will be its measure of whatever is not identical with it' (Ibid:5-6). Thus, 'non-identity' manifests itself as that which is flawed, conditional and indeterminate, and therefore contradictory to the ideals of the (simple) concept and 'instrumental reason'.

Adorno's and Horkheimer's juxtaposition of myth and enlightenment, as sketched above, can also be seen as an attempt to reveal the inadequacies of the (simple) concepts of these phenomena: enlightened thought is not totally distinct from myth but in fact shares crucial features with the very way of thinking that it aims to overcome. Thus, it should be stressed time and again that in these polemical statements Adorno cannot be taken literally, but must instead be understood as pointing to the 'non-identity' between the concept of enlightenment and the actual process it seeks to grasp. This will enable us to see the inadequacy of the concepts we possess and seek to apply in a given situation. However, Horkheimer and Adorno do not attempt to describe what *would* count as an adequate description of these phenomena. For this reason, immanent critique is nothing more than *one* part of what constitutes the implicit methodology of 'negative dialectics', a part that 'was conceptual-analytical, breaking apart the phenomenon, isolating its elements, and mediating them by means of critical concepts' (Buck-Morss 1977:101-102). We will deal in Chapter 3 with the way in which immanent critique can be utilised for sociology. For now it is enough to understand that it is a (negative) 'method' that helps break through the reification of (simple) concepts and reveals how they are dominating.

2) Before turning our attention towards the second of the two patterns that can be discerned in Adorno's writings we need to understand the presuppositions that underlie it. If identity thinking is dominating because it is based on an instrumental relation between concept and object, the 'techniques' employed by Adorno suggest a 'mimetic' relation between subject and object. This different view of the subject/object relationship in turn implies a different 'type' of experience: 'unregimented experience'. However, on the grounds that it is most often found in our encounter with art I will henceforth term

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<sup>14</sup> I could have used a number of terms to designate this pattern, since Adorno used several terms interchangeable to describe a linguistic procedure that sought to circumvent the negative consequences of (simple) concepts (for an elaboration of this see Bernstein 2001:354). The term 'critical model' is used instead of that of 'constellation' because the latter refers to a specific type of technique (i.e. a way of relating concepts into a set of relations) that can be utilised in various ways for methodology (for instance by relating concepts but also by relating scales in surveys) while a 'critical model' instead refers to a 'constellation of constellations' (i.e. constellation refers to the *process* of constructing constellations while critical models refers to the *result* of this process and the interpretation of it that follows). I must stress, though, that these are *my* definitions not those of Adorno's.

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these experiences *'aesthetic'*. There is no reason, though, to think that this type of relation and experience belongs exclusively to the realm of art, although this is widely assumed in the interpretations of Adorno and partly account for the belief that he was ultra-pessimistic and therefore sought 'comfort' in the works of modernist art (for such a reading see for instance Honneth 1991:58-69). His interest in art should instead be interpreted as a response to the fact that it is only in the practices of art that aesthetic experiences are *systematically* available to us (for an elaboration of this claim see for instance Hammer 2000b; Bernstein 2001:429-451; Morris 2001:143-191; Sherratt 2002). However, in order to make this more comprehensive 'type' of experience available in all aspects of life, it was necessary to understand how it worked in this arena. In order to understand what is unique about aesthetic experiences we must pursue the discussion of art that was inaugurated above. It will be remembered that Adorno understood art as a continual process of 'concept formation'. This would seem to imply that works of art cannot be of much use except as a source of pleasure: since art continually renews itself and disregards tradition, the practice of it surely offers little opportunity to learn, whereas in science learning is of paramount importance. While this is to a certain extent correct, we must nevertheless bear in mind that Adorno also saw art as a form of knowledge:

"Certainly, art, as a form of knowledge, implies knowledge of reality, and there is no reality that is not social. Thus truth content and social content are mediated, although art's truth content transcends the knowledge of reality as what exists. Art becomes social knowledge by grasping the essence, not by endlessly talking about it, illustrating it, or somehow imitating it. Through its own figuration, art brings the essence into appearance in opposition to its own semblance" (AT:258).

If we disregard, for a moment, the categories of 'essence' and 'appearance' in their strict Kantian (or Hegelian) meaning and instead construe 'essence' to mean the 'non-identical', it becomes clear that (authentic) works of art grasp precisely that which is non-identical to the (simple) concepts of identity-thinking. An 'aesthetic experience' is thus an experience of the 'non-identical', which is why it is not possible to understand a work of art through our ordinary (simple) concepts (i.e. transitively):

"Man versteht ein Kunstwerk nicht, wenn man es in Begriffe übersetzt – tut man einfach das, so ist es vorweg mißverstanden -, sondern sobald man in seiner immanenten Bewegung darin ist; fast möchte man sagen, sobald es vom Ohr seiner je eigenen Logik nach nochmals komponiert, vom Auge gemalt, vom sprachlichen Sensorium mitgesprochen wird" (Adorno 1965:138).

In order to grasp the 'logic' of the work of art it is therefore necessary to 'immerse' oneself in the 'movement immanent to the artwork' by 'recomposing' or 'repainting' it with the senses or, in other words, by *imitating* it. In order truly to understand a work of art (i.e. to grasp the 'non-identical') the subject cannot just passively immerse herself in it, but must actively try to *imitate* it, thereby 'arousing' some kind of reaction within herself. This process of imitation is what Adorno calls *mimesis*, a term that he uses to refer to a more comprehensive type of rationality (compared to instrumental rationality). Because *mimesis* is founded on our ability to imitate and express the object ('work of art') it is still tied to our language practices: 'It is precisely in this way that Adorno's use of the subject-object paradigm puts language itself in a different light than that at work in the Habermasian paradigm of communicative rationality. His is a *linguistic* but not a communicative rationality' (Nicholson 1997:9-10, my emphasis). Thus, Habermas is right to attribute great significance to Adorno's concept of *mimesis*, and he is indeed right to claim that he cannot provide us with a *theory* of *mimesis*, since, according to

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Adorno's own premises, this would be identitarian. However, this does not mean that it is not possible to reconstruct Adorno's own attempt to do this, and to outline a *critical* conception of what rationality would be like if it were truly rational (i.e. if it were to make use of the potential inherent in contemporary society). While this explication of 'aesthetic experiences' sheds light on certain aspects that would need to be borne in mind when designing an approach that can take advantage of this more emphatic type of experience, we need to look in more detail at the contribution of the subject in this act of 'mimesis'. How, for instance, can the subject be active in this relationship without being dominating? This question needs to be answered before we can discuss the pattern of critical models in more detail.

A mimetic relationship between subject and object would be one that 'granted primacy to the object'. At the same time, however, it demands an effort on the part of the subject, so the relationship is not merely passive. The precondition for 'mimesis' and 'aesthetic experience' in general is what Adorno calls '*exact fantasy*':

"An exact fantasy; fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate. If the idea of philosophic interpretation which I tried to develop for you is valid, then it can be expressed as the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question" (AoP:131).

By combining 'fantasy' and 'exactitude' (i.e. subjective and objective, active and passive) a *dialectical process* is put into action where elements from the imagination are matched against the features of the object, transforming the immediate experience of the object into something that can provide the subject with cognitive knowledge of it, even if this knowledge cannot be (reductively) 'identified'. It might seem that this 'exact fantasy' is nothing but unconstrained subjective projection which bears no relation to reality, and is therefore either mythological or dominating. In fact, in Adorno's view, the opposite is true: without 'exact fantasy' it would not be possible to achieve objectivity:

"The more the observer adds to the process, the greater the energy with which he penetrates the artwork, the more he then becomes aware of objectivity from within. He takes part in objectivity when his energy, even that of his misguided subjective 'projection', extinguishes itself in the artwork. The subjective detour may totally miss the mark, but without the detour no objectivity becomes evident" (AT:175).

This claim is less strange than it seems at first sight, if we bear in mind the distinction between transitive and intransitive understanding sketched above. For Wittgenstein the paradigmatic situation of intransitive understanding is that in which one comes to understand works of art. This cannot be done by 'translating the artwork into concepts', but must proceed mimetically by 'granting primacy to the object' thereby creating a 'spontaneous and criterialess' (intransitive) understanding of the work of art. Since authentic works of art are by definition radically new it is impossible to understand them exclusively by (passively) employing the concepts we already possess, for this would amount simply to 'identifying' the work of art and thereby passing over the 'non-identical' (i.e. that which is radically new and unique). We should thus see intransitive understanding and reflective judgements as exemplary instances of what Adorno calls mimesis. Without the ability to (actively) imitate the work of art, thereby gaining knowledge of the structure and 'logic' inherent in it, it is impossible to understand it, and this

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holds true for all other situations in which we do not yet have an adequate concept that covers the situation. The reason that a 'subjective detour' is no hindrance to achieving objectivity is that the process of realising that one was wrong is just as much a way of dispelling myths (or overcoming illusions) as realising that one is right. Furthermore, a precondition for 'granting primacy to the object' is a respect for its Otherness and for its distance from us (and our concepts), which can easily be achieved when one comes to realise that a certain description is inadequate (or a mere projection). Instead of *forming* the object, 'by projecting onto experience [the subject's] own *a priori* forms and categories', the mimetic relationship implies a *transformation* of the object that 'lets the object take the lead' (Buck-Morss 1977:88). These considerations constitute the background for Adorno's idea of 'aesthetic experiences' and 'mimesis' and for his view that the relation between subject and object may be thought of as non-dominating. However, if 'aesthetic experiences' are to be relevant to anything outside the sphere of art, for instance sociology, it must be possible to pass these experiences on to others. This is where the second of the patterns discerned in Adorno's writings comes into the picture.

In order to examine this we will need to discuss Adorno's use of parataxis, constellations and aphorisms and the priority he gives to essay writing over more systematic ways of presenting one's points. All of these forms of presentation should be seen as attempts to transmit 'aesthetic experiences' using (simple) concepts to their limits. Essays are exemplary 'forms' of presentation that 'do justice to the consciousness of non-identity' (Adorno 2000a:98) because they renounce any claim to totality or closure. Because of its length an essay can *never* claim to explicate a situation or event in full, and it therefore challenges the ideal of determinacy prevalent in most science today.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the essay posits no first principles or methodological rules for its engagement in substantive issues, and in this sense it reorganises the historical character of these (for an account of Adorno's use of essays see Jarvis 1998:137-140). While this explains why the essay form is crucial to 'negative dialectics' it does not say anything about how such essays should be composed. In order to shed light on this we need to examine the other aspects of Adorno's style mentioned above.

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<sup>15</sup> The ideal of determinacy is problematic because it is the linguistic equivalence to the idea of science's and enlightenment's absolute independence *vis a vis* their Other (i.e. myth and metaphysics). Adorno models his critique of conceptuality on his critique of Kant's distinction between the 'empirical' and 'transcendental I'. Like Habermas, Kant conceives of reason and rationality as that which 'raises us out of nature', since through these phenomena human beings ascribe (subjective) meaning and value to the natural world. In other words, without human beings there would be no meaning and no values. However, reason and rationality can be understood only as a sophisticated version of our drive towards self-preservation (which is why Habermas conceives of morality as a 'safety device', see Habermas 1990:199). What we consider to be independent of nature and constitutive of our values and meaning, in other words, is itself an outgrowth of nature. This makes the claim of independence problematic and ultimately self-defeating. In the case of conceptuality, according to Adorno, determinacy is the equivalent of independence. By striving to be completely determinate, (i.e. unambiguous), wholly transparent and essentially unchanging, conceptuality aims to become independent of the world it seeks to capture, since only by being independent could the description of the world be truly neutral and objective. If it is dependent on the objects being conceptualised, and the experiences on which it is built, the concept must necessarily differ according to the perspective of the perceiving subject. However, as Kant notes 'thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind' (Kant 1995:93). From this it follows that concepts which do not rely on some kind of content derived from our experiences of and engagement with the world are necessarily empty. For Adorno, it is impossible to imagine concepts that were completely empty; the notion of thoughts without content is altogether unintelligible (Jarvis 1998:148-174). For this reason determinacy and independence share the same conceptual presuppositions as myth and enlightenment: they are founded on the principle of immanence (for an elaboration of the convergence of determinacy and independence see Bernstein 2001:212-224).

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Another device that Adorno often employs is to construct a *constellation* of concepts. Adorno was inspired here by his friend Walter Benjamin, eleven years his senior, who had introduced it in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (for Benjamin's original idea of constellations see his Epistemo-Critical prologue in the above-mentioned book, Benjamin 1998:27-56). In creating such constellations, Adorno seeks to relate different concepts to each other by showing the way in which they immanently refer to something outside themselves. The constellation is 'centred around a thing' and aims to 'represent from without what the concept has cut away within' (ND:162). By illuminating the inadequacy of any *one* of the concepts entered into the constellation, and by placing them in relation to each other, it is possible to gain an understanding of what 'the concept has cut away within': i.e. the 'non-identical', even if this can be understood only 'intransitively'. Closely connected to the idea of constellations is Adorno's use of a paratactical form of presentation:

"It is interesting that in working there obtrudes from the *content* various implications for the form that I long expected but that now astonish me. It is simply that from my theorem that there is no philosophical first principle, it now also results that one cannot build an argumentative structure that follows the usual progressive succession of steps, but rather that one must assemble the whole out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight and concentrically arranged all on the same level; their constellation, not their succession, must yield the idea...The book (*Aesthetic Theory*, CH.) must, so to speak, be written in equally weighted, paratactical parts that are arranged around a midpoint that they express through their constellation" (Adorno cited in Tiedemann & Adorno 1997:364).

In the correspondence cited above Adorno explicitly deals with the difficulties he encountered when trying to complete *Aesthetic Theory*. If he was to be consistent with the consequences of his own thought, it was necessary to construct the book itself as a constellation (or in my terminology a critical model), without indicating the beginning of the book. At the same time no information was to be given on the relationship between the different parts of the constellation. Instead, the experiencing subject (the reader of the text), by 'granting primacy to the object', was supposed to construct a relation between the concepts. For Adorno, 'true knowledge' demanded that the reader actively employ her 'exact fantasy' in order to grasp the immanent logic of the relationship between the elements in the critical model.

It may be difficult to see how these rather abstract ideas on how to rescue the 'non-identical', taken solely from Adorno's philosophical works, could ever be utilised in sociological research practices. However, even though the idea of critical models may seem far removed from the practice of empirical research, Adorno himself invented ways to utilise by using scales in surveys that resembled a constellation and by constructing 'historical images' when analysing cultural artefacts. Before turning to an examination of how these 'techniques' could be transferred to sociology we need to answer the two remaining questions that were sketched in the preceding part of this chapter.

#### 'Negative Dialectics' as an Archimedean Point? On Adorno's Concept of Truth

Adorno's reference to Kantian and Hegelian terms such as 'essence' and 'appearance' and his idea of the 'truth content' of works of art appear to suggest that he regards himself as having found an Archimedean point from which it would be possible to grasp what things are like 'in-themselves'. If this is the case it may be difficult to see how a reconstructed version of Adorno's critical theory of society

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would be an improvement over the Habermasian version because it would entail a hopelessly outdated philosophical framework. In order to circumvent this charge we need to discuss what Adorno's insistence on the 'primacy of the object' amounts to and how we can understand this in relation to his reference to the distinction between essence and appearance, without succumbing to an outdated philosophical framework.

Although Adorno was highly critical of Kant's attempt to ground epistemology in a set of *a priori* 'rules' that govern our way of experiencing and relating to the natural world, he was also in many respects greatly influenced by Kant's thinking. His dialectical view of the relation between mind and world could in fact be seen as an attempt to elaborate on Kant's famous dictum that: 'Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind' (Kant 1995:93) (for a discussion of Adorno's attempt to reunite concepts and intuitions, see Hammer 2000b; Bernstein 2001:287-301). What Kant tells us here is that concepts (thoughts) are empty without reference to external reality (content) and that pure sense perception (intuition) is unintelligible (blind) without the concepts that structure and relate these perceptions to our stock of knowledge. While this is exactly what Adorno seeks to tell us in *Negative Dialectics* he is not convinced that Kant himself fulfils his task, because by radically separating the analysis of understanding and intuition he makes it impossible to reunite these two intertwined elements of our thinking (for an elaboration of this point, see Jarvis 1998:153-165). When Adorno protests against the separation of the logical and the material axes of language, he is in fact seeking to reconnect concepts and intuition, categories that became disconnected as a consequence of the disenchantment of the world (and language). His critique of idealism and naïve realism could therefore also be seen as a critique of approaches that grant primacy to concepts and intuitions respectively: both extremes offer examples of what Adorno calls 'identity-thinking'.<sup>16</sup>

Adorno's view of reality might be called *dialectical materialism*. In his proposed view of epistemology and ontology, he insists that reality exists independently of our conceptions of it, but that we cannot (yet?) grasp the world as it is in itself, that is to say, we cannot have unmediated access to reality even though our very concepts depend on the objects they seek to grasp (for an elaboration of this see HTS:53-71). However, in so far as human beings are part of the natural world, our concepts are also 'natural' phenomena. This 'mediatedness' should not therefore be seen as the major problem that it was often made out to be in positivist epistemologies. The idea that subjectivity as such distorts our view of the (natural) world is possible only if subjects are thought to *dominate* the objects conceived. Thus, the idea that subjectivity necessarily entails distortion is itself an anthropomorphic view (i.e. it is mythological). If our subjectivity were instead thought of as conditioned by and dependent on the natural world, we could acknowledge the *objectivity* of subjectivity. It is thus not possible to have any unmediated access to reality as it is in itself, and naïve realism was wrong to believe in this. Whatever objectively exists cannot be given directly to us without being mediated by language and concepts. This does not mean, however, that objectivity can be given a 'residual definition' as 'that which remains

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<sup>16</sup> In this light it is possible to understand why, in Adorno's view, 'communicative rationality' could never be more than a sophisticated version of instrumental reason: the radical separation between nature and sociality in Habermas' theory 'mistakes a contingent distance between thought and world...for a metaphysical and necessary one; but by doing so, he ironically remains a representative of precisely that "identitarian thinking" which Adorno aims to overcome' (Hammer 2000b:73). For Habermas, concepts (thought/sociality) and world (intuition/nature) are forever separated with no hope (or indeed no need) for them to be reconnected.

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given after subjective appendages have been subtracted' (ND:187). Thus for Adorno subjectivity is not supreme; it cannot exist without objectivity because it is itself unthinkable without being an object. At the same time, however, objectivity needs a subject in order to be objective, and it is this *dialectical* movement that is the 'starting point' for Adorno.

In other words, Adorno is *not* arguing for the possibility of grasping some kind of transhistorical *essence* of every phenomenon by letting art practices govern our scientific approach. However, he does believe that art practices point to the possibility of a *bound* moment of unification between subject and object (what Sherratt terms 'loss of self' or 'absorption', see Sherratt 2002:169-180), that is, to the possibility of knowing what the 'essence' of a phenomenon is in a *particular situation*, where the object makes certain claims on us. When Adorno writes that 'mediation of the object means that it must not be statically, dogmatically hypostatized but can be known only as it entwines with subjectivity' (ND:186) or when he states that 'essence can no longer be hypostatized as the pure, spiritual being-in-itself' (ND:167) he is in fact refuting the Kantian idea of 'essence' as something transhistorical. This has profound consequences for Adorno's concept of truth and its relation to rationality: because we could never hope for complete correspondence between concept and object (i.e. the ideal of a correspondence theory of truth) since this would entail a completely static world, we must instead redefine truth as being 'the (continual) movement of overcoming illusion', the dispelling of what is (or has become) illusory at the present time.<sup>17</sup> In other words, neither truth nor illusion can be thought of as something transhistorical, since truth is the *process* of overcoming illusions and illusions are conceptions of a situation that we have come to recognise as no longer adequate. In this way, truth (as the process of overcoming illusions) is bound to rationality and its aim of dispelling myths. However, truth is equally connected with error: in order to appreciate our current knowledge, what we think of as the truth at the present moment, we need to be aware of the process by which this knowledge has been gained, be aware of the struggle and suffering that is entailed in overcoming error and illusion, and that is therefore bound up with the truth. If we do not recognise this, our current knowledge will be of no value to us except as a means for the further production of knowledge, since our knowledge is necessarily transitory (for an elaboration of this see HTS:36-42). In this way knowledge is bound up with the history of its becoming. However, it is also bound up with the future: if we remember that, for Adorno, concepts must always be *critical*, it will be clear that 'the idea of a scientific truth cannot be split off from that of a true society' (ItPD:27). In other words, the aim of seeking knowledge is to 'overcome illusions' in a way that creates the foundation for a better future, and this can be done only by comparing the existing situation with a possible situation in the future. This also helps shed light on some rather cryptic passages from Adorno's work, such as the following passage from his inaugural lecture:

"Authentic philosophic interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time...so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less

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<sup>17</sup> It follows from the discussion of Adorno's critique of communication, as sketched above, that he could neither support a consensus theory of truth such as the one proposed by Habermas prior to his recently published epistemological work *Truth and Justification*. An agreement among subjects about the properties of an object cannot count as a criterion of truth for Adorno, because this idea disregards the importance of those parts of the object which are 'non-identical' to the subjects' current conceptual apparatus.



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astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears" (AoP:127).

What Adorno is saying here is that we should not try to seek the truth about some ahistorical 'thing-in-itself', but instead try to grasp 'the claim of the object' being studied in the present, *contextually-dependent* situation. Truth (what Adorno calls 'meaning' in this passage) is thus not to be found hidden in the object, but is what 'suddenly lights up' when a prior understanding of a situation is found to be illusory. That it disappears again only means that this newly-gained knowledge becomes part of the conceptual apparatus that we use to understand a situation such as that which we have just experienced. That this reservoir of knowledge is not itself 'the Truth' has to do with the fact that, for Adorno, truth is the process of overcoming illusions (of 'bringing elements into changing constellations until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer'), not some (static) representation of the state of affairs (which would be inadequate because the world is continually changing).

In other words, Adorno is not arguing for the idea that 'negative dialectics' is an Archimedean point that grants privileged access to the truth, but is instead refuting the very idea of such an Archimedean point. The existence of such a point would imply that it was possible to reach a final correspondence between concept and object, a possibility ruled out by the transitory nature of all being. Truth must instead be conceptualised as always bound to a particular situation, in which an effort is made to reveal the illusory nature of what was previously taken for granted. This makes Adorno's concept of truth as process quite unique and in any case very different from the traditional theories of truth offered in accounts of epistemology. It should be clear from the discussion that even if his concept of truth is radically different from that of, for instance, Habermas it does not rely on metaphysical categories such as 'essence' or 'appearance' in their traditional senses. It remains to be seen, however, whether Adorno's altered conception of truth can be employed fruitfully in methodological discussions connected to sociology.

#### **An Ethics of Dependence: Normativity and 'Primacy of the Object'**

Before turning to a discussion of the consequences of Adorno's philosophical thought for sociological methodology it will be fruitful to contrast his position, and the normative foundation on which it is based, with the themes put forward by Habermas. One of the central claims in Habermas' criticism of Adorno was that the latter allegedly lacked any normative foundation on which to ground a critical theory of society. Habermas solved this problem by appealing to the rules of communication underlying our everyday use of language as a mean for coordinating action. In Adorno's view this approach is problematic because it over-emphasises only one dimension of language, namely that of communication, while failing to realise its own dependency on the expressive aspects of language (for an account that suggests that communicative rationality is an instant of 'instrumental reason' see Bernstein 1995; 2001; Morris 2001). Instead of grounding our critique in a communicative rationality and the experience of reaching understanding, we should ground it in the existence of 'mimetic rationality' (i.e. mimetic relations between subjects and objects), and in what Adorno thinks of as 'aesthetic experiences'. We have already touched upon the preconditions for this type of relationship between subject and object. However, it may be fruitful to examine what this implies for the subject so

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as to contrast it further with Habermas' ideal situation of reaching understanding. In Sherratt's words this type of experience can best be understood as an 'absorption' and 'loss of self'. On this she writes:

"...in absorption the 'loss of self' means that the conceptual faculties of the mind are not deployed at all (i.e. those faculties connected to *simple* concepts, CH)...In the experience of 'loss of self' the ego as structure is diminished. The ego as structure provided the boundary around self. Therefore, it is the boundary around the self that is lost. The boundary around the self...provided the demarcation between self and that which is distinct from the self...With its loss, therefore, comes a momentary loss of the Subject's sense of self...Consider that the loss of the boundary around the self means that the Subject is no longer *separated* from the work of art. Adorno describes this loss of separation as resulting in an 'immersion' of the Subject into the work of art...In losing the boundary that separates him from the work of art the Subject becomes 'united' with it." (Sherratt 2002:166-167).

It is this 'immersion' and potential 'unification' between Subject and Object that constitutes the normative foundation for Adorno; (this is the 'potential agreement between people and things' he referred to, in the passage cited in the Introduction, when criticising the notion of communication). This 'loss of self' will remind the subject of the fact that she is not alone, that her understanding of the situation depends on the object that she is seeking to understand.

The acknowledgement of a *distance* between subject and object (an awareness of the object's independence and our interdependence) is a precondition for mimetic rationality. This idea of distance may shed light on what Adorno means when he argues, in the preface to *Negative Dialectics*, for the need to give 'the Copernican revolution an axial turn' (ND:xx). Kant is often seen as the philosopher who brought the Copernican revolution from the natural sciences into philosophy and the social sciences. In other words, it was he who finally put human beings, rather than God, at the centre of philosophy. However, this decentring of subjectivity, in which it becomes clear that there is not only one world view but a whole range of world views, requires a further axial turn or what could be called a *second decentring of subjectivity*. It is not enough to be aware that the worldview of God, the king, my parents, or whatever other authority, is not the only one, i.e. it is not sufficient to know that I am not the only *subject* in the world. What is needed is an awareness of the fact that human beings are not the only *objects* in the world and that as objects we are dependent on other objects. This 'axial turn' can come to the fore in 'aesthetic experiences' where there is a felt distance between subject and object (for a further explication of this distance see Morris 2001:143-191; Sherratt 2002:151-188). The recognition of our dependence on that which is external to us (for instance nature) and of the transitory character of everything existing should give rise to what could be called a 'principle of humility' or a 'principle of caution': Only by recognising our dependency (thus being humble), only by acknowledging the distance between our perspective and that which is being conceptualised (thus being cautious), and only by realising the partial character of our knowledge can we heed the claims of the 'non-identical'. In this sense it could be argued that 'the subsumption of non-identity' is the Adornian equivalent to Habermas' idea of the 'colonisation of the lifeworld', because 'non-identity' is that which is overlooked and dominated by the hegemonic practices of modern society.

However, even if 'mimesis' and 'aesthetic experiences' do provide a rudimentary account of what could count as a new normative foundation for a critical theory of society, it is not clear why it would have the same force as Habermas' idea of communicative rationality. The latter is implicitly invoked in our everyday language use and is thus inescapable, whereas 'mimesis' and 'aesthetic experience' are

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involved mostly in the reception of works of art, which could hardly be considered an everyday act. As should be clear from the discussion of conceptuality above, however, mimetic relations between subject and object are intrinsic to situations where we need to form new concepts. Another example related more clearly to sociological questions could be that of 'critical situations' in which previous routines become inadequate because of radical changes. In other words, it is possible to find everyday (critical) situations of (for instance) learning in which mimetic relations come to the fore, even if they occur more rarely than those involving communicative action. This is not the place, however, to defend this notion of mimetic rationality in any detail (that would be the subject of a completely different thesis). My aim here has been only to provide a plausible explanation for the fact that Adorno *does* offer an alternative normative foundation for a critical theory of society that is not as impotent and impractical as has often been argued. The question as to how this new type of rationality can be used in the development of a new methodology for sociology will be taken up in Chapter 3.

### Concluding Remarks

Although it is not an easy task to elaborate on Adorno's metaphilosophical and epistemological considerations, since he refrained from giving them any kind of systematic presentation in his works, his main ideas, and the ways in which they differ from other accounts (particularly that offered by Habermas) should be clear from this chapter. Adorno's most crucial idea is of course his claim that the disenchantment of the world not only constitutes a 'loss of meaning', but that it essentially prevents us from engaging in certain relations with objects (and therefore other subjects), ultimately resulting in what Benjamin once called 'the poverty of experience' (Benjamin 1999b). It follows from this reduction of experience that all sciences involving empirical research are affected, since they depend on their ability to gather pieces of experience that can be analysed to reveal crucial insights into the constitution of society. If our experience is systematically reduced by societal mechanisms inherent in our language use, sociology must proceed by acknowledging this and finding ways to circumvent this reduction. In order to sketch how this can be done through the use of 'negative dialectics', it will be fruitful to adopt a two-fold procedure that draws upon the elaboration of immanent criticism and critical models sketches above: first, we will use an entirely 'negative' approach, aiming to reveal the inadequacies of competing sociological methodologies that do not explicitly take into account the disenchantment of language. This is the task of Chapter 2, where I look at Adorno's critique of Karl Popper's version of positivism and Glaser & Strauss' Grounded Theory approach. In the light of this critique it will be easier, in Chapter 3, positively to reconstruct Adorno's Social Physiognomic approach to sociological research, not least because it creates a frame of reference that will help structure our reconstruction in a better way.

## Chapter 2

### Adorno's 'Positivist Disputes'

In order to gain a better understanding of what Adorno can offer an empirically founded sociology, I will begin by offering a (partly immanent) critique of two of the most influential sociological methodologies in contemporary sociology. It will be necessary to sketch how the metaphilosophical and epistemological framework presented in the last chapter will affect the decisions to be taken when deciding which research design to employ in a given situation. What criticisms can we make of already existing methodologies in the light of Adorno's dialectical materialism, his critical 'theory' of language and 'aesthetic' experience and his ideas of critical model and immanent critique? These are some of the questions I will seek to answer in this chapter. My starting point will be two paradigmatic sociological methodologies: the classical hypothetical-deductive approach as outlined by Karl R. Popper, and the equally classic inductive approach for which Glaser & Strauss coined the term Grounded Theory (GT). In the light not only of Adorno's 'negative dialectics', but of his critical sociological essays and the actual empirical studies he conducted, these approaches will be compared and criticised in order to flesh out which aspects of these methodologies can be used and which have to be discarded. On the basis of this critical comparison, I will aim in Chapter 3 to provide an outline of Social Physiognomics. This critique and comparison will be structured around four distinct methodological issues<sup>18</sup>:

1. What counts as sociological knowledge?
2. What types of explanation and theory can be accepted as scientific?
3. What kind of logic should be employed in sociological investigation?
4. To what purposes should sociological knowledge be put?

By focusing on these issues it will be easier to discern the differences and similarities between Adorno's methodology and the two alternatives. The methodologies are so distinct that they can be compared without too much repetition. I will begin (A) by revisiting Adorno's critique of positivism as presented in the renowned 'Positivist Dispute in German Sociology'. Crucial to this critique are his perception of the relation between empirical 'facts' and sociological theory, the role of falsification in the validation of knowledge and the positivist notion of objectivity. In regard to all these issues Popper succumbs to a form of 'identity-thinking'. By shifting the focus from a deductive approach to empirical sociology towards Glaser & Strauss' primarily inductive approach, we will be able to examine a new set of issues (B): for instance the relationship between substantive and formal theory, the need for mediation or 'second reflection', and sociological theory considered as a process. Although GT in several respects live up to the ideals implicit in 'negative dialectics' there are also crucial issues where they differ. Once we have completed this comparison, it will be possible to see in what way the alternatives to Social Physiognomics fail to take into account the disenchantment of language and the reduction of experience that follow from that. At the same time, we will be able to discern a first (negative) outline of what distinguishes the Adornian approach from others and what makes his sociological

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<sup>18</sup> These issues have been adapted from Norma Romm's study of Marxism and Positivism (Romm 1991:viii) and Neumann's introduction to *Social Research Methods* (Neumann 2000:63-88).

methodology unique and original. For now, let us turn to an analysis of which aspects of positivism and Grounded Theory respectively are in need of revision and which aspects can be seen to converge with Adorno's metaphilosophical framework.

### **A. The Subjectivity of Positivist Objectivity: Adorno's Criticism of Popper**

Apart from his involvement in the research project, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno is probably best known as a sociologist for what was subsequently called 'the positivist dispute in German sociology'. The famous dispute was formed around a symposium held in 1961 in which both Karl R. Popper and Theodor W. Adorno participated. It has often been emphasised that the term 'dispute' in this connection is quite misleading: The original symposium consisted of two papers presented respectively by Popper and Adorno, neither of which was related to the other in any emphatic sense. Several years later the papers were published in a single volume together with essays by Hans Albert and Jürgen Habermas and a long introduction to the volume by Adorno, in which he gave a retrospective critique of Popper's position (for a more extensive discussion of the thoughts behind the seminar and the misunderstandings surrounding it see for instance Frisby 1972; 1976; Dahrendorf 1976; Popper 1976a; D'Amico 1994; Wiggershaus 1994:566-582). Popper was highly dissatisfied with the resulting book which in his view rendered the supposed 'dispute' completely unintelligible:

"There is no answer to the question of how the book got a title which quite wrongly indicates that the opinions of some 'positivists' are discussed in the book...What is the result? My twenty-seven theses, intended to start a discussion...are nowhere seriously taken up in this longish book – not a single one of them, although one or other passage from my address is mentioned here or there, usually out of context, to illustrate my 'positivism'...Thus no reader would suspect, and no reviewer did suspect, what I suspect as being the truth of the matter. It is that my opponents literally did not know how to criticize rationally my twenty-seven theses" (Popper 1976a:290-291).

Popper is certainly right about the bizarre outcome of the so called 'dispute', which disappointed the original initiator of the symposium, Ralf Dahrendorf, since 'at times', he writes, 'it could indeed have appeared, astonishingly enough, as if Popper and Adorno were in agreement' (Dahrendorf 1976:123-124). Paradoxically, none of the participants in the 'dispute' identified with the term 'positivism' and instead used it as a derogatory label from which they all sought to distance themselves. However, although there are indeed certain similarities between Popper and Adorno, it is worth emphasising the major points on which they diverged. Although Adorno's contributions to the 'dispute' are highly polemical and ironic, Popper never tries to take seriously the claims that he raises; at certain points it even seems as if Popper is ridiculing Adorno for his form of presentation:

"Thus arose the cult of un-understandability, the cult of impressive and high-sounding language. This was intensified by the (for laymen) impenetrable and impressive formalism of mathematics. I suggest that in some of the more ambitious social sciences and philosophies, and especially in Germany, the traditional game...is to state the utmost trivialities in high-sounding language...I will give a brief example from the writings of Professor Adorno...On the left I give the original German text...and on the right a paraphrase into simple English of what seems to have been asserted...the theory of social wholes developed here has been presented and developed, sometimes better and sometimes worse, by countless philosophers and sociologists. I do not assert that it is mistaken. I only assert the complete triviality of its content. Of course Adorno's *presentation* is very far from trivial" (Popper 1976a:294-297).

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### Adorno's 'Positivist Disputes'

While it is completely true that the quotation presented in Popper's text is quite trivial, this does not apply to many of the other ideas that Adorno presented. At no point, however, does Popper try rationally to interrogate Adorno's claims. In fact, he commits twice over the very mistake that he accuses Adorno of, namely of quoting 'out of context' in order to 'illustrate' the mere 'triviality' of Adorno's thought. Fortunately, we are in a much better position than Popper because we have access to Adorno's other sociological works and have already explained his style of writing as a response to his diagnosis of modern societies. However, Adorno's unconventional view of presentation also has a profound influence on his ideal of sociological knowledge, as will become clear in the following section when we compare his ideal with Popper's.

#### The Ideology of Simplicity: On the Nature of Sociological Knowledge

According to Popper it is possible to distinguish between values that are related to science and are an intrinsic part of it and values that are 'extra-scientific' and which therefore ought to have no influence on scientific practices. Among the former he counts ideals such as 'fruitfulness', 'explanatory power', but also 'simplicity' and 'precision'. Scientific knowledge therefore must be formulated as simply and precisely, i.e. as unambiguously and consistently, as possible if it is to approach the 'regulative ideal of truth'. As should be clear from the discussion in Chapter 1, this ideal of simplicity is problematic in our disenchanted society. The ideals of simplicity and precision are ideals that are clearly connected to the logical axis of language (i.e. ideals of 'identity-thinking'). As Adorno notes:

"Similarly, directness and simplicity are not unquestionable ideals when the matter [Sache] is complex. The replies of common sense derive their categories to such an extent from that which immediately exists that they tend to strengthen its opacity instead of penetrating it. As far as the directness is concerned, the path along which one approaches knowledge can hardly be anticipated" (OLS:110).

This criticism should not be misunderstood: It is not the 'complexity' of the matter at hand *per se* that makes the ideal of simplicity questionable, because even if our conceptual apparatus were developed in more detail this would not solve the problem. Our knowledge of social reality cannot be reduced to a number of more or less interrelated statements that constitute a whole. The problem is of course connected to our current inability to grasp the (bounded) claims of social reality in which the 'non-identical' manifests itself in the form of a contradiction (i.e. precisely what adherents to the ideal of simplicity would seek to eradicate).

Simplicity, however, is not the only quality that Popper ascribes to sociological knowledge. For Popper this knowledge consists of theories of 'sociological laws' that are believed to exist between social phenomena and from which it is possible to formulate hypotheses that can be tested empirically. Sociological theory therefore should 'correspond to the facts' and strive to reach a state where 'things are as described by the proposition[s]' (Popper 1976b:99) that follow from the sociological theory. The ideal of truth thus relates to what could be termed a *correspondence theory of truth* even if this can never be more than a regulative ideal, because in practice it will never be possible to achieve such correspondence.

It will come as no surprise that Adorno does not agree with Popper on this issue either, since he regards the ideals that Popper puts forward as corresponding closely to what he termed 'identity-thinking'. Because of the disenchantment of language and experience we cannot at the present moment

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hope to achieve anything like a correspondence between 'facts' and 'theory' (and even if we could the idea of an ahistorical or static correspondence between theory and 'facts' is mistaken, because everything changes through the course of history). To stick solely to the 'facts' (and strive for identity between these and the theory) would result in what Adorno, at several points, terms 'duplication' [Verdoppelung]: "...then *scientific mirroring indeed remains a mere duplication*, the reified apperception of the hypostatized, thereby distorting the object through duplication itself. *It enchants that which is mediated into something immediate*" (SaER:75-76, my emphasis). The idea of 'duplication' cannot be understood without alluding to Alfred Schutz' distinction between the natural and the social sciences. For Schutz it was important to remember that the 'facts' of the social sciences are already *pre*-interpreted by the actors that contribute to the (re)production of particular social phenomena. The social scientist is thus trying to gain a *second order* understanding of the situation (i.e. an understanding of the understanding possessed by the actors involved, see Schutz 1973). Similarly we have to distinguish between reification and duplication (second order reification): if the experiences that the actors in a given situation possess already contain only *traces* of the materiality that ought to constitute our experience, and are therefore *reified*, it follows that by neglecting the effects of disenchantment on conceptuality and experience in the social sciences (e.g. its effects on the collecting of empirical data) we will end up reifying the reified experiences of actors in the social world. This *second order reification* is what Adorno refers to as 'duplication'.

The critique of 'duplication' can be reformulated at a more abstract level as a critique of the positivist ideal of objectivity. According to Adorno, the positivists' view 'can rightly be termed subjective' (ItPD:7) in two distinct senses. First of all, it is subjective in the sense that it operates with (subjective) 'hypotheses' and 'schemata' under which the empirical data must be subsumed, instead of analysing the features of the object (and hence gaining objectivity). By relying exclusively on already-existing concepts we become unable to grasp anything that is not consistent with the theories we currently hold. This prevents us from 'granting primacy to the object', as we must if we are to reach objectivity. In other words, the process of concept formation which ought to be central to all empirical sciences (i.e. sciences based on *experience*) is eschewed in favour of concept possession (cf. the discussion in Chapter 1). As a result, our *choice* of theory gains in importance, because it has great influence on the type of sociological knowledge that will be produced. However, if our knowledge of the social world differs according to the theories used to conceptualise it, this knowledge is merely *subjective* and dependent on our perspective, not an objective description of the world.

The second point on which Adorno finds Popper's approach to be subjective is in its sole reliance on human beings (subjects) as a source of (objective) knowledge. Rather than starting out with individual opinions, beliefs and modes of behaviour and treating these as objective properties of society, we should instead see them, according to Adorno, as being *expressions of society that are mediated by it*. Thus Adorno writes:

"My approach here, in contrast to prevailing sociological opinion, or rather technique, is far more radically sociological, in that I regard innumerable facts which empirical sociology attributes merely to individuals and then generalizes by including them in a statistical universe as social facts from the outset. In this way seemingly particular facts take on a far more general value than they appear to have at first sight" (ItS:75).

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Like Durkheim, Adorno sees society as more than the 'mere sum of the individuals': it is an objectivity *sui generis*. This means that we cannot take the merely subjective responses of people as constituting society itself. Society, instead, is that which manifests itself *through* these individual moments, for instance through the suicide rates of a given country. It is this societal totality which is the primary object of sociology in Adorno's formulation, and knowledge of the totality can never be attained by sticking to only 'one' of the facts through which it manifests itself, since these 'facts' themselves are mediated by the societal totality.

To sum up, we can conclude that, for Adorno, Popper's idea of what constitutes sociological knowledge is problematic on several counts. First of all, the ideals that Popper subscribes to clearly reinforce the negative consequences of the disenchantment of language instead of seeking to alleviate them. This helps bring about a 'second order reification', or what Adorno refers to as *duplication* in scientific thinking, which contributes to domination and inequality in society by reinforcing the status quo. Secondly, Adorno regards Popper's view of objectivity as being essentially subjective because it does not seek to grasp the object of research but only to subsume it under existing theories and hypotheses. In addition, it relies solely on the responses of individuals who are themselves mediated by society and are an expression of it. However, it is not only the nature of sociological knowledge that is problematic in the account of sociology given by Popper, since the types of explanation and theories involved are equally fraught with difficulty.

#### **The Limits of Causality: A Critique of the Positivist Mode of Explanation**

Sociological knowledge would not be fruitful if it consisted only of completely independent concepts that did not bear any relation to one another. In fact the purpose of sociology, according to Popper, is to unravel the *laws* of sociality and to establish with certainty the (causal) relations existing between social phenomena. In one of his 27 theses Popper makes the following point about causal explanations:

"A purely theoretical problem...always consists in the task of finding an explanation...of a fact or of a phenomenon or of a remarkable regularity or of a remarkable exception from a rule. That which we hope to explain can be called the explicandum...[T]he explanation...always consists of a theory, a deductive system, which permits us to explain the explicandum by connecting it logically with other facts (the so-called initial conditions). A completely explicit explanation always consists in pointing out the logical derivation (or the derivability) of the explicandum from the theory strengthened by some initial conditions" (Popper 1976b:100).

Sociological laws enable us logically to make predictions about the outcome of certain situations. These predictions are logically deduced from the premises of the theory and the 'initial conditions' in order to give the problem in question a scientific explanation.

As was the case with the ideal of simplicity discussed above, Adorno finds the idea of causal laws to be insufficient to constitute a sociological explanation. According to Adorno, 'causality can teach us what identity has done to nonidentity', because the idea of causality is 'the spell of dominated nature' (ND:269). In other words, the idea of causality is problematic because it adheres to the ideal of complete determinacy (i.e. to discover the fundamental laws of the world that would explain it without



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remainder) that is characteristic of 'identity-thinking'. On Adorno's critique of causality Bernstein writes:

"Adorno subjects the idea of nature as a realm of pure causal law-governedness to the same sort of critique as he subjects the idea of the pure will. The notion of law-governedness is modelled after identitarian reason. Actual causal episodes occur not in chains (X causes Y causes Z), but in causal contexts or fields, and can be singular. When so conceived, it becomes possible to perceive that causal necessity owes more to reason's self-understanding of order than to natural fact" (Bernstein 2001:255n20).

Thus, we cannot reduce the world and the knowledge about it to the existence of (a few) 'causal laws' that would explain everything because the positing of causal laws is our attempt at identifying the 'non-identical' properties of nature. In other words, the idea of causality enables us to identify the 'causal powers' of nature in order for us to control it thereby rendering the unknown less frightening. In relation to scientific explanations about society this is even more problematic, because by using the idea of laws society is considered to be something objective over which the individual members of society do not have any influence (i.e. the idea of causality contributes to duplication). This is not to say, however, that the idea of causality (and that objects has 'causal powers' in the Critical Realist sense of the word) is completely illusory for as Adorno says: 'Objectively, in a provocatively anti-Kantian sense, causality would be a relation between things-in-themselves insofar – and only insofar – as they are subjugated by the identity principle' (ND:269). This could be interpreted as stating that 'things-in-themselves' have 'causal powers' (because they have the ability to form relations between themselves) in the Critical Realist sense of the word. In other words, causality could not be reduced to causal chains (or 'conjunction of events'), but must instead be thought of as something that happens in contexts or fields (i.e. we come to experience causality as what is 'actual' in certain 'events' see Bhaskar 1998b) (for a discussion of Adorno's relation to Critical Realism see Engelskirchen 2004; Norrie 2004). Although Adorno far from would agree with all aspects of Critical Realism this discussion of causality can, nevertheless, serve as a starting point in Chapter 3 when discussing which types of explanation can be accepted by Social Physiognomics.

Another problematic feature of the positivist understanding of causality is its lack of connection to any concept of totality. Because positivism operates with hypotheses and concepts that are not necessarily linked to a theory of society, these concepts in themselves cannot provide an adequate explanation of our society. Adorno emphasises this very clearly in the quotation below:

"It emerges constantly and relatively quickly that attempts to explain [the work] climate by conditions in the factory concerned have something inadequate about them...the decisive factors point back to wage agreements, the wage agreements point back to the compromise situation between the employers' associations and the labour unions and finally to power relationships, and therefore to structural problems of society itself...[A]ll explanations of individual phenomena lead on much more quickly than is supposed to something resembling the social structure" (ItS:49).

Thus, Popper's notion that science consists of 'finding the explanation of a fact' is clearly problematic, since, as Adorno notes above, 'all explanations of individual phenomena lead on...to something resembling the social structure'. In other words an explanation that involves only the immediate relation between the facts of a given situation (for instance in the factory) would be inadequate, because these relations and facts all point beyond themselves towards the societal totality in which they exist.

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What is needed is thus not only a sociological theory that seeks to explain certain clearly demarcated areas of society, but a theory of society that enables us to connect the diverse findings of empirical sociology and give them their proper place within the societal totality. This point will be elaborated further below. Let me summarise this discussion of Popper's explanatory account: First of all, Adorno finds that Popper's view of causality contributes to the duplication of society thereby strengthening the opacity of the social world instead of penetrating beneath it. Second, without considering disparate facts that need to be explained in light of its place in society as a whole these explanations will have something inadequate about them. Adorno's critique of the failure to understand the importance of societal totality in sociological research leads on to a closely connected issue: Are there inherent limitations in the Popper's logic of science and the way in which he seeks to validate sociological knowledge that prevents him from generating knowledge of society?

#### The Demarcation and Validation of Science: Falsifying Falsification

Popper is perhaps most famous for rejecting the Logical Positivists' reliance on verification as the prime principle of science in favour of falsification. Popper uses the example of 'the black swan' as evidence of the inadequacy of verification as a criterion for distinguishing science from non-science: even if we had, until now, observed only white swans in nature, this could never be taken as a *logically* compelling proof that 'all swans are white'. Though our experience may tell us that this must be so, there is no reason in principle why a black swan should not exist. From this Popper concludes that 'there is no induction: we never argue from facts to theories, unless by way of refutation or falsification' (Popper 1976c:86). It follows that we cannot *verify* our theories of the world by grounding them in our experience of a certain regularity. Instead we must acknowledge that what demarcates science from metaphysics or other purely supernatural beliefs is the demand that scientific theories be falsifiable. We always start out with a certain understanding of the world (however inadequate), and at certain points our experiences of the world come into contradiction with this prior understanding, thus presenting us with a problem. The aim of science is to offer a solution to this problem so that we may come to understand the situation once more. In order to do this we develop certain theories (or hypotheses) that seek to explain the situation, and the implications of these theories are then submitted to a relentless critique (carried out by testing the theories according to generally accepted methods) in an effort to falsify them. If the falsification fails we cannot refute the theory and must instead accept it as a tentative solution to the problem; in this way the theory is 'corroborated'. We can secure the objectivity of (positivist) science therefore by sticking closely to the methods of science in our attempts to falsify hypotheses. It follows from this description that Popper's logic is purely deductive.

Popper's own critique of positivism meant that his own position was not affected to the same extent as that of the classic positivists by the immense critique of positivism that has influenced sociology since the beginning of the 1970s (see Carleheden 1999; Jacobsen 1999). However, this does not mean that Popper's approach is beyond criticism. If we accept Adorno's conclusion that 'all explanations of individual phenomena lead on...to something resembling the social structure' the idea of falsifying *singular* hypotheses become dubious. The reason for this becomes evident in the quotation from Adorno below:

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“But some thoughts and, in the last instance, the essential ones recoil from tests and yet they have a truth content – Popper even agrees with this. Probably no experiment could convincingly demonstrate the dependence of each social phenomenon on the totality for the whole which preforms the tangible phenomena can never itself be reduced to particular experimental arrangements” (OLS:113).

What is at stake here is that even if we succeed, through our empirical investigations, in falsifying any particular hypothesis, this will never amount to a falsification of the theory of society. Just as we cannot have knowledge of society by sticking solely to any *one* of the facts produced by empirical sociology, so we cannot falsify knowledge of society through such a procedure. Popper's objection to this would be that Adorno's idea of society as a totality is not susceptible to falsification, and is therefore metaphysics rather than science.

Popper's use of falsifiability as the 'demarcation criterion' for distinguishing science from metaphysics, however, is not beyond criticism either. As Dykes (2003) has noted, it is impossible to refute mathematics and logic; and because physics is inconceivable without these two disciplines it follows that physics too is impossible to falsify. Does this, then, mean that mathematics, logic and physics are non-science? Johansson (1975) has likewise noted that Popper's idea of falsification presupposes the *ceteris paribus* clause (i.e. that everything else that might influence the hypothesis being tested must remain constant and unchanged during the experiment). While this may be possible for experiments in closed systems, it is manifestly impossible to apply in the social sciences, since society is an 'open system' (for an elaboration of this see also Benton 1998; Bhaskar 1998a). Thus the 'demarcation criterion' that Popper employs is by no means self-evident, and the criticism that Adorno raises against it is not to be dismissed as pure metaphysics, for exactly the same reasons that logic and mathematics should not.

A final complaint about Popper's logic of science can be raised against his claim that it is the *methods of science* that vouch for its objectivity. Given the elaboration above this notion of objectivity is problematic: by sticking solely to already-existing methods and applying them to the empirical matter at hand (through deduction) without any regard for the object's particular qualities and unique features, we will only be reproducing the knowledge we already have of the object. Instead of letting the object determine the choice of methods and the concepts used to describe it, the research process covers only those aspects of the object that we already believe to be of importance, therefore contributing nothing essentially new to science. That this is indeed so can be seen from the fact that Popper dismissed all talk of the role of induction in producing knowledge. However, as Lipton has noted '[t]here is no reliable route to falsification that does not use induction' (Lipton 1996:43). If the refutation of hypotheses (deduction) contributes to our knowledge of the world, so, too, must induction, since the logic applied is the same (Dykes 2003). Although Popper cannot be accused of being positivist in the classical (Logical Positivist) sense of the word, there are nevertheless serious problems with his approach that cannot be dismissed – problems that Adorno already pointed to in his early critique of Popper. To sum up: First, falsification is problematic because it is impossible to falsify a variety of scientific ideas which are nevertheless considered scientific (most notably ideas found in logic and mathematics). Second, methods alone cannot vouch for the objectivity of our knowledge because it only reproduces our current knowledge (thus substituting concept formation for concept possession).

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While this critique questions the whole foundation of Popper's Critical Rationalist approach a final issue remains to be confronted: namely how the knowledge obtained through sociological research should be subsequently employed. It is to this issue that we turn now.

#### **Social Engineering and Administrative Science: The Uses of Sociological Knowledge**

As we have seen the goal of sociology is to identify (causal) laws that can help provide an accurate description of the world. This knowledge will make it possible to predict the outcome of different paths of action and therefore to decide the best means to a given end. In this vision of science sociology becomes a type of technology or 'social engineering': In line with this, Popper favours a 'piecemeal technological approach to social planning' where social change is gradually introduced by adjusting only small parts of society at a time. By doing this it is possible to 'monitor' the effects brought about by the change. The point of departure for these 'piecemeal changes' is the discovery of 'problems', i.e. experiences of the world that contradict what we would have expected to happen in a particular situation. Initially Adorno agrees that 'problems' constitute the point of departure for all sociological research, although he does not define them as narrowly as Popper does: 'for Popper a problem is something merely epistemological and for me, at the same time, it is something practical' (OLS:109). According to Popper scientific problems arise when our prior knowledge comes into contradiction with our experience of the world. The aim of science is thus to adjust our knowledge and come up with new solutions which will eliminate this contradiction. However, if we recall the discussion above such contradictions are not merely indications of an outdated understanding of a situation. They are also 'nonidentity under the aspect of identity' (ND:5), and so long as our concepts are disenchanting, it will be impossible to eliminate these contradictions. Thus, society itself is contradictory and the contradictions that arise between our theories and our experiences are *real*, not merely the result of a faulty conceptualisation of a particular situation or a bad sociological theory. This calls into question Popper's narrow definition of what constitutes a problem, since it presupposes that any problem must be resolvable if we follow the rules of deductive logic. Instead it must be recognised that 'the object of sociology itself, society...is a problem in an emphatic sense' (OLS:108). Falsification and criticism cannot therefore be limited to our *knowledge* of society but must extend to the *object* of sociology itself: the societal totality. 'The critical path is not merely formal but also material. If its concepts are to be true, critical sociology is, according to its own idea, necessarily also a critique of society' (OLS:114). In other words, sociology must always be normative and judge society in the light of the present situation and future possibilities.

This view gives rise to a further criticism of Popper mentioned briefly above: Only if society is seen as an object is it possible to derive the laws of its functioning and consider these to be final (although always fallible). For Adorno, however, society is not merely an object but also a subject, that is, it is produced and reproduced by human beings and as such is capable of alteration. To think of sociological theories as laws is therefore to reify the way our present society functions and to adhere to the status quo, no matter how unjust this society may be. For this reason, '[t]he idea of scientific truth cannot be split off from that of a true society' (ItPD:27). What Adorno means by this is that if society is essentially produced by human beings we cannot be satisfied with a theory of society that merely 'duplicates' it. This follows from his concept of truth, as discussed in Chapter 1: a description of society

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(and a critique of this description) is not enough because we only achieve truth when we use science to overcome beliefs that are (or have become illusory). In other words, truth considered as the process of overcoming illusions automatically helps create a better society ('true society') in which its potentials are more fully realised. Thus, the values Popper terms scientific are not wholly neutral but in fact help to reproduce the status quo, and in this sense they are just as political as those that are explicitly non-scientific. If we opt for a *radical* separation between 'ought' and 'is', we by implication endorse the type of society that already exist.

According to Adorno, Popper's *a priori* decision in favour of existing society can also be seen in respect to another issue that has already been dealt with in a different context above. I refer to the neglect of society as a totality, which also creates severe problems in relation to the definition of the problems that are the object of science in Popper's version of sociology:

"It is postulated that everything with which sociology legitimately ought to concern itself can be dissected into individual problems. If one interprets Popper's thesis in a strict sense then, despite its common sense which recommends it at a first glance, it becomes an obstructive censure upon scientific thought" (ItPD:41).

Once again Popper's failure to see the dependence of the individual parts of society on the societal totality becomes problematic. If we recall Adorno's statement that 'all explanations of individual phenomena lead on...to something resembling the social structure', it will be clear that most individual problems also point beyond themselves and can neither be understood nor solved if they are not considered in connection with the totality by which they are mediated. Adorno's point is not that *all* problems can be solved only if considered in relation to the totality, but only that *certain* problems are excluded *a priori* by the Popperian approach to sociology, and that this helps sustain the existing society whether it is just or not (ItS:28). Thus, although Popper and Adorno ultimately agree on the purpose of sociology as a means to create a better society for all human beings, they disagree on what the best means are to reach this end. In table 3.1 below I have tried to summarise the main characteristics of Popper's positivism in relation to the four issues discussed.

**Table 3.1: Characteristics of Critical Rationalism's Methodology**

Elements of Methodology	Positivism (Critical Rationalism)
Type of knowledge	Simple propositions (located in the 'middle-range') that are logically connected to a set of presuppositions that describe social phenomena.
Type of explanation	Causal laws that can be deduced from sociological theory that try to explain the relations between diverse social phenomena.
Logic of science	Falsification of hypotheses deduced from sociological theory ( <i>testing of theory</i> ).
Methods most often used	Quantitative methods (e.g. surveys, statistics etc).
Goal of sociology	Social planning (or engineering) on the basis of laws of society that have been corroborated and tested during research.

However, it should be clear that there are serious shortcomings in Popper's approach to the logic of (the social) science(s). Of the various criticisms mentioned the most serious are that Popper's notion of scientific objectivity is itself subjective, that positivism contributes to second-order reification (or

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'duplication'), that Popper's conception of (deductive) logic is too narrow because it fails to recognise its own dependence on induction, and finally that he fails to consider society as a totality, thus excluding certain problems and theories *a priori* as well as failing to truly understand how diverse social phenomena are related to each other through the societal totality. What should also be clear is that Adorno by no means dismisses all of Popper's ideas but insists that they cannot stand alone, that they have to be enhanced by an approach that links the one-sided emphasis on theory-testing and deduction (i.e. concept possession in the sense given in Chapter 1) with an emphasis on the need for theory-generation and induction (i.e. concept formation). Such an approach can be found in the famous book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* written a few years before Adorno's death by two American sociologists, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, and it is to this book that we turn now.

#### **B. Adorno's Missing *Discovery of Grounded Theory*: Social Physiognomics and Interpretative Sociology**

Adorno's premature death in the summer of 1969 was probably not the only reason that he never became acquainted with the methodological approach developed by Glaser & Strauss during the 1960s in a series of sociological studies. Aside from his references to the work of Max Weber, Adorno hardly ever referred to other 'interpretative sociologies'<sup>19</sup> in his sociological writings. This is not surprising since, as Hans Joas has shown, the early Frankfurt School theoreticians took very little interest in American sociology and philosophy, even though they spent more than ten years in exile in the USA (Joas 1993). Although Joas' interpretation of Adorno is haunted by many of the same misunderstandings presented in the Introduction, he is right in saying that the Frankfurt School's neglect of American social theory was regrettable. Adorno's view of American sociology was based on many grave misunderstanding not least because he concerned himself almost exclusively with the branch of sociology that Lazarsfeld, Merton and Parsons represent. He was thus ignorant of the other genuinely American tradition in sociology that was initiated in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by students of Weber and Simmel, who had returned to America and developed an empirically founded sociology. This tradition was based primarily on qualitative research methods and on a clearly inductive approach to sociology, and can be found, for instance, in Thomas and Znaniecki's classical study of *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas & Znaniecki 1996). Although Adorno was far from being as critical of America as has often been suggested (Jay 1984a; Hohendahl 1992) and was indeed one of the pioneers in bringing quantitative research methods into German sociology after the war (on this matter see for instance Demirović 1999:339-353; Müller-Doohm 2000:116-131), it is quite possible that he would have taken a less rigid view of American sociology had he spent more time reading the 'true' classics of American sociology (i.e. its Chicago-school variant).

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<sup>19</sup> Interpretative sociologies should be understood in this connection in the sense given to the concept by Giddens in his *New Rules of Sociological Method*. In this book Giddens defines this type of sociology as 'concerned, in some sense or another, with problems of language and meaning in relation to the "interpretative understanding" of human action' (Giddens 1993:28). Habermas offers much the same definition in his study *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* and both authors agree that the most problematic feature of this type of sociology is that social reality cannot be reduced to its symbolic reproduction in language; a critique that Adorno to a large extent agrees with (on this critique see especially Habermas 1988:175-186; Giddens 1993:28-76).

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While we can only guess what Adorno's response to this approach would have been, we are by no means left entirely clueless, for although Weber's methodological approach is clearly distinct from GT, there are many similarities that permit us to appropriate Adorno's criticism of Weber as an indirect response to GT. Further clues may be found in Adorno's critique of his philosophical soul-mate Walter Benjamin whose views Adorno clearly found inadequate for reasons very similar to those he might have advanced against GT. However, this will become much clearer below. For now it will be instructive briefly to sketch the main ideas of GT and rehearse those points of criticism raised against Popper and his version of positivism that are applicable to GT as well.

#### **False Consciousness, Duplication and the Status Quo: Similarities between Grounded Theory and Critical Rationalism**

Glaser & Strauss explain the background for *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in terms of the intellectual climate that dominated the American universities in the 1960s. According to them, '[v]erification of theory is the keynote of current sociology' and is therefore suggested as the most important aim for students and professors alike. This emphasis on verification and *testing* of sociological theories has the result that '...many potentially creative students have limited themselves to puzzling out small problems bequeathed to them in big theories' (DoGT:10). This limitation is problematic not least because the founding fathers of sociology did not provide theories for all aspects of social life. As a consequence Glaser & Strauss are determined to rethink the sociological tradition, and to set in place a new aim and approach to the study of social reality that would supplement verification and the testing of theories:

"In this book we address ourselves to the equally important enterprise of *how the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analyzed in social research – can be furthered*. We believe that the discovery of theory from data – which we call grounded theory – is a major task confronting sociology today, for, as we shall try to show, such a theory fits empirical situations, and is understandable to sociologists and layman alike" (DoGT:1).

In contrast to Critical Rationalism the empirical approach is not exclusively directed towards the testing of theories through hypotheses. Instead it assumes that one can 'discover theory from data' and thus generate new theories as an intrinsic part of one's empirical research. One crucial advantage of this approach, according to Glaser & Strauss, is that the theory (to a larger degree than in deductive-hypothetical approaches) will 'fit the empirical situation' and at the same time be 'understandable to the laymen' participating in the study.

According to one of the few studies of Adorno that seeks to give a systematic presentation of his thoughts on sociology, there are 'striking parallels' between Social Physiognomics and GT (Müller-Doohm 2000:246n314). That Müller-Doohm's suspicion is not without foundation can easily be seen from the citation above: if theory is to be *generated from* the 'material of experience' this involves concept formation since sociological theories consist of concepts. If no (theoretical) concepts are brought in from the start our judgements of the situation will have to be reflective in order to create the universals ('the concepts') from which it will be possible to gain an understanding of the situation. Thus, Glaser & Strauss' chiefly qualitative methodology at first sight seems to live up to the initial requirements of a sociology inspired by Adorno's idea of a 'negative dialectics' (i.e. it grants 'primacy to the object').

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However, there are several problematic features of GT as well. Two of these have already been dealt with in the critique of Popper and can therefore be discussed cursorily. These points are 1) the notion of objectivity and 2) the aims of sociology.

Ad 1) While this approach is not subjective in the sense that the sociological theory employed by GT is arbitrary and depends solely on the perspective of the researcher, it is still subjective in the sense that it relies exclusively on individual 'facts'. In a passage on Weber's definition of sociology Adorno criticises the latter's reliance on 'subjective meaning': if sociology is to concern itself only with 'subjective meaning', whether in terms of strictly operationalised responses and behaviour that are tested in accordance with the principle of falsification, or in terms of the understanding of a particular situation by the laymen involved, it will completely miss the true purpose of sociology, i.e. the uncovering of the *structures* of society that help shape these subjective responses and understandings of a particular situation (ItS:103-105). This point of criticism has been developed more directly in relation to GT by other writers. Thus, Derek Layder writes that:

"...although grounded theory is good on depicting the lived experiences and subjective meanings of people, it does not have an adequate appreciation of social-structural or systemic aspects of society. This is because it is committed epistemologically...and ontologically...to denying the existence of phenomena that are not only or simply behavioural (like markets, bureaucracies and forms of domination)" (Layder 1998:19-20).

From this it is not hard to see why Grounded Theory is subjective, since it concerns itself only with the responses, attitudes and beliefs etc. of individuals, and does not see these as expressions of the type of society we live in. Because our concepts have become disenchanting, we cannot have confidence in the self-understanding of laymen and their ability to give an 'accurate' description of a specific situation. In order to gain an understanding of the structural properties of society we would need, for instance, to undertake an immanent critique of the self-understanding of individuals, unravelling those contradictions that point beyond their immediate (and inadequate) common-sense understanding of the situation (their 'false consciousness') and thus shed light on the fundamental structures of society.

Ad 2) Another area of convergence between GT and positivism can be found in their view of the actual uses to which sociological knowledge should ideally be put. The key word for both Popper and Glaser & Strauss is *control*, which they see as enabling us to bring about a better society for individuals and organisations alike:

"The substantive theory must enable the person who uses it to have enough control in everyday situations to make its application worth trying. The control we have in mind has various aspects. The person who applies the theory must be enabled to understand and analyze ongoing situational realities, to produce and predict change in them, and to predict and control consequences both for the object of change and for other parts of the total situation that will be affected" (DoGT:245).

By gaining a better understanding of everyday situations, the actor will be able to 'predict and control [the] consequences' of the actions she is carrying out. Even if Glaser & Strauss' view seem reasonable, it is still problematic for the simple reason that they almost totally fail to consider the effects of asymmetric power relations. Thus, for example, even if nurses and doctors may benefit greatly from an understanding of the concept of 'awareness contexts', this can be problematic for the patient or the family. That this is so Glaser & Strauss admit at a later point when they state that:



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“When a patient is dying, it is not uncommon to see patient, family, doctor and nurse all trying to control each other for their own purposes. Those who avail themselves of our theory might have a better chance in the tug-of-war about who shall best control the situation” (DoGT:248).

Although GT provides actors with understanding, and hence with potential control, this is not a kind of understanding that benefits all the actors in the situation; rather, it benefits only those who have had the chance to read their book. Even if this might help the patient to be able to control her situation to a greater extent, this is not very likely given the extensive division of labour throughout society and the circumstance of the patient (i.e. being ill and in an unusual situation), and for this reason it could be expected that the knowledge gained from the study would mainly benefit those already in control and power. Only an essentially *critical* theory could guarantee that the knowledge produced in sociology was not used to reinforce the status quo. However, there is also another problem which relates to those raised in our discussion of Popper: It is not possible to gain a complete understanding of a situation that does not to some extent refer to the societal totality of which the situation is part. In order truly to emancipate people by way of sociological knowledge, such knowledge would have to be related to the societal totality.

To sum up, even if GT has certain clear advantages over Popper's approach, it still gives rise to a host of problems, since it fails to acknowledge the far-reaching consequences of the disenchantment of the world. In its adherence to the subjective beliefs of people (their 'false consciousness') GT, like Popper, succumbs to 'identity thinking' and 'duplication'. Furthermore, although GT strives to enlighten and empower it cannot achieve this aim completely, not least because it is not a critical theory and because it fails to see singular problems in the light of society as a whole. While this brief recapitulation of the criticism that applies to both positivism and GT covers two of the methodological issues (i.e. the question of the nature of sociological knowledge and the uses to which this knowledge should be put), in comparing GT and Social Physiognomics we still need to consider GT's logic and the type of explanation proper to it.

#### Concept Formation and Theory Generation: The Possibilities of the Inductive Logic of Grounded Theory

It is worthwhile examining the inductive logic employed by GT in its approach to scientific research in order to see what can be learned from it and what must be discarded when it is evaluated in the light of Adorno's disenchantment thesis. As mentioned above, the idea of generating theory from empirical data resembles the emphasis on concept formation that Bernstein attributed to Adorno's philosophical approach. Because our introduction to GT was necessarily brief, however, these similarities were only briefly touched upon. Let me make up for this right away: According to Glaser & Strauss, GT can take many forms 'either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties' (DoGT:31). As mentioned above, this means that it is not the *form* of the theoretical propositions (i.e. the *type* of knowledge) as such that separates GT from Popper's positivism. However, at two very crucial points there are major differences between GT and positivism: 1) firstly, in its insistence on *induction* and in generating new theory that 'fits' a particular situation; 2) secondly, in its 'high emphasis on *theory as process*; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product' (DoGT:32). Let us examine these two points in more detail.

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Ad 1) Induction has been heavily criticised over the last couple of decades as being grounded in a naïve notion that science and scientists confront the world with no prior understanding ('theories') of it. As we recall this was also Popper's position, and although it must be borne in mind that it is never possible to give a completely neutral description of the world, the problem of our pre-understanding is not as great in situations of theory-generation as it is in situations where verification is the ultimate goal. As Glaser & Strauss explain in the following passage:

"Naturally we wish to be as sure of our evidence as possible, and will therefore check on it as often as we can. However, even if some of our evidence is not entirely accurate this will not be too troublesome; for in generating theory it is not the fact upon which we stand, but the *conceptual category* (or a *conceptual property* of the category) that was generated from it. A concept may be generated from one fact, which then becomes merely one of a universe of many possible diverse indicators for, and data on, the concept. These indicators are then sought for the comparative analysis" (DoGT:23).

From a GT point of view, then, what is interesting is not the pure fact itself<sup>20</sup> (and thus not a pure *description* of it). What must be evaluated and at a later point put under scrutiny (for instance through falsification) are the concepts generated from the 'material of experience'. Even if other facts seem to contradict the initial conceptual categories, these cannot be taken to *falsify* the concepts but must instead be seen as providing the impetus for a *revision* of them or a *specification* of the conditions under which they are still valid.

The difference between using facts as a way of verifying theory and using them as a starting point for generating theory can be illuminated by taking up a clue from Chapter 1 in order to further strengthen the assumption that a methodology adhering to the principles underlying 'negative dialectics' will be one that emphasises the generation of theory. Bernstein notes that: 'One could...run the whole argument concerning identity and nonidentity via a working-out of the different logics of example and exemplarity' (Bernstein 2001:345n12). A brief discussion of this distinction can shed some light on the difference between verifying and generating theory. In the former, the 'fact' is taken as an example that helps *ground the theory* that is being used to describe a situation (i.e. verification of theory). In the latter, the 'fact' serves as an exemplar that helps us *form a new concept* that adequately grasps the situation (i.e. generation of theory). If we consider this distinction in the light of the following statement, we can see how it is connected to the difference between 'identity-thinking' and 'negative dialectics': 'We are not to philosophize *about* concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, *out of* these things' (ND:33, my emphasis). If we are not to 'philosophize about' the facts we discover during our research (as that

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<sup>20</sup> In the passage cited above Glaser & Strauss conclude that the 'fact' only becomes 'one of a universe of many possible diverse indicators for, and data on, the concept'. Although the terminology they use is entirely different, this insistence on the plurality of facts that can function as indicators for the concept is highly compatible with one of the most crucial ideas of Social Physiognomics, that of constellations: 'By themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the 'more' which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking' (ND:162). What GT refers to as 'properties' are equivalent to the concepts that are entered into a constellation, the aim of which is to grasp 'the object of cognition', or what in GT is called the 'concept' (or 'categories'). What is crucial for both approaches is that the singular 'fact' or 'concept' cannot stand alone but needs to be considered in relation to other concepts or facts. This is the meaning of the passage cited below: "It must be kept in mind that both categories and properties are concepts indicated by the data (and not the data itself); also that both vary in degree of conceptual abstraction...In short, conceptual categories and properties have a life apart from the evidence that gave rise to them" (DoGT:36).

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would only be to identify what 'something comes under' and would therefore constitute 'identity-thinking') we cannot content ourselves with sticking (solely) to verification (or falsification) of theory. In this version of sociology, the 'fact' may become an *example of the theory*. However, what is forgotten is that the 'fact' also has other facets, facets which may be highly relevant in the situation but which we cannot know because verification will not let us in on anything besides its relation to the concept we already possess. Instead, Adorno suggests, we should 'philosophize out of' the 'fact', since that would represent a true effort to express what the phenomenon is in itself (the 'non-identical'). Through this approach, it would be possible to gain insight into those aspects of the object that are relevant to this particular situation, something Glaser & Strauss call the 'fit' of the theory. If we philosophize out of the 'fact', the fact will *serve as an exemplar*, providing the occasion to form new concepts and thus to *generate theory* (i.e. to do precisely what GT advocates). However, the emphasis on theory generation and concept formation is not the only point of similarity between GT and Social Physiognomics.

Ad 2) The second point mentioned above was the 'emphasis on theory as process' that is constitutive of GT. What is important here is the idea that theory is never complete or constitutes a 'perfected product', an idea that, according to Glaser & Strauss, 'renders quite well the reality of social interaction and its structural context' (DoGT:32). Because society and social interaction are *processes*, sociological theories that seek to grasp the 'essence' of these entities must be processes as well since this would recognise the open-ended and indeterminate character of the theories used to describe the world. It is not enough, therefore, to recognise the *fallibility* of our knowledge, as Popper does, because that would imply that it was possible (in principle) to reach a complete and full description of the world via our theories. Instead, we must recognise the essential *indeterminacy* of our knowledge, since (social) reality is constantly changing, which makes it necessary to rearticulate and redetermine our theories at regular intervals so that they come to 'fit' the situation.<sup>21</sup> The idea of 'theory as process' recalls another discussion in Chapter 1, in which we sought to identify the difference between science and works of art. Here the practice of art was conceptualised as 'the negation of tradition' and the 'paradoxical search for novelty', meaning that works of art are seen as a form of continuous concept formation that does not allow for any accumulation of knowledge gained. It is for this reason that Christoph Menke treats 'aesthetic processuality' as the defining characteristic of works of art in Adorno's conception of them:

"Accordingly, those enactments of understanding are termed automatic that make use of conventions to successfully identify the object to be understood; on the other hand, nonautomatic enactments of understanding are those that consist solely in the process of identification, without the support of conventions. Even if identification is spoken in both definitions of modes of enacting understanding, only the automatic mode is identificatory in Adorno's sense of the word. In automatic understanding, identification is a result; in aesthetic understanding, by contrast, it is a process" (Menke 1998:31).

What is instructive in this passage is the distinction Menke draws between 'automatic' and 'aesthetic understanding', a distinction that clearly resembles that which Bernstein draws (in comparing Kant and Wittgenstein) between determinative and reflective judgements and transitive and intransitive understanding. It is not difficult to see how this relates to GT: in situations of 'automatic

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<sup>21</sup> Brunkhorst is thus correct in stating that 'Adorno's fallibilism [was] different from that of Karl Popper's' (Brunkhorst 1999:55): However, he is nowhere near radical enough in his description of this difference as he emphasised only Adorno's insistence that critique should be material (i.e. a critique of society as well as a critique of sociological theory) instead of his idea of radical fallibilism (i.e. indeterminacy).

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understanding' (or concept possession), what is important is the *result* of the comparison between hypothesis and facts (i.e. whether they are in agreement or not): in other words, the *verification* of the theory. By contrast aesthetic understanding involves identification as a *process* (i.e. the continual formation and revision of concepts) or, in the terminology of GT, the *generation* of theory. The idea of theory as a process also fits well with Adorno's theory of truth: just as a theory is not the *result* of the research, truth cannot be thought of as the (static) correspondence between theory and world. Instead theory must be treated as the process of refining and developing concepts, just as truth is the process of overcoming illusions (i.e. an effort to revise our conceptual apparatus so as to better make use of the potential inherent in society).

What should be clear by now is that Müller-Doohm is right in discerning 'striking parallels' between GT and Social Physiognomics, and that these become even more plausible when we examine them in the light of Adorno's overall philosophical framework (an aspect that Müller-Doohm ignores in his account of Adorno's sociology). However, just as deduction constitutes only part of the dialectic, so too does induction. At the same time, GT's reliance solely on subjective opinions and understandings is glaringly naïve. Accordingly, it is necessary to reinstall the dialectic at the centre of GT if it is to serve as a more reliable model for sociological research. We turn to this point below in our discussion of the explanatory accounts that can be utilised in GT and the limits of these.

#### Formal Theory vs. Theories of Society: On the Need for 'Second Reflections'

In Chapter 1 I argued that in order to escape identity-thinking or at least lessen the consequences of disenchantment it was necessary for philosophy and sociology alike to proceed by way of an immanent critique. This approach would help illuminate the inadequacy of the (simple) concepts employed by showing how the concept comes to stand in contradiction to either what it purports to be or to the object it seeks to grasp. Through the discovery of these contradictions it would be possible to gain an understanding of the societal totality instead of being 'content simply to register and order the facts' (SaER:81) as happens in the case of both positivism and GT. In other words, we cannot be content just to stick to our immediate sociological theories derived from the 'material of experience' if we are to know anything about society at large.

To this one might note that this is exactly what Glaser & Strauss seeks to acknowledge when they attempt to advance from 'substantive theories' (concepts applicable to clearly demarcated subject areas) to 'formal theories' in order to form more general and abstract propositions that say something not only about the particular aspect of society under investigation, but about other aspects of life as well. However, even if formal theory was extracted from the substantive theories that had been developed in the course of empirical research, this would not make it any more 'objective' since its point of departure is still a (blind) reliance on the subjective opinions of individuals, rather than an attempt to gather objective knowledge of (the structural aspects of) society. This is also evident from the passage below where one of the strategies in generating grounded 'formal theory' is discussed:

"There are at least two 'rewriting' techniques for advancing a substantive to a formal theory that is grounded in only one substantive area. The sociologist can simply omit substantive words, phrases or adjectives: instead of saying 'temporal aspects of *dying* as a nonscheduled status passages' he would say 'temporal aspects of

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nonscheduled status passages'...By applying these rewriting techniques to a substantive theory, the sociologist can change the focus of attention from substantive to formal concerns" (DoGT:80).

Although Glaser & Strauss see this approach as inferior to one that generates formal theory directly from substantive theories, by comparing theories arising from different areas, it is evident that the distinction between formal and substantive theory is only a question of the level of abstraction in the two types. That Adorno is highly critical of such an approach to the creation of sociological theory can be seen from the following passage:

"...if...one wishes to proceed in accordance with general scientific custom from individual investigations to the totality of society then one gains, at best, classificatory higher concepts, but not those which express the life of society itself...Neither upwards nor downwards do sociological levels of abstraction correspond simply to the societal knowledge value" (SaER:69-70).

Just because a set of descriptions (i.e. sociological theory) can be shown to 'fit' more than one substantive area, this does not necessarily mean that it leads to knowledge of 'the life of society itself'. Thus, the crucial point in Adorno's critique is that we have to distinguish clearly between sociological theory and a theory of society, the latter being the true goal of sociology (for an elaboration of this claim, see for instance König 1987; Müller-Doohm 2000:146-149). For Adorno, a sociological theory does not in itself constitute a sufficient explanation of a given social phenomena, it must be interpreted in the light of a theory of society in order to reach a proper explanation in Adorno's view.

An example may help to illustrate the shortcomings of the idea of formal theory. Glaser & Strauss themselves offer an example of how to develop formal theories out of substantive ones, in this case taken from their empirical research on 'awareness contexts'. When discussing 'the structural conditions under which the awareness context exists' (in this case, 'awareness of dying') they outline certain features, for instance the design of the hospital and the fact that the patient has no allies, as preconditions for keeping the patients unaware of their impending death (Glaser & Strauss 1964:671-673). However, when identifying the 'categories' that can be extracted from this substantive area and translated into formal theory, the two authors fail to discuss the broader structural conditions that are necessary to create a 'closed awareness context' in certain hospitals. For instance, what general conditions in society at large are responsible for the fact that dying is a 'closed awareness context'? What are the conditions that make 'closed awareness contexts' possible at all and what are the implications of these for individuals? These (and similar) questions cannot be answered satisfactorily if the grounded theory approach to formal theory is to be complied with entirely, not least because Glaser and Strauss insist that these theories should be construed in a way that makes it possible for the layman 'readily [to] see how it explains his situation' (DoGT:98). To reach an adequate description one would have to have recourse to something like Durkheim's theory of the division of labour in order to explain, for instance, the conditions that make possible the 'deceptions' involved in dying in 'closed awareness contexts': only in societies with a strict division of labour, where certain types of knowledge are available only to special groups of people, is it possible to have systematically 'closed awareness contexts'. This differential access to knowledge creates the basis for asymmetric power relations, a theme that is virtually ignored in Glaser & Strauss' account of the hospital ward. At the same time, it is interesting that 'dying' should be kept secret, although this is not surprising given the prevailing anxiety towards the unknown that was discussed in Chapter 1: death is the ultimate 'unknown', the absolute

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indeterminate - a state that can never be known or controlled by humans. If we remember this it will be easier to understand why dying is particularly likely to become a 'closed awareness context' in modern Western societies. However, these metareflections (no matter how faulty the one just presented may be) cannot be fully grounded in the 'material of experience' but can be advanced only by analysing those contradictions (and other 'loose ends') that become discernible in the 'material of experience' during the research process.

In employing 'grand theories' such as Durkheim's idea of the division of labour one runs the risk of becoming too far removed from the research area. This is one of the major concerns for GT, which insists that the concepts employed in describing a situation must 'fit' and be 'understandable to [the] laymen' concerned. However, Adorno was fully aware of this danger, and would not have been satisfied with an analysis that only abstractly related the 'facts' revealed by empirical research to the totality. This relationship must be carefully developed by showing how the 'facts' and the totality mediate each other.

A concrete example of the care Adorno took to avoid an altogether abstract mediation of the objects under study can be found in one of his debates with Walter Benjamin.<sup>22</sup> It is well known that Benjamin was highly inspired by the surrealists and seriously considered using 'montage' as the prime principle for his never-completed analysis of modernity, *The Arcades Project*: 'Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show' (Benjamin 1999a:460). The 'analysis' was to consist of citations, pictures etc. without any direct commentary from Benjamin, and in this sense would transfer the technique of montage from art to philosophy. Although this may seem like the ultimate consequence of the idea of 'intransitive understanding' this was not the conclusion Adorno himself drew. In fact, he was highly critical of Benjamin's approach, believing that in using it Benjamin had committed an act of 'violence' against himself. Adorno summarises his critique in a letter in which he takes issues with Benjamin's study on Baudelaire:

"Let me express myself in as simple and Hegelian manner as possible. Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic is lacking in one thing: mediation...The 'mediation' which I miss and find obscured by materialistic-historiographical evocation, is simply the theory which your study has omitted. On the one hand, this omission lends the material a deceptively epic character, and on the other it deprives the phenomena, which are experienced merely subjectively, of their real historico-philosophical weight. To express this another way: the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to switch into the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wanted to put it rather drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell - your own resolute and salutarily speculative theory" (Adorno & Benjamin 1999:282-283).

What Adorno is referring to in this passage was the rather abstract way in which Benjamin sought to link his 'minutiae observations' with philosophical concepts such as 'the fetish character of commodities'. For Adorno it was problematic that Benjamin referred to the 'fetish character' as such and not to the specific form of it that could be developed in relation to the 'material of experience' used in the analysis: 'All references to the commodity form 'as such' lend that history a certain metaphorical character which in this crucial case cannot be permitted. I would surmise that the greatest

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<sup>22</sup> For an extensive discussion of these debates see for instance Wolin (1994:163-212), Caygill (1998:135-135) and Gilloch (2002:115-116,204-205) who all claim that Adorno to a certain extent misunderstood Benjamin's aspiration to reconstruct a neo-Kantian concept of experience. While their critique is correct in several respects it does nothing to diminish the relevance of Adorno's critique of lack of mediation with respect to GT.

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interpretative results would be gained here if you follow your own procedure, namely the blind processing of material, without hesitation' (Adorno & Benjamin 1999:108). Thus, instead of referring to the 'commodity form' in general it would be more worthwhile to consider the specific forms that it takes, for example in the case of world trade and imperialism discussed in Benjamin's analysis. Similarly, in studying the context of death in hospital, and the relationship between doctor and patient, one would need to examine the distinctive character of the division of labour between these two groups. Thus, on the one hand, the patient is an 'expert' on her own body, and the doctor needs the information only she can provide not only in order to diagnose her but also for purposes of research (which is an important part of the job for many doctors, and the one that grants most prestige). On the other hand, the doctor is the only one who possesses the medical knowledge needed to cure the patient.

Thus Glaser & Strauss' 'Grounded Theory' approach again constitutes a very good point of departure for Social Physiognomics if the process of concept formation is supplemented with what could be termed a 'second reflection'. In this process the 'mediated' character of these phenomena is 'mediated a second time by reflection: through the medium of the concept' (AT 358) Through this 'second reflection' it will be possible to gain knowledge of 'the life of society itself' (i.e. as the societal totality) by relating the individual 'facts' in the 'material of experience' to a theory of society.

Table 2.2 presents a summary of the main characteristics of GT in relation to the four issues that have been used to structure the discussion throughout this chapter.

**Table 2.2: Characteristics of the Grounded Theory Methodology**

Elements of Methodology	Grounded Theory
Type of knowledge	Descriptions of the social world (located in the 'middle-range') that connect different phenomena in a meaningful way.
Type of explanation	Interpretations that provide an understanding of the world.
Logic of science	Inductive reasoning and interpretation ( <i>generation</i> of theory).
Methods most often used	Qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, personal records, field observations)
Goal of sociology	Provide laymen with an understanding of their situation so that they will have better control over it.

What should be clear by now is that Adorno's own approach cannot rely solely on either inductive or deductive approaches and that theory testing and theory generation are equally important tasks of a sociology that seeks to enlighten individuals, groups and societies about the societal totality in which they live and act. Before turning to the most crucial part of this thesis, namely the outline (and reconstruction) of Adorno's sociological methodology, it will be useful to summarise what this chapter has taught us and what we need especially to bear in mind for the remainder of this thesis.

### Concluding Remarks

The critique of positivism and GT presented throughout this chapter has certainly alerted us to the shortcomings of these approaches seen from an Adornesque point of view. These weaknesses can be summarised in three overall points that are all formulated *negatively* (i.e. as principles of what sociology should *not* be): first, sociology *cannot* be based solely on either an inductive or a deductive logic but must

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instead proceed *dialectically*. This implies that theoretical concepts are generated from the 'material of experience' by 'granting primacy to the object', and that afterwards these concepts are set in relation to a theory of society in a 'second reflection'. Secondly, sociology *cannot* stick merely to the surface phenomena (whether in the form of the common-sense knowledge of individuals or the official doctrines of the state) of society because in doing so sociological knowledge will succumb to a mere 'duplication' of the social world, thereby contributing further to the 'disenchantment of the world'. Instead sociology must become an objective science, meaning that it must penetrate beneath the immediate appearance of these phenomena in order to grasp the real object of sociology: the structures of society. Finally, sociology *cannot* take a politically *neutral* stance with regard to the areas examined. In asserting this, 'traditional theory' reinforces the status quo regardless of the injustices or oppressions it may involve. Instead sociology must be inherently *critical* not only of its own concepts but of its object: society. Although this gives us a first impression of what we might expect from a reconstruction of Adorno's methodology it will be remembered that this chapter provides only a *negative* outline of Social Physiognomics by showing the inadequacy of competing methodologies. A good deal of clarification is still needed if this reconstruction is to be understandable, which means that we need now to turn to the *positive* explication of Adorno's methodological ideas. This is the task pursued in Chapter 3.



## Chapter 3

### An Outline of Social Physiognomics

Having examined the philosophical and metatheoretical framework of Adorno's version of critical theory we are now in a position to address the central task of this thesis: the *positive* reconstruction of his (implicit) sociological methodology. Our discussion thus far has given us a first impression of what the Adornian version of empirical sociology looks like: empirical sociology should be concerned with the development of 'critical models' in which close attention is paid to the object of study ('the object is granted primacy') so that the sociologist is able to reveal the contradictions that arise as a consequence of the disenchantment of language. These contradictions are interpreted in the light of a theory of society that seeks to show how the object is mediated by the societal totality. The primary goal of sociology is to decipher the 'physiognomy' of the object which will enable us to evaluate present day society in the light of its potential. In order to flesh out these tentative principles we will need to consider the four methodological issues presented in Chapter 2 and provide an analysis of Social Physiognomics in the light of these. Before turning to this, however, I would like to begin this chapter (A) by presenting what might be called the 'formal-sociological' considerations in Adorno's work, looking at the way in which Adorno defines sociology and how, according to his definition, it can be distinguished from those disciplines that are closely connected to it (i.e. history, psychology and philosophy). In doing so, we will look at the fundamental question of what characterises societies and individuals respectively and how they are related to and mediated by one another.

Having addressed these formal-sociological considerations, we will turn to the actual reconstruction of Adorno's sociological methodology. In this part of the chapter (B), we will return to the four issues that we identified in our presentation of Adorno's critique of positivism and GT. These will provide the guidelines for our reconstruction of Social Physiognomics. Several questions arise in this connection. How is our knowledge to become *critical* knowledge? To what extent should Adorno's sociology be seen as a form of 'action research' that *intervenes* in the research context and thus alters the very object under consideration? How are we to understand the logic of dialectical reasoning, as opposed to deductive and inductive reasoning, and how is this related to the revised concept of objectivity that Adorno proposes? Another urgent question concerns the criteria on which the validity of explanations is judged in Social Physiognomics, given the inadequacy of understanding and causal explanation respectively that was revealed in Chapter 2. These and related questions will be answered in the course of our reconstruction of Social Physiognomics. But let us begin, as mentioned above, by clarifying the formal-sociological aspects of Adorno's thought.

#### **A. The 'Formal-Sociological' Aspects of Social Physiognomics**

Just as it may seem paradoxical to propose a reconstruction of Adorno's implicit sociological methodology, given his determination that the methods employed in concrete research should be arrived at directly by 'granting primacy to the object', so it may seem paradoxical to try to elaborate on the formal sociological aspects of Adorno's sociology, since he was so fervent a critic of such *a priori* considerations. Thus in a passage on Simmel he writes as follows:

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“Formal sociology is the external complement to what Habermas has termed restricted experience. The theses of sociological formalism, for instance those of Simmel, are not in themselves false. Yet the mental acts are false which detach these from the empirical, hypostatize them and then subsequently fill them out through illustration” (ItPD:7).

For Adorno there is (at least) one crucial problem with formal approaches to sociology, as exemplified by Simmel’s often neglected work *Sociology*. In this work certain characteristics of modern societies are discussed as if they were eternal: in other words, their historical dimension is ignored and with it the possibility of effecting change. In a lecture on sociology in which he again attacks Simmel’s formalism, Adorno cites a good example of this:

“...the crucial point is that in this theory a category such as social conflict is hypostatized. It is removed from its context, a context of specific, explainable and inherently resolvable antitheses and conflicts, and treated as if it were a property of society as such...I use this example...to awaken in you a certain mistrust of the notion of scholarly neutrality...By seeming to adopt a neutral stance, by disregarding the specific content of social conflict, by not taking sides in the social antagonisms, but by saying, instead, that conflict in itself is something good...such a theory takes a social decision...It decides in favour of the antagonistic state which gives rise to conflict, without having seriously raised the question whether a category such as conflict...could not in fact be abolished...” (ItS:66-68).

By taking the existence of social conflict for granted Simmel, according to Adorno, has already ‘decided in favour’ of the present state of society, despite the fact that it is highly antagonistic. This problem is inherent in all formalistic theories of sociology, because if the historically specific nature of a phenomenon is ignored, the status quo is granted the status of an eternal feature of society.

Does this mean that it is impossible to sketch *any a priori* or formal sociological principles that could provide the foundation for a sociological approach? We saw in Chapter 2 how Adorno’s main criticism of Benjamin was that the latter lacked an explicit theoretical stance that could serve as a guide for the interpretation of social phenomena. However, although Adorno insisted in this critique that Benjamin could not do without a theoretical stance, he was at pains to emphasise that any such stance had to be specific. Instead of referring to the ‘commodity form’ in general Benjamin should have provided a specific description of this theoretical idea in relation to the phenomena that he deals with in his (sociological) texts. Similarly, we cannot do without *any* ‘formal sociological’ principles (i.e. considerations on the nature of sociality). However, these cannot be grounded *a priori* in the manner of Kant and Simmel. Instead we could think of them as *historical a priori* principles in the sense given to this term by Foucault in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In this book Foucault proposes an ‘archaeological’ approach to discourse analysis in which one would seek to uncover the ‘archive’ that serves as the ‘condition of possibility’ for the statements uttered in particular discourses. Foucault stresses that the ‘archive’ should be understood as a set of *historical a priori* principles that constitute the ‘conditions of possibility’ for a *specific* way of talking about a phenomenon (for an elaboration of his claims see Foucault 1972:126-131). Adorno was highly sceptical as to the use of the transcendental method and one of his principle criticisms against it was that it hypostatized that which already exists (for a discussion of his critique see Jarvis 1998:153-165; Bernstein 2001:212-218). This problem can more easily be solved if one recognises that no pure *a priori* principles exist, but only various historically *a priori* principles.

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From this it follows that we need to sketch the *specific historical formal sociological principles* that can be extracted from Adorno's works in order to provide a foundation for the reconstruction of his methodology. This will involve considering three distinct issues that are important in this respect: a) How can sociology be defined as an independent discipline distinct from history, psychology and, above all, philosophy?, b) what qualities does Adorno ascribe to the individual and what consequences do they have for empirical research?, and finally c) what is the nature of sociality and, more specifically, society and how does Adorno conceive of the relationship between individuals and society? These are the questions to be pursued over the next three sections of this chapter before we turn to an explication of the consequences of these formal-sociological principles for sociological methodology.

#### a. Sociology as an Independent Discipline? Social Physiognomics and Transdisciplinary Research

As we saw in the Introduction, one of the crucial criticisms that Axel Honneth made against Adorno was that the latter left no room for sociology because the 'general sphere' of sociality (i.e. the accomplishments of groups) falls outside the latter's vision of sociology. In the Introduction I promised to deal with this issue in more detail by considering the relationship between sociology and its neighbouring disciplines (e.g. philosophy, history and psychology). The demarcation of sociology proposed (implicitly) by Honneth is too reductive in Adorno's view, because sociality cannot be reduced to 'the cultural accomplishments of social groups' (Honneth 1991:95). In this respect Adorno's criticism of Honneth would be similar to his criticism of Weber (and GT), as we briefly discussed in Chapter 2, namely 'that to a very large degree sociological analysis relates to thing-like, objectified forms which cannot be directly resolved into action' (ItS:105). Thus, while the accomplishments of 'social groups' (and social action more generally) are certainly *part of* what constitutes sociology, this by no means offers an exhaustive description of what sociology is and ought to be in Adorno's view (and neither should this area of concern be given a privileged position in sociology). In fact, it would be completely mistaken to think of sociology as defined by some distinct subject matter that is shared by all sociological studies. The existence of 'hyphen-sociologies' makes this clear, since these types of 'practical' or 'applied' sociology are examples of the application of 'the sociological perspective to originally non-sociological subjects' (ItS:102). Instead of defining sociology in terms of a distinct subject matter, we should think of it as '...reflection on social moments within any given area of subject matter – reflections ranging from the simple physiognomic registration of social implications to the formulation of theories on the social totality. This is what makes the demarcation of sociology so problematic' (ItS:103). Because 'social moments' can be identified in almost any kind of 'subject matter', it is impossible to define sociology as the study of any particular area of society (as in Honneth's attempt at defining sociality as relating primarily to social groups). Because other disciplines are most often defined by reference to some distinct subject matter this makes it somewhat problematic to define sociology unequivocally.

Although Adorno in this sense distances himself quite explicitly from Weber's attempt to demarcate sociology, he clearly draws on another classical sociologist, Georg Simmel, in defining the discipline. Simmel, too, argued that sociology was not defined so much by its subject matter as by its approach to various phenomena: 'Sociology, accordingly, in its relationships to the existing sciences, is

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a new *method*, an auxiliary to investigation, a means of approaching the phenomena of all these areas in a new way' (Simmel 1909:293). For Simmel sociology represented a 'method' that made it possible to 'reflect on the social moments' of all those areas that were formerly considered the province of other fields such as psychology, economics etc. Although Adorno's and Simmel's approaches are in this sense very similar, they nevertheless differ in certain important ways, not least because of Simmel's clear neo-Kantian allegiances.<sup>23</sup> For Simmel sociology constitutes a new *form* of approach that can be applied to any *content* whatsoever in order to reveal the social aspects of it. For Adorno sociology is not a method but a distinct science, although it does not have its 'own' object of study in the sense that other sciences do. There are, however, very good reasons for this; first of all because it is the same '*content*' that sociology studies in each case, even if Adorno's definition of this 'content' is different from Simmel's. In a footnote that is worth quoting at some length, Adorno has the following to say on this:

"If one were to strip sociology of everything which, for instance, does not strictly correspond to Weber's definition in the opening pages of *Economy and Society*, then there would be nothing left. Without all the economic, historical, psychological and anthropological moments it would shuffle aimlessly around every social phenomenon. Its *raison d'être* is not that of an area of study, of an academic 'subject', but rather the constitutive – and therefore neglected – context of those areas of study of an older type. It is a piece of intellectual compensation for the division of labour, and should not, in turn, be unconditionally fixed in accordance with the division of labour. But it is no more true to claim that sociology simply brings the contents of these areas of study into a more or less fruitful contact. What is called interdisciplinary cooperation cannot be equated with sociology. It is the task of the latter to reveal the mediations of the object categories – each one of which leads to the next. Sociology is orientated towards the immanent interplay of the elements dealt with in a relatively independent manner by economics, history, psychology and anthropology. It attempts to restore scientifically the unity which they form, in themselves, as societal elements, and which they constantly forfeit through science" (ItPD:55-56n60).

The 'content' of sociology, according to Adorno, is the 'unity' that is formed implicitly by the interplay between the material of the separate sciences. Another way of putting this is to say that the object of sociology is *society* as a totality, as was suggested in Chapter 2. Because society as a totality is the utmost 'condition of possibility' for all social phenomena, it follows that it can be found immanent *in* all scientific fields and therefore does not constitute an independent field in itself. Instead sociology should be seen as an attempt to 'compensate for the division of labour' that exists between the distinct sciences.

This also casts light on the reasons for Adorno's disagreement with Horkheimer's original idea of an interdisciplinary research programme: the division of labour means that society does not constitute a single subject area and in this context it is not enough to 'bring the contents of these areas of study into contact' even under the guidance of philosophy. In order to reveal the societal totality this division of labour must be breached, if only temporarily, thereby creating instead what has been termed a *transdisciplinary* approach to the social sciences, i.e. one that does not unequivocally accept the division

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<sup>23</sup> According to Gillian Rose one of Adorno's main aims was to escape the 'neo-Kantianism' inherent in all classical sociology that resulted in the hypostatization of the various dualisms between theory and method, structure and agency, quantitative and qualitative methods etc. According to Rose, however, Adorno did not succeed in this. Nevertheless, what Rose points to is the great divergence between Simmel and Adorno on this point, since the former was writing from a clear neo-Kantian position while the latter was attempting to reformulate the Hegelian critique of Kant in contemporary terms and in relation to sociology (for an elaboration of this thesis see Rose 1995:1-47).

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of labour (for an elaboration of the inherently transdisciplinary character of Adorno's sociology see for instance Kellner 2002:34-38). While Adorno does not accept the division of labour at face value he is nevertheless aware of the fact that it is precisely this division that has made possible the immense progress of science over the last couple of centuries. For this reason sociology is founded on a tension between the wish to undo the division of labour (since 'traces' of society can be found in all areas) while at the same time adhering to it in order to further the accumulation of knowledge produced by the distinct sciences (ItS:199).<sup>24</sup> While this might explain the rather fluid boundaries between sociology and other disciplines in general it does not say anything about the relationship of sociology to concrete disciplines. How, for instance, are we to understand the relationship between sociology and philosophy, a relationship that was clearly important for Adorno in view of his frequent use of abstract and esoteric concepts?

The speculative character of Adorno's sociological essays can be understood only in the light of his view of philosophy: in his view, sociology had evolved from philosophy, especially those parts of philosophy that have always been concerned with society (for instance Plato's *The State* or Hobbes' *Leviathan*, to name only two such works: on this see for instance AoS:1-15). For this reason the line of demarcation between sociology and philosophy is vague (Müller-Doohm 2000:10; ItS:5). One of the crucial similarities lies in the fact that both sociology and philosophy attempt to circumvent the division of labour in order to gain knowledge of those areas that cannot be made a topic of analysis because of such division (for an elaboration of this see ItS:101-102). Unlike (social) philosophy, however, sociology aims to do this by employing empirical methods to investigate social reality. Another reason for the seemingly speculative character of Adorno's works is his style of writing and his use of what were by then controversial philosophical concepts. As we saw in Chapter 2, however, and as will become even clearer below, these seemingly speculative concepts are attempts to penetrate beneath the immediate appearance of a social phenomena and at the same time they are quite similar to the concepts employed in more traditional approaches to sociology. Thus, there are no grounds to assert that Adorno's sociology is only speculative philosophy in another guise, although it must be stressed that in order for sociology to be more than a mere duplication of society, it needs concepts and categories that escape our common-sense understanding of a situation.

Adorno's concept of sociology should also be considered in relation to history. It will be remembered from Chapter 1 that reification should be understood in part as stemming from our tendency to forget the origins of a concept. This tendency, however, is not confined to concepts but should be understood as pertaining to all social phenomena, including social rituals or other types of institutionalised behaviour ('routines' in Giddens' terminology). This means that it is impossible to distinguish clearly between sociology and history, since the aspects of social phenomena studied in

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<sup>24</sup> Adorno's refusal to accept the division of labour may have been one of the principal sources of the misunderstandings surrounding his sociological project. Criticisms of his work have often emphasised the highly speculative and anti-empirical nature of most of his publications in sociology with the exception of *The Authoritarian Personality* (cf. the discussion in the Introduction of this issue). Since the latter was published when Adorno was in exile, it has often been suggested that he participated in this research programme out of necessity, rather than interest. As should be clear by now, however, these views are mistaken, since even after his return to Germany Adorno voluntarily got involved in several empirical studies where he tried to apply what he had learned in the States to a German context (for a discussion of this see for instance Müller-Doohm 1996).

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sociology are nothing other than ‘the history stored up in these phenomena’ (ItS:146).<sup>25</sup> There are two reasons why the origins of social phenomena are important to sociological analysis. Firstly, only by remembering the struggle and suffering that gave rise to certain phenomena (i.e. certain ‘critical situations’) are we able to appreciate those routine dimensions of our everyday life that we have come to take for granted. Whenever we forget how our present situation originated and developed, we risk regressing to an earlier stage that we ought to have mastered and learnt from and we risk forgetting the meaning and hope that was originally tied to these routines thereby resulting in a ‘loss of meaning’. In the last instance the elimination of the historical dimension from sociology puts us at risk of squandering both what our society has already learned and its capacity to go on learning. This brings us to the second reason that history is an important element in sociology. When the origins of certain phenomena are borne in mind we are constantly reminded that things are not necessarily what they are today but that they *have* been different and therefore also *could* be different in the future. In other words, reflection on history enables us to see the present (the ‘real’) in the light of the future (the ‘possible’). Below, we will look at how this historical dimension can be revitalised in concrete sociological studies.

Before turning to an explication of Adorno’s (implicit) theory of the individual let me summarise the three most important aspects of sociology’s relationship with the other (social) sciences and the reasons why we should bear these in mind in reconstructing his methodology. 1) First of all, because the object of sociology, society, is not confined to one area but can be found in virtually all subject areas the division of labour between the social sciences should not be upheld strictly. This means that in studying a particular phenomenon one should draw extensively on other, non-sociological perspectives that afford a different view. For instance, in studying ‘the world of music’ one must take into consideration aspects seemingly far removed from sociology such as how the music itself (i.e. its harmonies and rhythm and other aspects that are normally the province of musicology) should be understood and how it is possible to connect these aspects to other more sociological questions (e.g. the identity of the musicians, the function of music for society etc). Only by letting all these facets of a subject area influence each other and the understanding we have of the area can we advance to a *transdisciplinary* approach to the (social) sciences. 2) Second, the importance that Adorno attributed to history should orient our attention towards the ‘history that is stored up in the phenomena’. That is, we must seek to uncover the *process* that has made a given phenomenon what it is today in order to be properly aware of the effort and suffering entailed in bringing it into existence. We can properly understand the phenomenon only if we take into account the hopes and expectations that were originally bound up with it. 3) Finally, in order to break out of our reified language practices we should not be afraid to employ abstract categories and speculative concepts, so long as we remember to

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<sup>25</sup> In this respect Adorno’s definition of sociology does not differ essentially from that of other social theorists. In his outline of social science in *Constitution of Society* Anthony Giddens writes that: ‘If social science is not, and cannot be, the history of the present, and if it is not, and cannot be, concerned simply with generalizations out of time and space, what distinguishes social science from history? I think we have to reply, as Durkheim did...: nothing – nothing, that is, which is conceptually coherent or intellectually defensible. If there are divisions between social science and history, they are substantive divisions of labour; there is no logical or methodological schism’ (Giddens 1984:357-358). That there are ‘no logical or methodological schisms’ between any of the social sciences (including history) is exactly the point that Adorno is making, and it is for this reason that he should be considered an adherent of transdisciplinary research instead of interdisciplinary.

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connect them to the 'material of experience'. Only by challenging our immediate experience and understanding of the phenomena (through 'second reflections') can we hope to circumvent the disenchantment of language. This is one of the fundamental reasons why philosophy has a crucial place in Social Physiognomics as well.

We need to bear these issues in mind in our attempt to extract the methodological rules of Social Physiognomics from Adorno's philosophy. Before doing this, however, we still need to examine Adorno's view of the relationship between the individual and society. By embarking from a discussion of his theory of the individual, we will also be able to reflect on the relationship between sociology and another discipline with which it is frequently contrasted, namely psychology.

#### b. Anxiety and Object-Libido: Adorno's 'Theory' of the Individual

A central discussion in sociology since its very beginning has concerned the relationship between the individual and society. Several commentators have suggested that it is possible to identify two primary paradigms in social theory that are divided precisely on this issue: one that stems from Durkheim's focus on society as a 'social fact' and on the influence of this structure on individuals, the other formed around Weber's analysis of the 'spirit of capitalism' and of the structural changes that can be seen as a consequence of changes in people's conduct and the meaning ascribed by people to their actions (see for instance Brante 1984; Ritzer 1996:621-650). Although there has been much criticism of this dualism and several authors (most notably Giddens and Bourdieu) have attempted to reformulate it, it nevertheless serves as a good point of entry to a discussion of the formal-sociological aspects of Adorno's work, and especially to his view the individual. I will aim to elaborate Adorno's theory of individual a) by considering what, in Adorno's view, characterises the individual, her conduct and her awareness of it; b) by comparing Adorno's implicit theory with Giddens' stratification model of the agent, since there are crucial convergences between the two, not least because they are both inspired by Freud; and finally, c) by relating this conception of the individual to the discussion of 'aesthetic experiences' presented in Chapter 1 in order to see how this is connected to a crucial aspect of the individual's conduct, namely her everyday routines.

Ad a) In one of his essays on empirical sociology Adorno gives some clues as to how we should understand his conception of the individual: here he says that it is possible to distinguish between, and to study, three distinct 'levels' of the individual. First of all, one must study the '*conscious opinions*' of individuals and their manifest views on whatever subject one is studying. Second, this has to be supplemented with an examination of the '*attitudes*' held by the individual, which should be understood as something more pervasive than mere opinions, for instance ideological convictions or world views. Finally, the effect of these attitudes and opinions must be ascertained by studying the actual '*conduct*' of individuals. Thus, for example, the behaviour of an individual who holds very negative views on immigration does not necessarily accord with such views (Adorno et al. 1975:332). However, it is not enough to focus on the stated, conscious opinions and attitudes of the individual. One must also consider at least two other aspects of the individual's actions: firstly, what Adorno calls 'reflex actions', by which he means 'the great majority of the so-called 'social actions' of human beings [which are not] carried out...in relation to some imagined social goal but more-or-less as reflex actions' (ItS:107). While these 'reflex actions' do not immediately influence the conscious opinions and attitudes of people

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(because the agents take these actions for granted and do not reflect on them) there is nevertheless nothing that suggests that it could not be brought to the attention of the individuals in certain situations. We must, therefore, distinguish between two different types of *conduct*, namely the 'ideal typical' form of conduct that serves as the ground for Weber's definition of sociology (i.e. actions which individuals imbue with subjective meaning) and those which are merely carried out as a reflex. Let us call this latter type of conduct 'reflex actions' and the former 'ego actions' (because they originate in the individual's 'ego'). Secondly, the typology of the individual must also include aspects that are more clearly related to her psychological constitution. For this reason, those psychological processes that serve as the motivational background for the conduct of individuals must be taken into account because 'naturally, ostensible subjective aims play a part (for the individual's conduct, CH), but only within a network of drives...and impulses [and] psychologically expressive actions' (ItS:107). However, these unconscious parts of the individual's psychological make-up do not only serve as motivation for their actions but must be seen as potentially exerting a direct influence not only on the attitudes and opinions of people but also on their conduct (i.e. it can be discerned as, for instance, 'traces' in their self-understanding). Although the individual in a given situation may believe herself to be acting in a certain way because of some clearly devised goal, her unconscious motives for acting as she does may directly contradict her stated goals. This situation is best captured by a term that has become highly unfashionable over the last couple of decades, namely *false consciousness*. In using this term I am not of course suggesting that there exist two types of persons, those with adequate and those with false consciousness. In this respect it will be fruitful to remember the famous dictum from *Minima Moralia*: 'Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen' (Adorno 1969:42). One could easily paraphrase this dictum as follows: 'there is no adequate consciousness in the administered world'. In our disenchanted world everybody's experience is reduced and so is our knowledge of the world; however, it must be emphasised that everyone possesses the potential to have 'unregimented experiences' and hence to gain a more adequate understanding of the world. Of course this does not mean that everyone has equal opportunities to realise their potential, since such opportunities are to a great degree determined by the social system. From these clues on the constitution of the individual in the (formal) sociology of Adorno it is possible to (re)construct a more schematised conception of the actor: one that is implicit in Adorno's sociological analyses and which follows logically from our analysis of his work so far, even though he never formulated it explicitly.<sup>26</sup> We can carry out this reconstruction by comparing Adorno's theory of the individual with that of Giddens, and it is to this task that we turn now.

Ad b) Because Adorno was highly influenced by Freud in his discussion of the individual and adopted many of the latter's concepts, it will be helpful to model this reconstructed conception of the individual on another theoretician who is also greatly indebted to Freud. In his magnum opus, *The*

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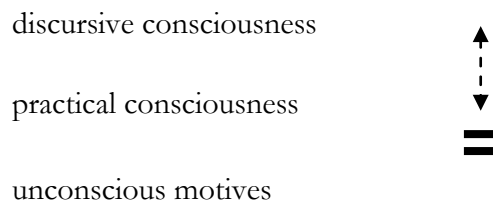
<sup>26</sup> The construction of a conception of the individual may seem to contradict Adorno's general philosophical project. He emphasised time and again the impossibility of positing any 'first principles' on which to base a philosophy and it follows from this that it is also impossible to sketch a conception of the individual (or an 'anthropology') as a foundation for sociological analyses. However, as Stefan Breuer argues, it is only a *positive* anthropology that cannot be sketched. An outline of a *negative* anthropology is 'justified...in the sense of a "turn to second nature" which describes human beings and their relations as petrifications, as sedimentations of the now completely autonomous structure in which they are trapped' (Breuer 1994:128). Thus while we cannot describe human nature as such (because it is thoroughly historicised and therefore impossible to discern) we can describe what human nature has become (that is, 'second nature') and this is exactly what we need for the purposes of sociological analyses.



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*Constitution of Society*, Anthony Giddens provides the outlines for a ‘stratification model of the agent’ that draws upon the Freudian distinctions between ego, id and superego. According to Giddens, this model has to be reformulated so as to incorporate what Giddens terms ‘practical consciousness’, i.e. a type of routine conduct of which one is not discursively conscious, but which at the same time is not unconscious. This level of the consciousness should rather be understood as practical and therefore as founded in the body. A model of this stratification of the agent can be seen in Figure 1 below (for an elaboration of these ideas see Giddens 1984:5-14, 41-64).

**Figure 1: Giddens’ Stratification Model of the Agent**



It is easy to see that this model converges in several respects with that which emerges from Adorno’s work. Firstly, Giddens’ insistence that ‘a theory of motivation is crucial because it supplies the conceptual links between the rationalisation of action and the framework of convention’ (Giddens 1979:59) echoes Adorno’s (albeit undeveloped) idea that ‘the subjective aims’ of actions (‘the rationalisation of action’) play a role only ‘within a network of drives and impulses’ (‘the unconscious motivation’) and one should therefore considered whether a type of conduct is a ‘reflex action’ rather than an ‘ego action’. In other words, social theory cannot do without an elaborate theory of motivation that includes other motives – including unconscious ones – besides ‘rationality’. Secondly, what Giddens calls ‘practical consciousness’ could easily stand in for Adorno’s idea of ‘reflex actions’, since it refers to actions which are carried out not because of some explicit goal (as is implied by Weber’s idea of social action), but because they are taken for granted.

One crucial aspect of Giddens’ model which would seem to run counter to Adorno’s idea of ‘reflex actions’ is his notion of the ‘bodily’ character of consciousness. In his lectures on sociology there are no references to an embodiment of this level of the consciousness. However, given his insistence on the importance of our belonging to the natural world, and his implicit emphasis therefore on the body, this is in no way implausible. That there are indeed close links between the body and our consciousness can be seen from the quotation below:

“There is no sensation without a somatic moment...While sensation is a part of consciousness...its phenomenology...would have to describe it equally as that which consciousness does not exhaust. Every sensation is a physical feeling also...The somatic moment as the not purely cognitive part of cognition is irreducible...” (ND:193-194).

Adorno takes the view that there is nothing that is purely mental because consciousness is part of our bodily existence. Thus it would seem that our knowledge is always inscribed in our bodies and that all

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cognition (and therefore also learning) requires a practical or bodily effort. This also helps explain why 'subjects themselves today represent a large part of ideology'. Because the reproduction of society in the final analysis depends on subjects, it is their capacity for *changing* society that is crucial if any major social changes are to occur. However, 'subjects today are a negative moment; like all ideology, they are more ponderous, slower to change direction...and society maintains itself precisely through this *inertia of the subjects*' (ItS:152, my emphasis). It is 'the psychological composition of individual people' that functions as 'a cement' that integrates society in its subjective moments. But it is easier to understand this thesis if the 'inertia of the subjects' is interpreted as a result of the embodiment of the subject's 'psychical composition'.<sup>27</sup> Although this elaboration of Adorno's theory of the individual may be somewhat oversimplified (i.e. compared to the treatment by Sherratt, Whitebook, Benjamin: see for instance Benjamin 1994; Whitebook 1995:132-164; Sherratt 2002), it nevertheless serves to introduce the most crucial aspects of his thinking about the individual in relation to sociological issues: aspects that need to be borne in mind when sketching his rules of sociological methodology. Adorno's emphasis on these unconscious motivational factors naturally influences his approach to the analysis of the individual's attitudes and opinions. In his study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno acknowledges the existence of such drives and motivational factors and argues that it is precisely these unconscious aspects of their psychology that make certain individuals susceptible to fascist propaganda. While these insights concerning the interconnection between individual and societal processes may seem a bit trivial, they are in fact crucial for an empirically-oriented sociology, because it follows from them that it is impossible to conduct sociological analyses without explicitly taking into account psychological factors such as the motivational background for certain actions. In practice, very few sociologists acknowledge this and it is therefore worth emphasising just how important Adorno thought this point to be.

Adorno's analysis in *The Authoritarian Personality* indicates how closely, in his view, psychology and sociology are connected. It is impossible to understand the psychological processes in an individual without also considering the impact on her of the society she lives in. It is a bit trivial to conclude that we can have no society without individuals and vice versa: let us say rather that society affects the direction of our libido (i.e. whether it is directed towards the world or towards our selves) and hence the (unconscious) motivation behind our actions, just as these in turn affect the constitution of society (since society is reproduced by our actions). Although it would seem as if Adorno, in emphasising the role of both sociology and psychology, grants primacy to the latter (especially in the light of the frequent references to psychoanalysis in most of his sociological works) this is by no means the case. On the contrary he states explicitly that 'psychology may not be regarded as the basic science of the

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted, however, that although Adorno alludes to the bodily character of our consciousness (and therefore of 'ideology') this cannot be equated completely with what Bourdieu at times has called 'symbolic violence' (see for instance Bourdieu 2001). For the latter, domination is never purely discursive and cannot therefore be overcome by 'enlightening' people about their situation. Domination, according to Bourdieu, must instead be seen as incorporated into the *habitus* of individuals in such a way that enlightenment needs to become practical in order to escape from domination (i.e. people's *conduct*, and not only their consciousness, has to change in order for domination to be abolished). For Adorno, the bodily character of domination is more complicated because it is closely intertwined with psychological aspects of the individual that must be taken into account. In this respect his stance is much closer to that of Slavoy Žižek, who argues that 'the fundamental level of ideology...is not an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself' (Žižek 1989:32-33) (for an elaboration of the similarities between Adorno's view of ideology and that advanced by Žižek see Morris 2001:87-91).

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social sciences' (OLS:119). Thus, for Adorno sociology was the most important of the (social) sciences even if sociology cannot stand alone but must draw heavily on its neighbouring disciplines. Having clarified this, we still need to connect this understanding of the individual with some of the issues discussed in Chapter 1.

Ad c) We can now turn to the more substantive issues in Giddens' stratification model of the agent as they appear in the light of Adorno's views on social psychology (i.e. his 'negative anthropology') and on the reduction of experience. This discussion will shed light on what to make of the distinction between concept formation and concept possession in sociological analyses, since this will enable us to see how 'identity-thinking' and the 'principle of immanence' influence social practices directly. A crucial element in Giddens' action theory is that he sees anxiety as 'the most generalized motivational origin of human conduct' (Giddens 1984:54). This explains why routines are an important part of the everyday conduct of individuals, since they help create order in a world that is initially 'chaotic'. The routines that make up most of our everyday conduct thus generate a feeling of 'ontological security' that helps keep this anxiety at bay (for an elaboration of this see Giddens 1984:41-64; 1991:35-69). Adorno completely agrees with Giddens on the importance of anxiety: '*Anxiety* constitutes a...crucial subjective motive of objective rationality' (SoPs:71). However, whereas Giddens sees anxiety as an inherent, unchangeable aspect of our psychological make-up, Adorno considers it to be closely connected to our current historical situation: 'In the course of history this anxiety has become second nature' (Ibid, translation altered). As we saw in Chapter 1, the unknown is the ultimate cause of anxiety:

"Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment...Enlightenment is mythical anxiety radicalized...Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the 'outside' is the real source of anxiety" (DoE:11, translation altered).

In our everyday conduct, a further source of anxiety is anything 'outside' or disruptive of our routines, i.e. 'critical situations' that undermine our sense of 'ontological security'. 'Critical situations' should not be seen as the small disruptions and alterations that occur in our everyday routine conduct, but instead 'circumstance[s] of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind...that threaten to destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines' (Giddens 1984:61). In this respect we can compare 'critical situations' to those 'anomalies' in science that pave the way for 'paradigm changes' that we discussed in Chapter 1. Although Giddens talks of 'critical situations' almost exclusively in negative terms there is no reason why we cannot think of them as 'positive' as well (that is, critical situations arise not only from negative phenomena such as sickness and divorce but from such events as falling in love, winning the lottery or getting an unexpected job opportunity). If we accept this it will be clear that 'critical situations' may also encompass those in which we (ideally) have 'aesthetic' experiences (i.e. those situations in which our present knowledge and expectations are inadequate, and in which we therefore have to 'grant primacy to the object' in order for us to make new sense of it). In other words, 'critical situations' are the sociological equivalent to concept formation in discussion of conceptuality while routine conduct of course is equal to concept possession.

This raises a whole series of questions with regard to everyday routine conduct. Does it follow from this, for instance, that *all* everyday routines are 'problematic' in the sense that people following them only have 'regimented experiences'? If this is the case it would be impossible to explain how one could

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ever 'learn' from past experiences as the routinisation of conduct that is implied in situations of learning would be nothing more than 'regimented experiences'. In order to answer this we must recall one of the dictums cited in Chapter 1: 'All reification is forgetting' (DoE:191). In relation to conduct what Adorno is telling us here is that everyday routine conduct first becomes reified and hence a site for 'regimented experiences' when the routines are uncoupled from the 'critical situations' that gave rise to them in the first place. Only when we *forget* why we are participating in the routines that make up our everyday conduct do we fall prey to this reductive type of experience. Whenever this happens, routine conduct is maintained only because it serves as a tool to keep anxiety at bay. According to Adorno this is the dominant trend in late capitalist society<sup>28</sup>, which is why Giddens' stratification model of the agent serves so well as an analysis of the current state the individual.

We can also look at this uncoupling of routines and critical situations in terms of the distinction between 'aesthetic' and 'regimented experiences' and the relationship between these experiences and the psychology of the individual. In situations where 'regimented experiences' are primary and our consciousness is, therefore, pervaded by 'identity-thinking' our relation to the situation (the 'object') is only 'instrumental'. This means that the substantive meaning of the routines is lost and that our conduct is of value to us primarily because of its interconnection to other routines and the sense of (ontological) security this gives us. For this reason, our investment of psychic energies in the situation is only partially object-related (i.e. driven by a desire to reach some kind of social goal). The result is that the individual becomes narcissistic: because of the disenchantment of the world we are unlikely to have 'aesthetic experiences' and this means that the world cannot provide us with 'interesting' objects that could become the target of our libido. Instead, our psychic structures regress and our libido is directed at ourselves: object-libido is replaced by ego-libido (for an elaboration of this claim see Breuer 1994:122-123; Sherratt 2002:105-110). Through this process our relation to the world is also changed. Instead of providing us with objects that could become the targets of our libido (and therefore a source of desire, joy and happiness) it is conceived of only as a potential threat to our egos and therefore ultimately as a source of anxiety. Adorno contrasts such situations with those in which we have 'aesthetic experiences', i.e. those in which we 'grant primacy to the object' so that our libido is outward-directed. In such situations our routine conduct is considered a goal in itself: something which we can potentially 'lose ourselves in' and which satisfies and nurtures that part of our libido that is directed at objects outside ourselves.<sup>29</sup>

It is possible to draw two conclusions from these discussions that are important in relation to methodological questions. 1) It follows from the stratification of the individual's consciousness and

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<sup>28</sup> It will be remembered that this was also one of the crucial claims of Weber's analysis of modern societies in which he claimed that the rationalisation of society brought about a 'bureaucratisation of everyday life'. According to Weber, this process resulted in a 'missing link' between those aspects of conduct that gives meaning to the individual and those she has to participate in so as to reproduce society. In other words, the routines that make up society become uncoupled from the 'critical situations' that gave rise to these routines.

<sup>29</sup> The distinctions between 'regimented' and 'aesthetic experiences' and 'ego'- and 'object-libido' can be reformulated as the distinction between anxiety and hope as the primary unconscious motivational factor for individuals. In situations where our libido is directed at objects in the world (and we are thus open to 'aesthetic experiences') it is not anxiety but primarily *hope* which motivates us. In other words, the major problem of the disenchantment of the world is that the objects of the world and our relations to them cease to provide us with hope (for a discussion of the lack of hope as the dialectical opposite to anxiety in Giddens' stratification model of the agent see Hansen 2002).

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conduct that each level must be studied equally thoroughly and that this can only be done by employing a diversity of methods. For instance, it is impossible to grasp the attitudes of the individual (her 'ideology' or 'world-view') from any *one* statement. We can understand them only by employing different scales or by relating different aspects of her opinions to each other (i.e. by constructing a constellation). The same goes for her conduct, especially those aspects of it that she is not discursively aware of (i.e. her everyday routines) or those that are motivated at the level of the unconscious. One approach to the analysis of individual attitudes is to search for contradictions in order immanently to criticise the self-understanding of the individual and hence reveal those aspects that are 'non-identical' to it. These 'non-identical' aspects might be 'traces' of the unconscious motivational background. I will discuss these issues further below. For now, suffice it to say that this is an important aspect of Adorno's theory of the individual and one that also has clear consequences for his methodology. 2) Another, equally important and overlapping issue concerns the unconscious motivation behind individual conduct. In the light of the disenchantment thesis it is especially interesting to examine how anxiety serves to perpetuate the routine conduct of people (for instance by leading them out of pure anxiety to carry out tasks that no longer have any meaning to them, though they do not realise the influence of anxiety on this) and thereby contributes to the 'inertia of subjects' that we mentioned above. Another equally crucial issue relates to 'critical situations' in which the individual may be even more susceptible to anxiety than in ordinary everyday situations (where routines keep the anxiety at bay). More importantly, however, 'critical situations' are crucial because the individual is forced into reconsidering her conduct and use her reflective judgement to construe new ways of acting (i.e. critical situations are similar to situations of concept formation and therefore 'grant primacy to the object'). In either respect 'critical situations' become paradigmatic sites for sociological analysis. Before exploring further the way in which this insight might be utilised for empirical research, however, we need to consider Adorno's view of the other side of sociology, namely society.

#### **c. Society as Subject and Object: Between Action Theory and Structural Sociologies**

At first sight it does not seem as if Adorno touches upon the crucial issue mentioned briefly at the beginning of the preceding part of this chapter, namely the distinction between 'action theoretical' and 'structural' sociologies. However, when one penetrates beneath the surface of Adorno's terminology it can be seen that he too operates with this distinction:

"For sociology has a dual character. In it, the subject of all knowledge – society, the bearer of logical generality – is at the same time the object. Society is subjective because it refers back to the human beings who create it, and its organizational principles too refer back to subjective consciousness and its most general form of abstraction – logic, something essentially subjective. Society is object because, on account of its underlying structure, it cannot perceive its own subjectivity, because it does not possess a total subject and through its organization thwarts the installation of such a subject" (ItPD:33).

The 'action theoretical' element in Adorno's sociology can be seen in his statement that 'society is subjective because it refers back to the human beings who create it'. However, society is also objective in the sense that these subjects are not aware of their role in (re)producing society; nor does contemporary sociology, and in particular positivism, help towards such awareness (because they perceive the relation between social phenomena as laws, i.e. as something objective and independent of

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individuals). Adorno's emphasis on the objective nature of society of course represents the structural element of his sociological theory. This emerges even more clearly in a different essay on *Society*, where Adorno writes that the '...resistance of society to rational comprehension should be understood first and foremost as the sign of relationships between men which have grown increasingly independent of them, opaque, now standing off against human beings like some different substance' (Soc:270). Adorno's statement that society is perceived as 'some different substance' can only be interpreted as meaning that what should ideally be subjective (that is, created by human beings) has come to appear as something completely external and alien to them (that is, as something objective and therefore unalterable). The insistence on both an objective and a subjective aspect of society testifies of course to the dialectical character of Adorno's sociology (and it explains why he is critical and appreciative of both Weber and Durkheim: see Rose 1978:82-86; Jarvis 1998:44-48).

Having clarified what Adorno means by his assertion that society is both subject and object and investigated the subjective aspects of society (discussed in the preceding section), it is time to concentrate on those aspects that he terms objective, i.e. *the structural aspects of society*. From his discussions of society it is possible to extract *four* central claims about society:

1. society is a *totality*,
2. it can best be described as a *system*,
3. it can be defined only in terms of its *functional aspects*, not in terms of any substantive characteristics
4. finally, it is a *critical* category rather than an affirmative one.

Let us examine these four claims in turn:

Ad 1) As will be remembered, one of the primary criticisms that Adorno raised against both positivism and Grounded Theory was that they were unable to conceive of the 'societal totality', which meant that their sociologies were essentially subjective. This assertion poses one of the principal problems in Adorno's sociology, for it appears highly abstract and therefore difficult to relate to concrete problems in sociology.<sup>30</sup> In order to understand it, we need to piece together the various clues taken from all Adorno's sociological essays, since at no point does he present a fully-fledged account of society as it appeared to him.

In one of his essays Adorno writes that 'in the democratically governed countries of industrial societies, *totality is a category of mediation*, not one of immediate domination and subjugation' (OLS:107, my emphasis). What does he mean by saying that 'totality is a category of mediation'? To understand this it will be fruitful to remember his idea that we cannot take the individual 'facts' of empirical sociology for granted, since they are not in themselves what constitutes society, but are rather *an expression of society*. It follows from this that society as a totality is that which influences or *mediates* the facts, so that they appear to us the way they do. In sociological terms Adorno emphasises that 'the

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<sup>30</sup> In fact it is often argued that the philosophical character of this concept makes nonsense of Adorno's idea that it is essential to consider society as a totality. Thus, Christel Beier argues that the concept is so closely connected to its Hegelian origins that it cannot escape the untenable consequences of the latter's philosophy. One of the most problematic aspects of the concept, according to Beier, is the statement that society is a *concept* because this presupposes central parts of Hegel's philosophy which cannot in any obvious way be transferred to social theory (for an elaboration of these claims see Beier 1976).

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concept of society refers to *a relationship between people*' (ItS:37, my emphasis) and is thus 'a relational category' (ItS:42). If we understand society as 'the network of social relations between human beings' (AoS:31), it is much easier to understand what Adorno means by saying that 'totality is a category of mediation'. This explains why we cannot rely on a *single* 'fact', since that fact is always related intrinsically to other 'facts' and 'influenced' by this relationship, and indeed it is this 'influence' that is sociology's proper object of study. While this still sounds very abstract Adorno continually emphasises that the impact of society must be studied in its concrete manifestations, since it does not exist beyond the facts that mediate it and are mediated by it. In fact, the mediation does not take place *between* individuals and society but *in* them: '...mediation is never a middle element *between* extremes, as, since Kierkegaard, a deadly misunderstanding has depicted it as being; instead, mediation takes place *in* and *through* the extremes, *in* the extremes themselves' (HTS:8-9, my emphasis). At first sight this may seem to reveal a contradiction in Adorno's sociological thinking, for how can society be both 'a relationship *between* people' and a 'category of mediation that takes place *in* and *through*' the people themselves? I believe that we can best understand this if we consider society from two distinct yet interrelated perspectives: a 'natural' and a 'social' perspective. From the perspective of 'nature' (in which society is seen as a means of self-preservation) society consists of the network of relations that exists *among* individuals and *between* individuals and nature (Ritsert 1988:196-199). These relations can assume different forms, whether instrumental, mimetic or something else. However, we become aware of individuals, society, nature and the relations that exist between them only by conceptualising them, i.e. we can only grasp these elements in so far as they are mediated in and through our consciousness. For this reason, the apparent contradiction should be understood as arising from Adorno's double perspective, i.e. from the fact that all phenomena possess both an immanent ('natural') logic and a ('social') logic pertaining to their status as 'social facts'. In this sense, society is both a relationship *between* people and a category of mediation *in* and *through* them.

This conception of society also has consequences for empirical sociology: one of the charges raised against the idea of society as a totality is the impossibility of studying this phenomenon empirically. In this regard it is instructive to refer to Ulrich Beck, who discusses the possibility of studying 'globalization' empirically, a proposition that seems as impossible as studying society as a *totality*:

"In the globalization discourse, one often finds the assumption that globalization only changes the relations *between* and beyond the national states and societies..., but not the inner quality of the social and political itself...But globalization includes globalization *from within*, globalization *internalized*...From this one can draw the most important implication. There is no need for the global to be investigated totally globally" (Beck 2001:184, my emphasis)

Neither do we need to investigate society as a totality in total. Instead we should aim to reveal how society manifests itself immanently in and through individuals (or through whatever cultural artefacts are being analysed), for instance through their self-understanding. If we follow this task the idea of studying society as a totality does not seem so difficult anymore. Having clarified this, however, it will be interesting to discuss how certain *forms* of relations between people come to dominate society, as implied by the disenchantment thesis discussed in Chapter 1. The dominance of certain relations is real,

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even though these may manifest themselves differently in different situations, since they are mediated by subjects and objects in a particular context.<sup>31</sup>

Although there may indeed be certain *forms* of relation that dominate in a particular society, however, it is not possible to reduce all these relations to examples of the *same* form or to explain them on the basis of the same societal mechanisms. Nonetheless, this is precisely what Adorno is commonly understood to be saying: a misunderstanding of which even very learned Adorno scholars, such as Gillian Rose, are guilty (but see also Beier 1976; Ritsert 1988; Reußwig & Scharping 1988). In her monograph Rose argues for the view that in Adorno's account reification and the form of relationship pertaining to (commodity) exchange in capitalist societies are the sole models for the relations between human beings (Rose 1978:141). And while it is true that Adorno attributes extraordinarily great importance to the influence of the commodity form over relations between human beings in general, he does not reduce all relations to this form. Most interpretations of Adorno stress what he has in common with Marx and Weber, and the fact that he follows Lukács in fusing their theoretical perspectives (see for instance Buck-Morss 1977; Rose 1978; Bernstein 2001; Morris 2001). What is often forgotten, however, is that Adorno frequently refers to another almost forgotten sociologist from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely Herbert Spencer, and in particular draws on Spencer's idea of a complementary relationship between *integration* and *differentiation*. Spencer's most crucial contribution, according to Adorno, was that he 'was the first to diagnose the integrative tendenc[ies] of society' (ItS:24). Although Adorno modifies Spencer's insights, he does not deem irrelevant those factors that Spencer considered responsible for societal integration. In other words, 'the increasing size of the social aggregate; the interaction between society and its units; those between a society and its neighbouring societies; and the accumulation of 'superorganic products', such as material implements, language, knowledge and works of art' (AoS:28) are all factors that contribute to the increasing integration and differentiation of society, and which therefore have to be taken into account when analysing social phenomena. However, differentiation and the commodity form share (at least) one crucial aspect that has profound importance for the *form* of the relations that exist between human beings in modern societies: they render these relations more *anonymous* and *abstract*. By abstract Adorno means that the particular qualities of an object or a person are rendered increasingly irrelevant because they are subsumed under more general characteristics. The most obvious example of this is of course the abstraction that takes place when objects are produced solely for the sake of their exchange-value instead of their use-value. 'In this exchange in terms of average social labour time the specific forms of the objects to be exchanged are necessarily disregarded; instead, they are reduced to a universal unit' (ItS:32). Thus, through the production of commodities the particular qualities of the commodity (its use-value) come to have no significance at all compared to the commodity's value as an object of exchange (its

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<sup>31</sup> In more than one respect Adorno's view of society resembles that of Georg Simmel, who was the first to emphasise relations as the primary object of study in sociology (for an elaboration of this see Simmel 1910). This is not surprising in view of the influence that Kracauer and especially Benjamin exerted on Adorno: David Frisby has argued for close similarities between Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin (for an elaboration of this see Frisby 1985). However, we must not forget that Adorno's perspective is clearly Hegelian, whereas Simmel adheres to a branch of neo-Kantianism. This is most evident in Adorno's discussion of the nature of relations and the existence of mediation, a concept that is more or less alien to Simmel's approach. For Simmel society consisted not of a dialectical relationship but of 'reciprocal interaction' [Wechselwirkung] (for an elaboration of Hegel's influence on Adorno's theory of society see Reußwig & Scharping 1988; Ritsert 1988:194-231).



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exchange-value). Another source of anonymisation and abstraction lies in the increase in population and hence the increased number of relations between human beings (what Durkheim referred to as 'dynamic density': see Durkheim 1947:201-205). These factors are often seen as the source of the 'complexity of modern societies' (AoS:148-149), although in Adorno's view this complexity is an aspect of society's 'appearance' rather than its 'essence' (because the form of relations becomes increasingly integrated and similar, rather than more diverse).

It is not difficult to see how the relationship between use-value and exchange-value is equivalent to that between non-identity and identity. What is disregarded in the object when it is being exchanged are all those aspects of it which are non-identical to its exchange-value: 'Exchange is the social model of the principle of identification, and without the principle there would be no exchange; it is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical' (ND:146, translation altered). This points to the fact that both 'identity thinking' and the commodity form are related to the same fundamental feature of contemporary society, the 'principle of immanence'. Bernstein's account of Adorno's thinking shows how the process of disenchantment is connected with his concept of society discussed above:

"Hence, in his account of the disenchanting of the world, Adorno contends that not only does it eliminate previous *objects* of ethical esteem, but more emphatically and importantly it eliminates what I want to call *forms of object relation*...Disenchantment thus effects not only beliefs...but even more significantly our *modes of cognitive interaction with objects*" (Bernstein 2001:32).

If we bear in mind that human beings are also always objects as well as subjects, it becomes clear that one of Adorno's principal claims is that the disenchantment of the world has rendered impossible certain *forms of relations* between human beings. Bernstein mentions relations of authority as one example of the type of relationship that has vanished, but in the context of disenchantment love and friendship are also difficult to maintain (for an elaboration of this claim see Bernstein 2001:40-74). We could find other examples of such relations, but in order to do so we need to engage in empirical studies in which social phenomena are related to the societal totality. What is instructive for our purposes is to remember that society is made up of (a diversity of) relations and that the 'influence' of these on individual social phenomena manifests itself immanently *in and through* these 'social facts'.

Since society consists of relations between human beings which can never be seen as 'facts' (but rather as that which mediates and is mediated by such facts) it is, as Adorno points out, 'a societal law that decisive structures of the social process...cannot become apparent without the intervention of theory' (ItPD:11). This points to the second decisive aspect of Adorno's concept of society: the 'conceptual nature of social objectivity itself' (ItS:43), which can be explained only in connection to the idea of society as a *system*.

Ad 2) What does it mean to say that society is a system or that there exists a 'systemic character located within society itself' (ItS:43)? To pursue the discussion above, one could say that the 'network of relations' and the typical form that such relations take in modern society resembles a system and therefore displays systemic qualities. For Adorno a system should be understood as 'an order imposed in a somewhat abstract way' (ItS:43) which is principally characterised by 'mechanisms of separation' rather than a sense of 'togetherness'. In other words, instead of thinking of society in terms of an organism that is bound together 'immediately' and in which 'each organ would receive its function in

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the whole and derive its meaning from the latter' (ItPD:37), it should be seen as an abstract and anonymising system that has become independent of the human beings that reproduce it. The main reason for abandoning a concept of society based on the idea of an organism is that the primary relation that binds the parts to the totality is one of mediation, not of immediacy, and is thus *conceptual*. We can see this by examining the effects of the exchange relationship: Since exchange value is 'merely a mental configuration when compared with use value' (SaER:80), the foundation for the dominant form of relationship in capitalist societies is essentially conceptual. In other words, the exchange relationship implies a *mediation* of that which constitutes the relationship, because exchange value, like language, arises out of human interaction and has little or no connection with whatever is being exchanged.

The question arises, however, as to whether it is possible to understand the conceptual nature of these relations solely by reference to exchange, since this would invoke the kind of reductionism Rose pointed to above. However, in one of Adorno's contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality*, where he discusses the origin and nature of types and stereotypes, he also implicitly refers to increasing differentiation as a source of mediation (and thus as an argument for seeing society as a system). One of Simmel's crucial insights is that we cannot navigate in the social world without the help of types. Just as we 'identify' and categorise in order to distinguish between different objects, so we use typifications as a mean of distinguishing between different people and their social roles. In highly differentiated societies, however, there is a risk that these types will become stereotypical, and that everything that falls outside the type will be neglected and deemed irrelevant (for an elaboration of these claims see Simmel 1910:378-381). Adorno sees differentiation as the reason for our use of social types and stereotypes, which - in connection to other social processes - creates 'psychological classes' (AP, 2:747). To the extent that these types and stereotypes are not based on the essential characteristics of the people to whom they are applied, they are merely 'mental configurations' and as such can be considered mediations, just as was the case with exchange value.<sup>32</sup> Like exchange value, stereotypes make the relations and interaction between human beings more abstract, anonymous and devoid of substantive meaning. It is precisely this quality of abstractness and anonymity that leads Adorno to use the concept of 'the system' to describe society. This distinction between the organic and the systemic view leads us to the third feature of society as Adorno sees it, namely *its functional character*.

Ad 3) In Adorno's view, the relations which constitute society are not arbitrary or accidental. Ultimately, human beings enter into such relations for reasons of self-preservation, and they should therefore be seen as *functional relations*: in fact, 'this functional interrelationship...is what I mean first and foremost by society' (ItS:30). That society consists of functional relationships means first of all that human beings define themselves by reference to the function they fulfil in relation to society as a whole. In defence of this view Adorno points to the concept of *roles* in sociology:

"This notion is derived from the pure being-for-others of individual men, from that which binds them together with one another in social constraint, unreconciled, each unidentical with himself. Human beings find their 'roles' in that structural mechanism of society...It is no accident that the notion of 'role' (a notion

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno refers to these kinds of types as 'formal-logical' and contrasts them with 'genuine' types based on the real existence of 'standardised' individuals (i.e. individuals who are not merely perceived in a stereotypical way but whose conduct come to converge completely with typified behaviour, see AP, 2:749n2).

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which claims to be value-free) is derived from the theatre, where actors are not in fact the identities they play at being” (Soc:270).

Adorno’s claim here is that by identifying themselves with certain roles human beings are in fact defining themselves in relation to the function they have in the societal totality. This converges with a central tendency in the process of cognition in ‘identity-thinking’, namely that of saying what an object comes under instead of saying what it is (cf. the discussion in Chapter 1).

Although Adorno’s view of functional relations differs crucially from Parsons’ Structural Functionalism, of which he has highly critical (despite the similarities in their view of role theory), it is instructive to consider some of the criticisms made against Parsons because they might apply to Adorno’s thoughts as well. Giddens identifies four main problems with functionalism: a) the implicit division between synchronic and diachronic views of society, b) the lack of an account of the individual in functionalism c) the idea that societies can have ‘needs’ and finally d) the question as to whether functional explanations are in fact explanations (for a further elaboration of these points of criticism see Giddens 1981:15-19). Ad a) Adorno’s continual emphasis on the historical dimension of sociology and the fact that he wrote an entire article on the untenability of upholding a rigid distinction between the static and dynamic elements of society (see Adorno 1961) renders him immune to the first of Giddens’ criticisms. Ad b) Although Adorno does not develop an explicit theory of the individual it does not follow from this that he regards individuals as ‘cultural dopes’, which is the charge Giddens brings against the functionalism of Parsons and Althusser.<sup>33</sup> Ad c) Another crucial point brings us back to the discussion pursued in the Introduction and Chapter 1 as to the ‘nature’ of the social. It follows from Giddens’ refutation of the idea of society having needs that Giddens advocates a radical break between the social and the natural world, a division which Adorno would never accept. From the latter’s point of view sociality is always already *part of* the natural world. It therefore follows that one cannot appeal to the alleged difference between the natural and the social world as a reason to refute the idea of societies having needs. For Adorno society (as a mechanism for preserving life on an aggregate level) has needs just as all other parts of nature do. However, if we remember that societies are *not* similar to organisms (but are systemic instead) we cannot assume that their ‘needs’ are the same or should be defined in the same way.<sup>34</sup> Ad d) The final criticism raised by Giddens is that functional explanations do not really explain anything. That is, while we may identify certain characteristics of a society that must be present in order for the society to persist, we cannot thereby *explain why* this is so.

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<sup>33</sup> It is worth in this connection citing a passage where Adorno refers to an empirical study that made him change his view of individuals: “it turned out that many of the people interviewed...suddenly showed themselves to be thoroughly realistic, and proceeded to evaluate critically the political and social importance of the...event...I think that we can here glimpse a chance of maturity, which might just eventually help to turn free time into freedom proper” (Adorno 1991:196-197). Although we should not attribute too much significance to a single remark in a rather unimportant essay by Adorno it must be stressed that given this passage he could not have thought of individuals as pure ‘cultural dopes’.

<sup>34</sup> It may come as a surprise that Adorno’s philosophical thought in this respect quite explicitly resembles a form of naturalism, since he is often thought to be non-naturalistic and speculative in his account of nature. However, Bernstein attributes this speculative character to the fact that ‘Adorno had no access to modern ethology. But it is almost inevitable that we should see his genealogical naturalism as adumbrating a practice of genealogical reflection that would be ethologically informed. Not having access to ethological findings, Adorno’s genealogical naturalism thus becomes highly speculative. Equally relevant here...is Adorno’s employment of psychoanalytic thought. In that stretch of his work it is fair to say that he was interested precisely, in psychoanalysis’s conception of the transformation of the natural (drive theory) into the social, and the recurrent interplay between those two levels’ (Bernstein 2001:245n11).

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In other words, functional explanations are not explanations, they are only apologies. For Giddens, the institutional features of society (those which are often explained by means of functional explanations) must always be analysed in historical terms, since institutions are a 'result of concrete conditions' (Giddens 1981:18). There is nothing in this point of critique, however, that Adorno would disagree with. As we saw in his criticism of Benjamin, discussed in Chapter 2, Adorno does not accept references to abstract philosophical categories. Nor would he accept abstract references to function: he is interested in the term function only if it can count as an explanation of the concrete historical events that have led to the situation investigated. Only by investigating this historical chain of events can one understand the consequences they have for society as a whole and hence the function this particular 'fact' (for instance the individual) has for society. Although this makes more plausible Adorno's claim that society is a *functional interrelationship*, it does not explain how this claim can be reconciled with his assertion that 'totality is not an affirmative but rather a critical category' (ItPD:12).

Ad 4) When discussing the concept of society, including the features already discussed in the preceding three points, we should bear in mind that Adorno's concepts are *critical*. Thus, his concept of society is not affirmative in the sense that it does not merely describe how and why people are related to each other through the societal totality. Instead, 'dialectical critique seeks to salvage or help to establish what does not obey totality, what opposes it or what first forms itself as the potential of a not yet existent individuation' (ItPD:12). It is not enough merely to *describe* the societal totality because that would only be to 'duplicate' the reified and disenchanting world. Instead sociology must seek to find those aspects of the totality that stand in contradiction to each other and therefore point beyond themselves. This would make it possible to 'dissolve the rigidity of the temporally and spatially fixed object into a field of tension of the possible and the real' (SaER:69). Only by first judging and evaluating the present condition of society (that is, its status as a totality) in the light of what it *could* and *ought* to be can we arrive at a *critical* concept of society. As Jay notes, this also has profound consequences for Adorno's idea of society as such, since his concept of totality is almost exclusively *negative* (Jay 1984b:261-275). Thus, 'a liberated mankind would by no means be a totality' (ItPD:12). This should not of course be understood to mean that in a liberated society there would be no relations at all between human beings. However, the reifying and abstracting tendencies in the *forms* of relations that obtain in modern societies would cease to exist. And while this ideal may seem utterly speculative and hopelessly naïve it should still be understood as a critical conception, i.e. as a critique of the dominant relations (such as the exchange relationship) between human beings in the light of what such relationships might be like (as indicated for instance by friendships, relations of love etc).

Let me try briefly to sum up the main points in relation to Adorno's view of society that are important for empirical research: First, society is a category of *mediation* which means that we can only study it as it works *in* and *through* the 'material of experience'. For this reason 'immanent critique' is granted a special place in the analysis of 'material of experience' because it can point to those contradictions that arise between an object's 'inherent logic' and its status as a 'social fact'. Second, because society is a *functional relationship* we need to study how and why individual 'social facts' have come into existence and which function they might serve for society as a totality. Third, society is a *critical category* and empirical research must for this reason abandon a mere description of society (i.e. duplication) and try to find those aspects that point to an unrealised potential inherent in it.

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### Intermediate Reflections

Before turning to the discussion of Social Physiognomics in relation to the four methodological issues presented in Chapter 2, it will be fruitful to summarise the main points that have been unravelled in this examination of the ‘formal-sociological’ presuppositions on which Adorno’s sociology is based. First, sociology must be flexible in the sense that it must be prepared to draw from its neighbouring disciplines, in particular psychology (which can help illuminate certain unconscious aspects of conduct), history (because only by remembering the origins of phenomena is it possible to ‘grant primacy to the object’ of study) and philosophy (because philosophy provides sociology with tools to interpret the ‘material of experience’ in the context of a disenchanted world). Second, it must be remembered that there are several levels of the individual that all have to be taken into consideration in order to reach an adequate understanding of a given situation especially those levels that are influenced by unconscious motivational factors (most notably that of anxiety). Finally, the primary object of sociology is the network of relations and the particular forms they assume in modern societies. This means that it is necessary to develop a theory of society, since relations and their particular forms cannot be reduced to the individual ‘facts’ gathered through the research process and to the type of sociological theory that can be developed from these facts alone. In addition, it becomes clear that the relations within society and the individual’s relation to these can only be understood in functional terms (i.e. in terms of the function that individuals fulfil in society). Having clarified some preliminary aspects of Adorno’s concept of society as a totality and his view of the agent within it we are in a position to start reconstructing the methodological approach that he advocates for a sociology based on *Social Physiognomics*.

### B. The Methodological Aspects of Social Physiognomics

In Chapter 2 we outlined in negative terms the contours of Adorno’s methodological approach to sociology, thereby leaving a number of questions unanswered: questions that need to be addressed if we are to draw together the scattered remarks that have been presented so far. Our approach will be to divide the discussion of methodology into the four issues that were used as an analytical frame of reference in the preceding chapter. However, because Adorno does not systematically distinguish between these issues (and in fact would question their very division) this may result in a certain amount of overlap and repetition. The first issue that needs to be clarified is to what use sociology (and sociological knowledge) should be put.

#### Critical Theory and Praxis

As has been noted many times in the preceding chapters, one of the crucial differences between Adorno’s approach to sociology and the more traditional approaches is that Adorno’s approach is *critical*. This has profound consequences for the methodology employed in sociological research. In his lectures on sociology Adorno said that his sociology should be understood ‘as something like the restoration of...the experience which is denied us both by the social system and by the rules of science’ (ItS:51). In the terminology introduced in Chapter 1, the task of sociology is thus to identify and

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criticise those features of society that prevent us from having (routine) ‘aesthetic’ experiences. In this sense sociological research becomes a special kind of praxis aimed at intervening in and changing the social world in the light of its inherent potential (AoS:127). The purpose of *The Authoritarian Personality*, for instance, was to obtain ‘knowledge of the personality forces that favor [fascism’s] acceptance [and] may ultimately prove useful in combating it’ (AP, 1:5). Thus it was not a neutral investigation into the preconditions of fascism, but an explicit attempt to generate the knowledge that would prevent fascist movements from gaining power in the future. For Adorno there was no radical separation between theory and praxis: indeed, he saw theory as becoming a *form* of praxis instead of being a *tool* for criticism. Many of his sociological essays and his radio talks testify to his engagement as a philosopher of praxis. Indeed, it was not only through his writings that Adorno sought to intervene in the social world. Alex Demirović stresses that one of Adorno’s (and Horkheimer’s) primary goal on returning to Germany was to re-educate the German population in order to prevent anything like the Nazi seizure of power from ever taking place again. Accordingly, they not only taught at the university, but also gave talks on the radio and participated in public debates on several issues (for a discussion of this see Müller-Doohm 1996; Demirović 1999; Berman 2002).

This interventionist type of sociology may seem a bit too political for most sociologists. However, it is possible to identify two major reasons for the priority of critical over ‘traditional theory’: 1) As we saw in Chapter 2, however, even the seemingly apolitical and neutral *description* of the social world is already political through and through, because by simply describing the world as it is we are at the same time ‘*duplicating*’ it and thereby reproducing the existing inequalities and the misuses of its potential. 2) Since Adorno wrote his sociological essays, the impact of the production of knowledge on society has been recognised by a whole range of sociologists, including Giddens, who states that ‘critical theory is not an *option*’ (Giddens 1984:xxxv) because the knowledge produced by sociologists will always feed back into, and thereby modify, the everyday lives of individuals, whether or not this was intended in the first place. It is thus necessary to recognise the ‘performativity of research methods’ (i.e. that ‘method helps to bring what it discovers into being’, see Law & Urry 2002). This is also the thought behind Adorno’s idea of duplication: in his view, supposedly neutral research helps reinforce that which already exists, whereas a critical theory would help realise the potential inherent in the social world. A second point to bear in mind is that the sociologist must have a certain humility about the ‘unintentional consequences’ of her intervention in social reality. Research brings about changes in the social world that can never be completely controlled. Thus, ‘unintentional consequences’ are the sociological equivalent of the fundamental indeterminacy of our world, which should be met with caution and humility.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I cannot touch in the present thesis on the nature of this indeterminacy and its connection to the much-used concept of risk (on the concept of risk see for instance Giddens 1990; Beck 1992). However, a few points must be stressed: first, (modern) anxiety over the unknown is a *precondition* for the discourse of risk (i.e. unless the outcomes of an action were unknown we would have no risk). Second, it follows from this that risk is conceptualised almost exclusively in negative terms, as a potential threat. If we expand our understanding of the unknown, so that it is equated with the ‘non-identical’, it becomes clear that risk should not be seen exclusively as a threat but equally as an opportunity to bring about changes for the better (i.e. risk not only produces anxiety but also hope). We can never hope to eliminate all risks (because that would be to eliminate everything which is different from that which exists now) and as long as societies strive for this we are trapped in the ‘risk society’. Only by recognising the fundamental indeterminacy of our knowledge (the ‘risky’ nature of it) and accepting this can we hope to escape the impasse of a paralysing anxiety over the unknown (be it the consequences of globalisation, new technology, foreigners or potential environmental catastrophes).

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This does not, however, mean that we cannot distinguish ‘good’ from ‘bad’ sociological studies because a notion of truth, although differently defined, is still inherent in critical theory. The goal of empirical sociology is thus not solely to reach an adequate description but rather, as described in Chapter 1, to penetrate those aspects of our current knowledge which are *illusory* and therefore hinder the creation of a better society (i.e. the realisation of the potential inherent in society). This also fits well with the ‘performativity’ of sociology, since by seeking to overcome illusion sociology at the same time transforms the social world, thereby contributing to a rationalisation of it. In this sense sociology constitutes a kind of *praxis*, and it is in this light that truth should be understood as the *process* of overcoming that which is illusory instead of the accurate (static) description of a situation (which will inevitably become obsolete as times goes by). Now that we have clarified the critical character of Adorno’s idea of sociological knowledge and the aims he ascribes to Social Physiognomics, it is time to discuss more fundamentally what *knowledge* as such means for him.

#### Knowledge of what lies below the Façade

It is possible to distinguish between three ‘levels’ of sociological knowledge in Adorno’s account of sociology. Through his emphasis on all three levels it becomes clear that Adorno did not despise ‘ordinary’ sociological research, although he was in no doubt that it required further reflection. The first ‘level’ is what Adorno calls ‘simple physiognomic registration’ (ItS:103) by which he means something very similar to the collection of empirical data carried out by most sociologists. There are of course certain differences that have to do with his insistence on the ‘primacy of the object’, i.e. differences related to the ‘nature’ of the knowledge obtained through empirical research as such, an issue I will deal with in more detail below. But what is also important is the ‘logic’ (or type of approach) used as a means of obtaining the knowledge. If the researcher, while collecting data, bears in mind the ‘primacy of the object’, this ‘registration’ will not be a mere ‘fact’ but instead a piece of genuine ‘material of experience’, because it relates intrinsically to the experience of human beings in a particular situation.

The second ‘level’ of sociological knowledge can be dubbed ‘critical models’ and can be seen as the Adornian equivalent to what is often known as sociological theory in traditional sociology. The sociologist constructs constellations (that are in turn read as ‘critical models’) by finding those aspects of the ‘material of experience’ that point beyond themselves, and which therefore signal that they relate to other aspects of the social world that need to be examined in order to reveal that which is non-identical to the current piece of ‘material of experience’. In this way several concepts come to be connected in a manner that illuminates the object or phenomenon under consideration (Müller-Doohm 2000:138). Through the construction of such constellations it is thus possible to experience the object more emphatically than we would by applying singular concepts alone in our cognition of it. This way of relating concepts can be compared to GT, the aim of which was to generate theory from empirical data. The construction of constellations is also a form of ‘theory-generation’; however, the logic of research and the definition of ‘valid’ knowledge differ fundamentally in the two approaches. That Adorno too considers the construction of constellations a form of ‘theory-generation’ can be seen clearly from a passage in *The Authoritarian Personality*, where he and his collaborators write:

“This approach (the one taken in AP, CH) stands in contrast to the public opinion poll: whereas the poll is interested primarily in the distribution of opinion with respect to a particular issue, the present interest was to

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inquire, concerning a particular opinion, with what other opinions and attitudes it was related. The plan was to determine the existence of broad ideological trends, *to develop instruments for their measurement*, and then to inquire about their distribution within larger populations” (AP, 1:14, my emphasis).

The research was framed like a ‘pilot study’ and thus emphasised the ‘exploratory’ part of empirical research (Adorno 1977b:729). However, the aim of the study was not only to generate the theory needed for a social psychological explanation of fascism. At the same time, the study sought to develop instruments that could measure these trends of the personality, that is, scales that when taken together constituted constellations (for an elaboration of this claim see Buck-Morss 1977:177-184).

The third and final level of sociological knowledge that can be discerned from Adorno’s writings is of course the ultimate goal of sociology: *a theory of society*. According to René König, sociological theory as a type of knowledge is ‘confined to a relatively narrow range of conceptualizations rooted in reality’ (König 1987:148), when compared with a theory of society that seeks to relate the concepts gathered through research to the societal totality. Of crucial importance to this distinction, however, is that ‘neither upwards nor downwards do sociological levels of abstraction correspond simply to the societal knowledge value’, by which Adorno means that ‘the empirical and the theoretical cannot be registered on a continuum’ (SaER:70). In other words, there is no *logical* connection between the content of the sociological theory and a theory of society, because the former is always mediated by the totality itself. This holds true to an even greater extent for the level of ‘physiognomic registration’, since the ‘facts’ that have been gathered here are all in differing degrees connected and related to other phenomena, and are therefore mediated by these and by their relations to them (for an elaboration of this see Beier 1976:133-136). In more contemporary terms one could say that what is needed, in Adorno’s view, is a ‘grand theory’<sup>36</sup> that would give an overall account of the processes taking place in and through society. It is thus not enough to *construct* constellations because these are fundamentally incomprehensible without a theory of society that enables us to *read* society *in* this constellation as a critical model (i.e. the constellation becomes a model of society when deciphered in the light of the theory of society) (on this see Bonß 1983:207-210).

In addition to the three levels of sociological knowledge that we have discussed, we can identify from Adorno’s work four features that are essential to sociological knowledge in the context of a disenchanted world. These are: 1) the *contradictory* nature of knowledge, 2) the fact that it is embedded in *history*, 3) its essential *incompleteness* and *partiality*, 4) and finally the *critical* character of all knowledge. There is no reason to discuss all of these features in detail since they follow quite explicitly from the discussions taken in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the consequences of the disenchantment of experience. Ad 1) Sociological knowledge cannot be completely free from (logical) contradictions since the concept cannot (yet) quite grasp the object under consideration. For this reason that which is ‘non-identical’ to the concept can be found immanently in the concept as a contradiction. This means that sociological knowledge cannot be judged on the traditional criteria of simplicity and internal consistency. Ad 2) Adorno points more than once to the importance of history as a part of sociology and sociological knowledge: ‘One might...express its purport by saying that what should be regarded as the essence of

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<sup>36</sup> It must be stressed, however, that Adorno’s theory of society should not be understood as a ‘grand theory’ comparable to those offered by Parsons, Giddens, Habermas or Luhmann, because their theories are too far removed from empirical research (and therefore fail to ‘grant primacy to the object’).



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social phenomena...is largely nothing other than *the history stored up in these phenomena...* that the dimension of interpretation in sociology lies primarily in the fact that history is stored up in phenomena which are seemingly at rest' (ItS:146, my emphasis). In relation to the research process, this means that it is neither possible nor desirable to isolate social phenomena in the same manner as in the natural sciences: society can be understood only by a concrete *historical* analysis of the phenomena under consideration. Social Physiognomics is inherently critical, and because we can evaluate a given phenomenon only when we understand the consequences and the conditions that gave rise to it, this means that history is important to this branch of sociology, i.e. only by considering the ideals and hopes that were tied to its genesis can we judge the present state of affairs in the light of its inherent possibilities. Finally, once we realise that the present state of affairs did not always obtain we will find it easier to conceive of the future as being different than what exists today (for an elaboration of this see ItS:145-153). Ad 3) Since all phenomena are transitory, knowledge will always be fundamentally partial and incomplete. This means first of all that sociological knowledge must be continuously revised in the light of change (i.e. sociological theory is a *process* not a *result* cf. the discussion in Chapter 2). At the same time, however, the sociologist must make sure that the knowledge applied in a particular situation is appropriate. What is important here is that we do not see the transitory nature of the world or the necessary incompleteness of knowledge as meaning that it is impossible to accumulate knowledge at all. Nevertheless, we must ensure that knowledge is always relevant in a particular situation in order to avoid regressing to mere 'identity-thinking' because we have forgotten the conditions that gave rise to that knowledge. Ad 4) We have already touched upon the critical nature of Adorno's theory, so it is no surprise that sociological knowledge, too, must in his view be critical. This means that the sociologist must recognise the performativity of sociological knowledge in order to help realise the unused potential it unravels during the research process instead of merely duplicating what already exists.

From these various considerations it follows that knowledge is not just (or exclusively) a set of interconnected statements that seek to describe the (social) world in the most appropriate way. Instead, knowledge is closely connected to the idea of truth that was briefly mentioned in Chapter 1: 'For Adorno, knowledge is a process, *coming to know*, not a body of received findings, or a set of theories with methods for testing them. This process of acquiring knowledge, which is self-reflective, and occurs in stages, is called experience' (Rose 1978:150, my emphasis). Rose gives an accurate account of Adorno's thinking but she fails to see that Adorno did not dispute the existence of knowledge as 'a body of received findings', nor did he dispute the benefit of such findings (for an example concerning the benefits of building on existing methods see ItS:73).

To sum up, sociological knowledge consists of *three distinct levels*. At the same time it is impossible to think of these levels as comprising a continuum, since the 'facts' at level one are mediated by the societal totality (i.e. the 'facts' are *expressions* of that which the theory of society tries to elucidate and explain, not *elements* of it). Furthermore, Adorno rejects the notion that simplicity and strict consistency are a *sine qua non* of sociological precepts, since such criteria exclude the claims of the 'non-identical'. Finally, he stresses the historical dimension of knowledge, because without this dimension it would be impossible to produce sociological explanations and to work critically with sociological theory. Having clarified this, we can now turn to the third issue of Social Physiognomics, namely what constitutes an explanation within this framework.

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### Between Understanding and Explanation: On the Nature of *Deutung*

It has been commonplace in the sociological tradition to distinguish between two fundamentally different logics of sociological inquiry: one based on a view of sociology as a *nomothetic* science and one based on the belief that it belongs to the *ideographic* sciences. To simplify matters a great deal one could say that nomothetic sciences seek to formulate (causal) laws that *explain* how and why certain events are brought about, while the ideographic sciences seek an *understanding* of the situation. The former term is generally identified with the natural sciences, and the latter with the human sciences, which regard as significant the meaning that agents attribute to their actions, and see such meanings as part of the explanation of human behaviour. There is no need to look in detail at these two distinct types of explanatory account. What is important here is that Adorno finds both types inadequate and seeks to develop an alternative that is neither pure explanation nor understanding. This does not mean that Adorno refuses to acknowledge any value at all in these two types of explanatory account; however, he distinguishes between these scientific ‘explanations’ and the type of ‘explanation’ found in philosophy: ‘Plainly put, the idea of science is research; that of philosophy is *deutung*’ (AoP:126, translation altered). (It will be remembered that Adorno makes no clear distinction between philosophy and sociology, so this statement applies to sociology as well: see ItS:5). In other words, what are usually thought of as acceptable explanatory accounts in sociology are in Adorno’s view mere ‘duplications’ that need to be supplemented with a further analysis (i.e. a ‘second reflection’) that seeks to *decipher* these accounts in the light of the societal totality. We can see this idea in the following quotation:

“In sociology, *deutung* acquires its force both from the fact that without reference to totality...nothing societal can be conceptualized, and from the fact that it can, however, only be recognized in the extent to which it is apprehended in the factual and the individual. It is the societal physiognomy of appearance. The primary meaning of ‘*deutung*’ is to perceive something in the features of totality’s social givenness...Physiognomy does better justice to it since it realizes totality in its dual relationship to the facts which it deciphers...The facts are not identical with totality but the latter does not exist beyond the facts...By developing mediations of the apparent and of what expresses itself in these mediations, *deutung* occasionally differentiates and corrects itself in a radical manner” (ItPD:32-33).

From the passage cited above we are able to get a preliminary idea of what Adorno means when he refers to ‘*deutung*’ as an alternative to understanding and explanation. What is decisive here is the intrinsic relationship between ‘facts’ and ‘totality’ in the process of *deutung* and the postulate that neither of the two would be anything without the other: totality can be illuminated only if its ‘concealment’ in the ‘facts’ is deciphered and the ‘facts’ acquire real meaning only when related to the societal totality (Ritsert 1983:231). Thus, while Adorno explicitly distances himself from Weber’s account of empirical sociology, he nevertheless still seeks a form of *meaning* (and thus understanding) as the ‘end-point’ for the process of *deutung*: ‘A dialectical concept of meaning would not be a correlate of Weber’s meaningful understanding but rather the societal essence which shapes appearances, appears in them and conceals itself in them’ (ItPD:37). In more recent sociological terminology we might say that the aim of empirical sociology is to discover those *intransitive* processes and causal mechanisms that do not become manifest in actual situations. For Adorno, these intransitive processes (i.e. the societal totality) leave behind *traces* that we must decipher in order to reach an *objective understanding* of the situation. As mentioned above, it is not enough to identify the subjective meaning of an action because the

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individual agent may not be aware of the unconscious motives behind her action, nor can she anticipate its unintended consequences.

This idea of objective understanding is closely connected to the concept of constellations, because its particular configuration yields an objective relationship between the concepts that have been entered into it (i.e. it is this objective relationship I have termed critical models): '[P]hilosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations...into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer...The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by power of constructing figures, or images, out of the isolated elements of reality...' (AoP:127). This may sound rather cryptic, but it can be reformulated in more intelligible terms: by analysing the concepts that arise in the course of empirical research and relating them to other concepts that follows directly from this research, it becomes possible to discern a pattern of relations among these concepts. This pattern and the understanding it gives rise to constitute an objective understanding of the situation that may or may not converge with the understanding of the agents involved, i.e. the critical model is not just a *theory* of society but an actual and real *expression* of it (for an elaboration of this see Buck-Morss 1977:101-103). In speaking of 'unintentional reality' Adorno means only that the manifest meaning or the official doctrines that relate to a certain practice should not be taken for granted uncritically. Instead they should be subjected to an unrelenting critique that seeks to discover those aspects of the phenomenon that contradict the outward appearance of reality. In the final section of this chapter I will briefly present an example of research that draws on this type of 'objective understanding', in order to show that these ideas can indeed be put to use in concrete empirical studies.<sup>37</sup>

Several passages in Adorno's empirical writings lend credence to the view that he saw the discovery of relations between concepts and phenomena as the primary objective and the form of explanation

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<sup>37</sup> In an article on Adorno's methodology Ritsert refers to the American philosopher Abraham Kaplan and to his idea of the 'pattern model of explanation' which in many ways, he argues, resembles Adorno's model (Ritsert 1983:232). Kaplan's observation sheds further light on the relationship between constellations and 'objective understanding'. According to Kaplan we should distinguish between two types of explanation that are often confused: the semantic and the scientific. Semantic explanations can be described as attempts to 'make clear a meaning', that is an attempt to paraphrase or translate a term into another concept that has an equivalent meaning. However, this type of explanation cannot really be used in the sciences, because semantic explanations are nothing but an attempt to 'describe the same thing all over again, but in other terms...A man is not incapable of work because he is lazy, incapable of love because he is selfish...Such designations only describe what they purport to explain' (Kaplan 1964:330). In scientific explanations by contrast 'something is explained when it is so related to a set of other elements that together they constitute a unified system. We understand something by identifying it as a specific part in an organized whole' (Ibid:333). Kaplan calls this the 'pattern model of explanation', and it clearly resembles Adorno's idea of constellations in which the individual concepts first gain their importance and their (objective) meaning in the light of the constellation. It is not necessary, Kaplan argues, for the elements of this pattern to be gathered anew every time because, even 'ordering them differently' will often contribute new knowledge of the way in which the elements relate to each other. This model of explanations is analogous to the idea presented above that concepts should be put 'into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer'. This means not only that it is possible to produce new knowledge without gathering new 'facts', but also that it is always possible to relate concepts in a new way and hence arrive at a new conclusions. This approach allows scope to think of understanding in a new light: 'Rather than saying that we understand something when we have an explanation for it, the pattern model says that we have an explanation for something when we understand it' (Ibid:335). This notion of understanding is similar to Adorno's 'dialectical concept of meaning', because they seek to grasp the relations between distinct phenomena and understand them in the light of the whole (the 'theory of society').

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proper to Social Physiognomics. Thus, in connection with the qualitative analysis of interview material in *The Authoritarian Personality*, he writes the following:

“Our types are justified only if we succeed in organizing, under the name of each type, a number of traits and dispositions, in *bringing them into a context which shows some unity of meaning* in those traits. We regard those types as being scientifically most productive which integrate traits, otherwise dispersed, *into meaningful continuities and bring to the fore the interconnection of elements which belong together according to their inherent ‘logic’*” (AP, 2:749, my emphasis).

When seemingly unrelated statements and characteristics are juxtaposed and connected with one another, they show a unity of meaning that is determined by the ‘inherent logic’ of these elements. The resemblance between Adorno’s ideas and those of GT, discussed in the previous chapter, is also evident from this passage. However, in his attitude towards his interviewees Adorno does not show the kind of naïve respect demonstrated by Glaser & Strauss. Quoting Hegel, Adorno emphasises that ‘public opinion...deserves to be respected and despised in equal measure’ (SaER:85), and this is no less true of the consciousness of individual human beings. Having clarified Adorno’s unique type of explanatory account, we should now look in more detail at the actual *logic* that lies behind this type of approach. That is, we need to examine how this type of ‘objective understanding’ is actually reached, which means examining the *dialectical* logic inherent in Adorno’s sociology.

#### A ‘Logic of Disintegration’: On the Dialectical Approach to Social Physiognomics

In the preceding two sections of this chapter we examined the particular type of knowledge that is connected to Social Physiognomics and the type of explanatory account that is appropriate to it. However, we still need to explain *how* such knowledge is to be generated. It is thus time to turn to the issues connected to the *logic* of Social Physiognomics, a logic that is distinct from that of both Critical Rationalism and Grounded Theory in being neither inductive nor deductive but *dialectical*. This is a notoriously difficult concept to grasp, not only because it runs counter to the usual ‘one-dimensional’ logic of ordinary mathematics, but also because it is impossible to explicate the dialectic in isolation from the subject matter under consideration. Thus, while Lukács sought to find those elements that characterised ‘orthodox Marxism’ and identified these as constituting the dialectical *method* (for an explication of this see Lukács 1971) Adorno insists that it is impossible to separate methods from the phenomenon under consideration and that the recognition of this is one of the most important aspects of dialectical thinking. Notwithstanding this, we will attempt here to explicate the most important ‘steps’ in Adorno’s ‘methodology’, even though it is virtually impossible to describe them as ‘steps’: indeed, it would be more appropriate to describe the procedure as a ‘spiral’, as the Danish sociologist Henning Bech has continually emphasised:

“The use of ‘exemplary fixed points’ (or in other words: cases), and especially hierarchies of these, imply a special form of spiral movement in the cognitive procedure. A given phenomena, as well as the object under study taken as a whole, is continually investigated from different starting points and in different contexts; at the same time there is a continual movement between the universal and the particular, from part to whole and whole to part” (Bech 1999:34, my translation).

Any attempt to explicate this ‘spiral movement’ will always ‘fail’ in the sense that it can never be described adequately in general terms but only in relation to a particular subject matter, which again

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limits its use as a ‘methodological principle’. However, this is the price to be paid for a sociology that seeks to ‘grant primacy to the object’, since this in itself implies that methods cannot be given any validity separately from the subject matter under consideration. In order to circumvent the problem of a too abstract description of the logic, I will try to flesh out the ‘steps’ by reference to an empirical study that I have recently completed. I will not attempt here to give an exhaustive account of this study, but use it merely to briefly illustrate the ‘steps’ in Adorno’s methodology and to demonstrate the fruitfulness of his approach.

Although Adorno never explicitly discusses the different ‘steps’ of sociological research it is nevertheless possible to find a few clues as to those elements that he saw as essential to an adequate empirical study. Thus in one of his most crucial essays on empirical research he writes as follows:

“The first condition for construction of the totality is a concept of the object [Sache], around which disparate data are organized. From the living experience, and not from one already established according to the societally installed control mechanisms, from the memory of what has been conceived in the past, from the unswerving consequence of one’s own reflection, this construction must always bring the concept to bear on the material and reshape it in contact with the latter...It must transform the concepts which it brings, as it were, from outside into those which the object has of itself, into what the object, left to itself, seeks to be, and confront it with that it is. It must dissolve the rigidity of the temporally and spatially fixed object into a field of tension of the possible and the real” (SaER:69).

This quotation not only summarises perfectly Adorno’s view of the aims and aspirations of empirical research. It also highlights three sources that should be drawn upon in research situations: *living experience* (i.e. concepts based on an engagement with the object under study in contrast to reified concepts employed without consideration), *history* (‘the memory of what has been’) and *reflection*. In a more sociological vein we might explain how these elements are to be employed in the research process by using Müller-Doohm’s distinction between *four* analytically distinct ‘corners’ of Social Physiognomics. According to Müller-Doohm, the research process is spun out between: 1) The *formulation of concepts* out of concrete empirical evidence (i.e. our living experience) and 2) the subsequent relating of these to each other through *conceptual reflection*, which makes it possible to 3) *decipher* the phenomena so as to reveal how they are expressions of the societal totality; 4) a totality that must be grasped by the theory of society that has been built thereby helping us to *discern the possibilities for changing the world* for the better (Müller-Doohm 2000:133-139). The ‘formulation of concepts’ needs to draw on both ‘living experience’ (i.e. ‘aesthetic experiences’ in which we ‘grant primacy to the object’) but also ‘the memory of what has been’, because it is not sufficient to concentrate exclusively on what the object of study *is* at the moment. At the same time one needs to have knowledge of what the object *has been* and what it has been struggling *to become*, since only in the light of this is it possible to grasp the claims of the object (i.e. its ‘inherent logic’). After this ‘formulation of concepts’ we proceed to ‘the unswerving consequence of one’s own reflection’, which includes both ‘conceptual reflection’ and the deciphering of these concepts. Let us consider each of these ‘steps’ in more detail and see if they make sense in connection with our interpretation of Adorno’s ‘negative dialectics’.

Ad 1) One of Adorno’s most important criticisms of other methodologies was that they prioritised methods over a genuine engagement with the object on its own premises (i.e. ‘granting primacy to the object’). As we saw in Chapter 1 it is easier to grasp the claims of a given phenomenon in a given situation where we cannot use previously-existing concepts to understand that situation, and are

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therefore ‘forced’ into having ‘aesthetic experiences’ that enable us to form new concepts by drawing on our ability for reflective judgement. For exactly this reason Grounded Theory offers a promising starting point for gaining proper knowledge about the objective structures of society. Qualitative research methods should thus be given a certain priority in the opening phases of the research process. This stance is formulated explicitly in GT (see for instance DoGT:18), but it is also implied by some of Adorno statements: ‘Incidentally, Lasswell’s method, though purely or essentially quantitative, does assume certain qualitative moments in that the various categories enumerated in such a text are initially qualitative in nature. One cannot quantify anything which one has not first, in a certain sense, determined qualitatively’ (ItS:87).<sup>38</sup> Neither from Adorno’s perspective nor from that of GT, however, does this mean that only qualitative methods can be used to ‘generate theory’ or form concepts, although it is obvious that it is much easier to use these types of methods than quantitative methods such as surveys.

Thus Adorno rejected the neat distinction made in traditional empirical sociology between ‘methods’ and ‘subject matter’. Instead, he regarded it as crucial to develop adequate methods (that is, methods that respect and yield to the ‘primacy of the object’, and are therefore *formed* by the object) in the first phase of sociological research: ‘Für eine pilot study sind die methodischen Ergebnisse ebenso wichtig oder wichtiger als die inhaltlichen. Diese haben notwendig etwas Tastendes und Vorläufiges; die Methoden aber und die kritischen Reflexionen, an die sie sich anschließen, sollen künftiger Forschung zugute kommen’ (Pollock 1955:3). A pilot study is thus not solely an effort to extract some initial *concepts* from which it will be possible to offer a tentative analysis of the subject matter, but equally an attempt to identify those existing research methods that can be used for a study of this particular type, and to see how they should be modified to suit the object. Henning Bech explains this in more detail: ‘Seen in relation to the question of methods the principle of the primacy of the object implies that in the end it is the unique characteristics of the phenomenon being studied that should decide which methods it is reasonable to employ and how these should be arranged in relation to each other’ (Bech 1999:31, my translation). It follows from these considerations that it is not possible to rely solely on any *one* method and that it is impossible to decide *before* the research process begins which methods should be applied in a particular situation (although this does not mean that one has to reinvent methods all over again every time one begins a new research project: on this see ItS:73). As a consequence of the ‘primacy of the object’ it is not possible to provide more detailed considerations as to the choice of methods. However, given the transdisciplinary character of Social Physiognomics it must be stressed that one should not be afraid of employing methods (or concepts) that do not originally belong to sociology, since refraining from doing so may hinder the generation of objective knowledge of the subject matter.

Let me try to exemplify this idea of ‘the primacy of the object’ by drawing on a research study that aimed to unravel the conditions for being (i.e. constructing an identity as) a woman rock musician. While the primary focus of this study was on the (structural) conditions that influence the construction

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<sup>38</sup> This may seem somewhat surprising, since Adorno is most renowned for his work on the F-Scale, developed as part of his study on authoritarianism. However, a brief look at his other writings on sociology, including those chapters in *The Authoritarian Personality* of which he was the sole author, will show that Adorno relied exclusively on qualitative methods in his research, whether in using various types of interview material (Adorno et al. 1950; Adorno 1955), material from (radio) talks (Adorno 1975), soap-operas (Adorno 1977a) or even an astrology column (Adorno 1994).

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of identity, these could not be examined immediately (because society is a category of mediation) but had to be unravelled from the traces left in 'social facts', in this case in the identity of the women rock musicians (i.e. since society is mediated by the 'social facts', we can study it only by examining how it manifests itself in and through the self-understanding of the women involved). In order to grant primacy to their identity we made use of biographical interviews in which the women were asked to tell their musical life history. This method has been frequently identified as a tool that respects, to an even greater extent than standard qualitative interviews, the person being interviewed, since the interviewee alone decides which aspects of her life history she wants to emphasise (for an explication of this see Atkinson 1998). At the same time biographical interviews often concentrate on those 'critical situation's that are crucial for the self-understanding of the person being interviewed. By using biographical interviews we were thus able to 'grant primacy to the object' of our study, in this case the women's identity. However, during our preliminary analysis of the 'material of experience' we quickly discovered the importance of the material aspects of identity for rock musicians, where the staging of one's identity is even more important than it is for common people. In order to 'grant primacy to the object' we therefore needed to supplement our biographical interviews with 'material of experience' that grasped this dimension of their identity. We did this by using our own observations and by collecting pictures and video shots of the women and we even considered the 'musical aspects' of their conduct (i.e. their contribution to the music through whatever instrument they played and the function they had for the music and the band). This approach thus acknowledged the transdisciplinary character of sociology as required by Social Physiognomics. In addition, by using these techniques in addition to the interviews, we were able to identify those aspects of the women's lives that were not a manifest part of their self-understanding but that were nevertheless important in determining their identity (and the conduct connected to it) and the way in which they were perceived by others (i.e. those aspects of their identity that were embodied as 'reflex actions'). It must be stressed that the process of gathering 'material of experience' was not carried out only once but was carried out over a period of time that allowed us to alter the methods employed during the research process in the light of our engagement with the object. There is nothing extraordinary in this approach but it serves to illustrate how it is possible to let the object under study decide which methods should be employed in a particular research setting (for an elaboration of the methodological aspects of this study see Dalsgaard Hansen & Hansen 2003b:33-37). However, it is not enough to have 'granted primacy to the object', thereby allowing the object of study to shape the research methods. In order to escape the risk of 'duplicating' what already exists we must engage critically with the object and the concepts that emerge from it as part of our engagement with it. It is here that the second step of Adorno's sociological approach comes into view.

Ad 2) The 'outcome' of this first 'step' of the sociological research process is a concept of the object or, more likely, a set of concepts that are connected to the object in various ways. Because of the disenchantment of the world, however, none of these concepts by themselves can grasp the claims of the object under study. The purpose of this next 'step' of the research process is therefore to connect these concepts to each other. This is not an arbitrary process that depends purely on luck; rather, we must arrive at it through the use of *contradictions* because 'contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity' (ND:5). Thus contradictions should not simply be eliminated from the analysis, as they would be according to positivism or GT. Contradictions must instead be worked out and maintained in

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order to reveal the ‘non-identity’ between a given phenomenon and its concept. This should be done by way of what Adorno terms ‘immanent critique’<sup>39</sup>: this form of critique takes over the ‘self-understanding’ of the phenomenon and confronts this with reality in order to reveal any contradictions between these two aspects of the phenomena. Immanent critique is helpful not only in analysing ideologies or texts: it can also be used in sociological research to help shed light on the self-understanding of the people involved in the object of study, as well as to analyse music, literature and other ‘social facts’ in which contradictions manifest themselves.

While this explains *why* contradictions are central to this next phase of the research process, it does not tell us anything about *how* to make use of them. As mentioned above, the contradictions reveal those aspects of the object that are ‘non-identical’ to the concept currently being used. Taken in itself, in other words, this concept is inadequate and must therefore be supplemented by a new concept or by employing another method that can reveal another aspect of the object from one of its other sides. Through such *conceptual reflection* we can broaden the range of concepts used to grasp the ‘essence’ of the object under study, until a network or a *constellation* of concepts is revealed (for the idea of constellations as a network or a ‘net’ of concepts, see Bonß 1983:208). This constellation of concepts says something more emphatic about the phenomenon: something that cannot be grasped by any *one* of these concepts. This was what Adorno and his collaborators tried to do in *The Authoritarian Personality*: in order to expose the potentially fascist individual Adorno, and the group of scientist he worked with on this project, constructed the F-Scale (‘Fascism-scale’) which could be used to measure this potential. They constructed this scale by relating questions which on the surface (as mere ‘opinions’) did not seem to have any connection whatsoever, but which were united at the level of the personality of the individual (that is, at the level of the unconscious that manifested itself through the ‘attitudes’ or ‘world view’ of the individual). To make sure that the scale was not purely speculative, they validated it by checking its correlation coefficients with other scales that measured anti-semitism, conservatism etc., i.e. ‘ideologies’ which (in theory) are part of what constitutes fascism. At the same time the scales were constantly revised in the light of empirical data from the project, which included both questionnaires and interviews (for an elaboration of the method of this study see Adorno et al. 1950:222-279; Buck-Morss 1977:177-184; Rose 1978:102-108). With reference to Abraham Kaplan’s idea of the ‘pattern model of explanation’ one could say that the construction of constellations should be based on a meaningful relation between the concepts that provides us with an understanding of how diverse aspects of a phenomenon (or a plurality of phenomena) are related (Kaplan 1964:327-336). In other words, the constellation should provide us with an explanation of the objective structures of society. It is relatively easy to understand how this process of constructing constellations is connected to what Müller-Doohm calls conceptual reflection: only by relating the contradictions and the concepts formed in the course of empirical research to other concepts is it possible to judge the validity of the knowledge and to

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<sup>39</sup> Immanent critique can be contrasted with transcendental critiques. While the latter criticise by way of an *external* set of criteria, the former takes over the norms inherent in a given phenomena (for an explication of these forms of critique see for instance Benhabib 1986:19-43; Caygill 1998:34-52; Gilloch 2002:27-56). One great advantage of this form of critique, which uses the norms inherent in the phenomenon, is that, instead of being external and irrelevant, it poses a real threat to the self-understanding of the object. An example would be Marx’ analysis of the act of exchange in capitalism, where he reveals a discrepancy between the supposed fair trade between worker and capitalist and the real consequences of their exchange (i.e. that the exchange is in fact unequal because the capitalist gains a surplus value from the trade: see Marx 1968).



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overcome the illusions of the present. By successfully constructing a constellation we hope to arrive at a 'critical model', a 'theory' that is critical in the sense that it compares the existing situation to the possibilities in the future. For this reason, it is not possible to separate the two 'corners' as easily as Müller-Doohm suggests. Indeed it must be remembered that Adorno's approach is *dialectical* (or formed as a 'spiral', to use Henning Bech's image), which means that all the elements in the approach interact with each other in a complex relationship that cannot be taken apart.

Let me return to the study of women in rock and illustrate how the use of contradictions was essential to it, and how a constellation of concepts was derived from the 'material of experience' (i.e. we generated theory as part of this empirical study). A central concept in the study is that of 'increased attention': To be a rock star one needs to get attention not only from the audience but from other musicians and from the record business. Many studies, including the present one, show that women in the rock sphere often get more attention than men (see Groce & Cooper 1990; Lorentzen 2000; Jennings 2001), which may seem like a tremendous advantage since it may help them become more successful. However, when we analysed the interviews with women who received such additional attention, it became clear that this was not only slightly strenuous for them, but also deeply problematic, even where they were not (discursively) aware of this. Thus, the increased attention implied a contradiction, since the positive sides of it (more success, more fans and more money) often went hand in hand with negative aspects (for instance disrespect from other musicians and from the music press). In other words, by using the contradictions in the women's self-understanding as the impetus for conceptual reflection, we revised our conceptual apparatus so as to better fit the object under study. In this way it became clear that at least two different forms of 'increased attention' existed: one that was primarily tied to the looks of the women ('surface attention') and one that was elicited by that fact that, in playing rock music, they were breaking the boundaries for the normal behaviour of women (they were acting 'subversively', in Butler's term: see Butler 1999). Awareness of these different types of attention was found to be related to another major issue in the interviews (i.e. the contradictions pointed to something outside the original concept) namely the importance of feeling recognised as a musician and as being 'part of' the music. The degree to which the women felt this differed considerably according to the instruments they played and the role of these instruments in the music. Women who played guitars and other 'masculine' instruments typically felt themselves 'part' of the music, and were recognised as key players, while those who primarily sang, especially in backing groups, often felt 'left out' of the music and were not so highly respected as those who played instruments. It follows from this that instruments (especially 'masculine' ones) serve as a tool to empower the women. The idea of empowerment thus became a central concept in the study as well. These independent concepts were connected by the fact that the women who played 'masculine' instruments generated attention because of their subversive acts, while the attention gained by those who sang was primarily of the 'surface' type (i.e. they received increased attention because their looks were different from that of the men). A final conceptual pair to be found in the study was the relation between authenticity and standardisation. All the women stressed how important music was for them, seeing it as an essential part of their identity and one through which their identity gained authenticity. However, it was often very difficult to earn a living solely from playing music, especially if one was not prepared to compromise on the music played. The record companies wanted the music to be

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standardised to a certain extent to make it easier to sell (i.e. made similar to the music of other musician's who were already a success). In other words, it was possible to discern a contradiction between the musicians' desire to earn a living from their music and their need to maintain a relationship to music that did not compromise their own authenticity and identity. What is instructive here is that all the various singular concepts involved: attention, empowerment, standardisation and so on involve contradictions that point to other aspects of identity that need to be taken into consideration. Thus there is a contradiction between the positive benefits of attention and the negative aspects of it (e.g. the disrespect that such attention may entail); between the empowerment that comes from playing 'masculine' instruments and the risk of undermining one's gender identity by doing so (because by playing a masculine instrument one abandons a traditionally feminine role) and between being faithful to one's music (i.e. keeping an authentic relation to this part of one's identity) while maintaining the possibility of earning a living from it.

While these may appear to be three disparate and unrelated aspects of the identity of the women rock musicians, it was in fact possible to discern a meaningful relation between them (i.e. to construct a constellation out of these concepts that provide us with an objective understanding). This was to be expected, given that these phenomena all pointed outside themselves and towards these other aspects. By combining the interviews with an analysis of the women's stage performance (including their various roles as instrumentalists or singers) and of the way in which they were described in the media, we were able to consider the phenomenon of 'attention' from other angles and thereby gain a greater understanding of it and see the ways in which it was linked to other phenomena as well. Thus we saw, for instance, that increased attention towards the musicians on the grounds of their appearance was linked in their self-understanding to a sense of not being part of the music and not properly recognised as musicians. Our study of the commentary in newspapers and music magazines confirmed that descriptions of women rock musicians often focused on their looks and the staging of their performance. Because the singers were always placed in the middle of the stage and thus functioned as a centre for the music, and because their outfits, movements and contribution to the music marked them out from the male musicians they played with, they experienced 'increased attention' because of their difference from the other musicians. The women instrumentalists, on the other hand, were often placed to one side of the stage and as such were not the focal point of the performance. As a result, they experienced 'subversive attention' as opposed to 'surface attention'. Finally, the women who experienced 'surface attention' were often described by the media as standardised and inauthentic. In traditional theory the analysis would end here by concluding that certain relations exist between different phenomena (and this is in fact what is done in most of the other studies that have revealed increased attention as a crucial aspect of being a women rock musician, see for instance Groce & Cooper 1990; Jennings 2001). In Adorno's view, however, this would not constitute an explanation, because we do not yet understand the relation between these phenomena. In order to gain this understanding we need to decipher the relations and read them as expressions of the societal totality. Below, I will show how this could be done in relation to this particular study of women rock musicians.

Although contradictions constitute the point of entry for understanding the bound claims of social phenomena, they cannot be more than a starting point. The contradictions between concept and object do no more than point to the disenchantment of language. A critical theory of society must do more

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than this; it must try to 'heal' the gap between 'essence' and 'appearance'; it must try to save the 'non-identical' remainder in the object in order to provide hopes for a better future. This is to be done by *deciphering* the network of concepts (the 'constellation') and reading it as critical model of the objective social structure. This brings us to the third step of the research process.

Ad 3) To obtain knowledge of the 'essence' of society we need to *decipher* the phenomena and the critical model they constitute; we need to 'read individual *faits sociaux* as ciphers for a wider social reality' (ItS:22). This characterisation of the procedure for Adornian sociology also explains why Adorno calls his approach *Social Physiognomics*: if physiognomy is 'the art of judging human character from facial features' (American Heritage Dictionary 2000) then social physiognomics must be 'the art of judging the character of society from its façade' (i.e. its mere appearance to us). According to Adorno, we are able to do this because, as the old Hegelian dictum says, 'essence must appear' (ItPD:12). While this follows directly from the idea put forward in Chapter 1 that 'concept possession' depends on 'concept formation', it also makes sense when thought through in more sociological terms: The individual 'facts' gathered through empirical research represent only the façade of society, how it appears to us, but immanent and discernible within these facts are 'traces' of the fundamental structures of society, i.e. it is possible to see how society is mediated in and through these individual 'facts' and in turn how these facts are mediated by society. This also explains why it is important to rely on empirical studies in sociology, since they 'prevent blindly superimposed constructions'; that is, they prevent these decipherings from becoming so utterly speculative that they have no connection to reality. Thus, 'the task of empirical research [is] to protect the concept of essential laws from mythologization' (SaER:84).

The question that confronts us now is *how* we are to decipher these phenomena; how can we come to see society through the constellation that has been constructed? The answer to this question is, of course, by reading or deciphering it as a critical model. The purpose of this deciphering is to reveal how society, i.e. the network of relations and the typical form these take, influences the phenomena under examination. As will be remembered, we cannot do this in an abstract manner by referring to very general concepts such as the 'commodity form'. Instead the specific form and the way these general tendencies mediate and are mediated by the phenomena under examination must be brought to the fore. What is decisive here is Adorno's assertion that social phenomena always point beyond themselves and often in such a way that it will be impossible to understand them adequately without reference to society as a totality. In this way the social phenomena under research first make sense only when they are related to the total network of concepts through which we seek to provide insight into society. By building a theory of society we are in fact trying to widen the understanding of the phenomena being studied by connecting them to other phenomena and concepts that are essential to an understanding of the way society works. This calls for a certain sense of creativity on the part of the sociologist who needs to 'bring in the widest possible reservoir of forms of understanding and perspectives from sociology and other human sciences while using these as 'search lights' in order to reveal how they illuminate the phenomenon and its relations to other phenomena' (Bech 1999:36, my translation). In this sense it is not enough to draw on 'middle-range theories', because these are too intimately connected to the subject matter they are derived from, and cannot therefore provide us with the interpretation of the conceptual apparatus that is needed in order to escape mere 'duplication'. What is required are thus metareflections that seek to bring disparate data and sociological theory

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together in what have become known as ‘grand theories’. This should not be misunderstood: as we stressed above, and as is clear particularly from his fierce criticism of Talcott Parsons, Adorno was not an advocate of grand theories in their traditional sense. However, the metareflections implied by Parsons are necessary for the development of a theory of society, which is the ultimate goal of sociology. Thus, in a manner similar to that described by Henning Bech, this ‘formulation of theories on the societal totality’ (ItS:103) can only be carried out by relying on all the theoretical knowledge available to the sociologist. There is nothing strange in this when we remember that the demarcation between sociology and its neighbouring disciplines cannot be rigidly upheld and that sociology ought to draw on material and reflective power from both history and philosophy. In his excellent book on the difficulties involved in connecting social research and sociological theory above the middle-range level, Derek Layder explains how it might be possible to draw systematically on ‘grand theories’. One of the most obvious reasons Layder presents for doing this is the possibility of ‘enhancing the explanatory power’ of the research results being analysed (for an elaboration of this see Layder 1998:122-129). This is what Adorno means when he states that ‘decisive structures of the social process...cannot become apparent without the intervention of theory’ (ItPD:11). A rather banal example is that one cannot understand what a worker is without knowledge of what a capitalist society is.

While the meaning of ‘reflection’ appears easy to define, one needs to bear in mind the unique type of ‘subjective reflection’ proper to Adorno’s sociology. As was mentioned in Chapter 1 objectivity cannot be reached without ‘exact fantasy’, that is an investment of the sociologist’s subjectivity in the cognition of the object. This explains why Adorno compares constellations to compositions and, as Bernstein explains below, sees the process of constructing them as similar to the process of composition:

“Compositions are objective structures imbued with subjectivity. Hence, in the same way in which ‘getting’ a musical work can require coming to hear in a new way, and this really the only route to it, so for Adorno every significant piece of philosophical writing is soliciting from the reader a ‘conversion’, a coming to see/experience/understand the object in a new way. Knowledge that is dependent on experience cannot be activated through a course of neutral reasoning; coming to understand is learning *to* reason correctly rather than something effected *by* reasoning correctly” (Bernstein 2001:360).

Thus, in order that we can see ‘society’ in the disparate ‘facts’ that constitute a constellation, the facts need to be arranged and rearranged (in other words ‘composed’) so that their relations illuminate previously unknown areas of the social world, or so that we come to see how a previous understanding of a situation was illusory (i.e. the transmission of the sociological knowledge obtained during research must constitute an *experience* for the reader of the study that makes her see the world in a different light). Just as our own subjective response is important in composing, so it is significant in constructing constellations, since the study/the composition must arouse the same reaction in the reader as it did in us when we constructed it. In other words, it is not enough simply to give an adequate *description* of society through the constellation. Instead the latter must be constructed and read so that it is seen as an *expression* of society. From this insight it follows that the presentation of research results is a constitutive feature of the construction of a constellation, which in turn implies three things: first, the presentation should be constructed so as to reveal the inadequacy of the concepts currently being used (as was done, for instance, by examining the inadequacy of the women’s self-understanding in relation to the

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importance of the ‘increased attention’) Secondly, the presentation should be aimed at ‘grasping’ the ‘non-identical’ or, as we put it in Chapter 1, it should enable us to get an intransitive understanding of the situation or object. Finally, deciphering/construction a critical model/constellation means finding those features in the object that reveal the potential for change (and therefore constitutes and experience), and using the ‘performativity of methods’ to realise this potential. This last point already touches on the last ‘step’ of the research process. But before turning to a brief consideration of this let us examine how the ideas presented in this ‘step’ were utilised in the study on women in rock.

The only way we could make sense of the relations between ‘surface attention’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘standardisation’ was to interpret them in the light of a theory of the rock sphere and society in general. Many commentators have argued that ‘authenticity’ is a key concept in understanding art practices and it would indeed be possible to defend the thesis that authenticity is the specific form of ‘symbolic capital’ to be found in the field of aesthetics (see for instance Bourdieu 1996). In the rock sphere authenticity (to put it *very* simply) is exemplified by the creative musician who devotes his life entirely to the *music* without worrying too much about success and financial gain (Harron 1990; Middleton 2002). The rock guitarist occupies one of the most authentic positions in the rock sphere because she is often the one that writes the music and is thus the most creative of the musicians, especially if at the same time she refuses to enter into compromises that make her music more popular and more easily sellable. In more abstract terms: the rock guitarist refuses to engage in activities only for the sake of others (in order to become more popular) and insists on the importance of playing music solely for the sake of himself, the band and their music (one could say, using the vocabulary of role theory, that the rock guitarist is not merely playing a certain role, she *is* a rock guitarist). At the other end of the ‘authenticity scale’ we find the backing vocalist who is not even a member of the band, has been dressed up to look nice in front of the audience (in order to please them) and is not creative at all (at least not in this context). The existence of this type of ‘symbolic capital’ in the rock sphere can help throw light on the negative consequence of ‘increased attention’: because they are different from the other musicians and because they employ symbols (clothes, instruments, position on stage etc) that are not traditionally connected to the idea of an authentic musician the women risk receiving only ‘surface-attention’. While they themselves regard their performance on stage and in relation to the music as completely natural and spontaneous, it does not necessarily appear that way to the audience. The women could thus be seen as trying to *signal* their identity through their participation in the rock sphere. However, for the audience (and the media) it seems as if the women are consciously using certain symbols in order to generate increased attention that could make their bands more popular, help sell more records, etc (for a discussion of signals and symbols see Bech 1997:164-168). This is due to the fact that the symbols employed by the women have traditionally been considered far removed from the ideal of authenticity. This highlights the importance of bringing a historical perspective into the analysis of social facts, for without knowing the history of these symbols we cannot understand the present situation in the rock sphere. The audience’s belief that the women use symbols that generate attention and that are not intrinsically related to their identity helps undermine the view of the women’s authenticity: by consciously creating attention they appear to contradict some of the ideals associated with being a rock musician. Instead of playing music solely for themselves, the women appear to be trying to please the audience by devices that have no bearing on the music as such, to be acting solely for the sake of others

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(i.e. to be playing a role). But in order to understand the connection between the ‘attention’ paid to these musicians and the derogatory or disrespectful attitude towards them, we need to draw on a theory of society, showing how the aesthetic sphere was founded precisely on the desire to rebel against a world in which we increasingly come to exist only for others, at the expense of an existence in ourselves. To put it a little differently: rock music constitutes a rebellion against a situation in which music is important only in so far as it has value for others (its exchange value) and not for its intrinsic value, for the composer that wrote it or for the audience listening to it (its use value). What I hope this very briefly-described example serves to illustrate is that we could not have gained an adequate understanding of the contradictions between the experience of attention in its various guises without the *intervention of a theory of society*. Only by deciphering the constellation of empowerment, attention and standardisation in the light of the whole do we reach an (objective) understanding of the structural aspects of society that influence the way in which women rock musicians construct their identity (for a more thorough treatment of these issues that does not, however, employ the terminology of Social Physiognomics, see Dalsgaard Hansen & Hansen 2003a).

Ad 4) The last ‘step’ in the research process is closely connected to the construction and deciphering of constellations, but it can only be understood in relation to the *critical* nature of Adorno’s thought. We have already examined this point a number of times, so I will concentrate here on showing how the fact that a theory is *critical* affects the research process as such. As mentioned above, one of the most crucial aspects of the knowledge gained in the research process is that it enables us to point to those elements in a situation that constitute an unrealised potential. Only by grasping the essential claims of the object in this situation, by evaluating what the object has become in the light of what it once strived to be, is it possible to criticise it adequately and thus reveal the potential that it has lost (or failed to realise) in the process of its becoming. In the case of the study of women in rock, this evaluation of the present state of the rock sphere in the light of its potentiality was carried out in relation to a crucial discussion in the sociology of gender. The question at issue is whether emancipation for women involves achieving *equality with* men or, on the contrary, making room in society for the *differences* that exist between the two genders (see for instance Butler 1990; Offen 1992). The relationship between equality and difference is often construed as being mutually exclusive because being equal is interpreted to mean being *the same as*, which is incompatible with being *different from*. It is therefore assumed that women can only fight for one of these aspects at a time. Moreover, the norm in modern societies is that one can become a member of a group only by being regarded as equal to its existing members. Only once it has been recognised that one shares the group’s core characteristics is it possible to differentiate oneself from it. (The medical profession offers a good example here: in order to become a doctor one first has to pass certain exams; only afterwards is one in a position to distance oneself from one’s colleagues, for instance through research). In the sphere of rock the situation is completely different: only by being *different* from the artists that are already part of the sphere is it possible to be respected as an artist, since one cannot be regarded as authentic if one merely copies what already exists (or draws too extensively on it). This suggests the potential for escaping the contradictory relationship between equality and difference in other parts of society as well, a relationship that follows from the reductive identification of ‘identity-thinking’ (see Becker-Schmidt 1999; O’Neill 1999).

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A critical theory would not be critical if it did not turn reason against itself and evaluated the actual research process in the light of its own potential. This has profound consequences for the choice of study: although ideally all phenomena are constituted by their dual nature (i.e. they possess an ‘inherent logic’ or truth which it is the aim of research to penetrate, and at the same time they are *faits sociaux* that can be read as tokens of the societal totality: for an explication see ItS:93-94) it would be naïve to believe that society is expressed equally ‘well’ in all phenomena. Adorno at times recognises this when he states that seemingly unimportant aspects of reality can be interesting because they are not permeated with the official doctrines and ideologies and therefore constitute a point of entry into the ‘unintentional truth’ of reality. Bech is more specific and states that only in hindsight (i.e. *a posteriori*) is it possible to evaluate the real importance of a phenomenon. This evaluation should consider whether the phenomenon tells us something about society at large, and especially about those aspects of it that we did not know (or that we had a wrong impression of) prior to the investigation (see Bech 1999:33). Is it capable, in other words, of dispelling myths of the social world?, and does it provides us with any input as to how things could be altered so as to create better conditions for subjects and objects alike? Only if we can answer these questions in the affirmative have we arrived at what Bech terms ‘exemplary fixed points’, that is a phenomenon that ties together or constitutes the node of a whole range of societal processes and relations.

### Concluding Remarks

This concludes our investigation into the methodology of Social Physiognomics in which I hope to have shown the relevance and originality of Adorno’s approach to sociology. By drawing on the study of young women in rock I have sought to illustrate the rather abstract ideas that permeate all of Adorno’s sociological writings on methodology, and thereby to show the possibility of utilising his ideas in a concrete empirical study. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that the ideas presented throughout this thesis provide only an *outline* of Adorno’s methodology, which would have benefited greatly from a closer engagement with more contemporary ideas in this area of sociology than it has been possible to include. What is decisive for me, however, is that the thesis provides a defence of the Adornian variety of critical theory and makes plausible the idea that his ideas can be made fruitful for sociology, a possibility that has been neglected in the wake of Habermas’ influence on the discipline. In the light of this presentation it is time to turn to the Conclusion where I will summarise in more detail the main aims of the thesis and the conclusions drawn, and sketch some ‘Dialectical Rules of Sociological Method’ that could serve as guidelines for further investigations into Social Physiognomics, as well as principles that need to be borne in mind when considering choosing this special branch of empirical sociology.

## Conclusion

### Dialectical Rules of Sociological Method

At this point I want to summarise the main aims of this thesis and draw some concluding remarks with regard to the possibility of using ‘negative dialectics’ as the basis for formulating a set of principles for conducting empirical research. The main purpose of the thesis has been to make plausible the claim that Adorno’s philosophical thought is a viable alternative to other versions of Critical Theory, most notably that of Habermas. In the Introduction I sought to illustrate how the influence of Habermas and his reading of Adorno have prevented sociologists from taking advantage of the host of new interpretations of Adorno’s work that have emerged over the last decade (especially those concerned with his aesthetics). The stereotyped view of Adorno is 1) that his theoretical ideas are without (normative) foundation, which means that his philosophy becomes self-defeating and contradictory and that the conceptual apparatus it offers is not an adequate tool for analysing modern societies; 2) that sociology has no independent place in his thinking and that his work is therefore irrelevant to sociology as a discipline (though it may be relevant to psychology and philosophy); 3) that he was chiefly responsible for the early Frankfurt School’s abandonment of the idea of an interdisciplinary research programme, and that he was sceptical about the usefulness of empirical research as such; and finally 4) that his ideas are purely negative and therefore cannot provide us with an *alternative* conception of sociology, but only a set of criticisms of existing methodologies. As a response to these charges I have sought to reconstruct Adorno’s *positive* vision of an empirically-founded sociology, Social Physiognomics. In choosing to show how his ideas can be appropriated for empirical sociology I have deliberately chosen the area that he is usually considered to be furthest removed from (i.e. while there is widespread agreement about the fruitfulness of his contributions to aesthetics and even philosophy, almost no one considers that his ideas can be usefully applied in sociology, and especially empirical sociology). Succeeding in this task will thus be a major step in making plausible the thesis that Adorno’s version of Critical Theory is a strong alternative to Habermas’. In the Introduction I also argued that it was not only the influence of the Habermasian branch of Critical Theory that was responsible for the many misunderstandings surrounding ‘negative dialectics’. Another source of misunderstanding is Adorno’s very difficult prose: since most of his statements cannot be taken literally, it is necessary to *interpret* them extensively.

Bearing this in mind my aim in Chapter 1 was to present an alternative interpretation of Adorno’s philosophical ideas as they are outlined primarily in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. One of Adorno’s fundamental beliefs was that questions of epistemology cannot be discussed apart from ontological issues, because our ways of perceiving the world changes with the social circumstances prevailing at any given historical period. Thus in order to grasp the epistemological foundation for any methodological discussion in sociology we need to consider the development of history and how it has affected our perception of the world. In Adorno’s view the process of disenchantment has not only affected our beliefs about the world but has disenchanted our very use of language. This means that, both in everyday situations and in science, one of the axes of language (the material axis) is continuously suppressed by our ordinary language use. However, the material axis cannot be disregarded without serious consequences, since it is this part of language that is oriented at the



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'objects' in a particular situation (whereas the axis of *communication* is oriented towards coordinating actions and reaching agreement about the interpretation of a particular situation). Hence Adorno's well-known claim that (simple) concepts continually overlook (or 'dominate') that aspect of the object that is 'non-identical' to our concept of it: in his view, this aspect of language is suppressed *as a result* of the disenchantment of the world (i.e. not as an inescapable outcome of our use of concepts as such as it is often believed). This also has profound consequences for our experience of the world, since this too is mediated by language. Disenchantment results in 'regimented experiences' that are not as emphatic as they could and ought to be (compared with 'aesthetic experiences', which occur only in our perception of works of art or in 'critical situations'). The conclusion Adorno draws from this is that we need to 'grant primacy to the object', since only by doing so will it be possible to circumvent the negative consequences of disenchantment and pave the way for creating a society in which it would be possible routinely to have 'aesthetic experiences'. Adorno proposes two different strategies that can overcome the consequences of disenchantment: a negative one ('immanent critique'), in which the critic will aim to show how the (simple) concepts employed in a particular situation are inadequate and result in contradictions; and a positive one ('critical models') in which Adorno seeks to use linguistic techniques (such as the construction of constellations) to escape the (reductive) identification of (simple) concepts. The principle of 'granting primacy to the object', and the recognition that our concepts depend on the objects they seek to grasp, also constitute the basis of the normative foundation implicit in 'negative dialectics'. Adorno proposes to replace an instrumental or communicative rationality with a 'mimetic rationality': a form of relationship between subject and object that escapes the problem of domination. This type of rationality is potentially present in 'critical situations' where the subject experiences a 'loss of self', and a momentary unification with the object, such that he apprehends both the object's independence of his own understanding of it and his own fundamental dependence on the object. While Adorno does not elaborate this normative foundation with the same degree of thoroughness that Habermas, for instance, brings to bear in presenting his idea of 'communicative rationality' (or Honneth in explaining what he called the 'struggle for recognition' see Honneth 1995), it is nevertheless evident that *Adorno did provide an alternative version of Critical Theory including a normative foundation on which to ground it.*

Following Adorno's lead, I provide in Chapter 2 a *negative* outline of his Social Physiognomics by sketching a (partly immanent) critique of two paradigmatic methodologies of sociology: Popper's Critical Rationalism and Glaser & Strauss' Grounded Theory. The critique aims to show how, unless it is explicitly taken into consideration, the disenchantment of the world has a negative effect on empirical research. Apart from certain 'principles of caution' that can be extracted from Adorno's critique of these methodologies, a certain similarity could be discerned between Social Physiognomics and Grounded Theory, in so far as both represented attempts to generate sociological theory out of the 'material of experience' gathered through the research process. The process of generating theory (or 'concept formation') rests on 'granting primacy to the object' of study and thereby seeking to alleviate some of the negative consequences of disenchantment. However, one crucial problem with GT was its naïve acceptance of the 'material of experience' as something that could be immediately apprehended, i.e. as taken for granted without further reflection. Even though it 'grants primacy to the object', the

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purely inductive approach must thus be replaced by a dialectical approach that seeks to penetrate beneath the surface of the 'material of experience'.

Having sketched the problematic features of these two competing methodologies I turn in Chapter 3 to a positive reconstruction of Adorno's Social Physiognomics. In this chapter I begin by considering the formal-sociological aspects of his sociology, particularly the way in which Adorno defines sociology in contrast to its neighbouring disciplines and his conception of the relationship between the individual and society. From this consideration follow a number of issues that must be borne in mind when sketching the design for an empirical study. First of all, sociology must be thought of as transdisciplinary in the sense that the object of sociology, society, is immanently present in virtually all subject areas. For this reason, it is impossible to demarcate the discipline in traditional ways (i.e. by reference to some unique situation or subject matter, as one might do, for instance, in the field of economics). It follows from this that sociology must draw on the findings of all these disciplines because only by doing so can it 'grant primacy to the object of study'. In other words, sociology must draw on history to provide information on the background to a certain phenomenon that will help put its present status into context. Similarly it must draw on philosophy in order to penetrate beyond the surface of the material revealed in the course of research: the sociologist needs to engage in speculation or 'second reflection' here, using all kinds of philosophical ideas as an inspiration in interpreting and moving beyond the mere appearance of the object. Adorno's conception of the individual also grants a special place to psychology in the analysis of social phenomena. He sketches several levels of the individual's consciousness as well as different aspects of her conduct, showing that psychology is needed to supplement the purely sociological analysis of the 'material of experience'. This is most true of those unconscious motives that are related to the personality of the individual and influence her conduct and consciousness. With respect to the influence of society as such on the analysis, Adorno stresses the need to consider society as a *totality*. It is impossible, he argues, to analyse the 'material of experience' in a vacuum: we must see it as it relates to society as a whole. In other words, it is pointless to consider isolated 'facts' that emerge from the research process without relating them to the wider context of which they are a part, since it is only in the light of this context the 'fact' can be read as an *expression of society* (rather than as merely an element of society or as something that exists outside it).

Having said that, I will conclude this thesis, as promised, by sketching some Dialectical Rules of Sociological Method. It should be stressed once again that within the scope of this thesis I can offer only an *outline* of Social Physiognomics, not a complete reconstruction of Adorno's sociological thinking. I hope, however, that I have succeeded in showing that his work justifies the attempt to sketch a new form of Critical Theory that offers an alternative to Habermas'. In order not to stray too far from the general framework that I have followed so far in my discussion of methodological issues, I will divide these rules according to the four issues presented at the beginning of Chapter 2. Thus I will first (A) present certain rules relating to the status of sociological knowledge in the light of the disenchantment, and especially to the theme of 'duplication'; I will then move (B) to an explanatory account of Social Physiognomics, including some rules of thumb regarding *deutung* as distinct from both explanation and understanding, and the importance in this connection of considering society as a totality. The next section (C) will provide some reflections on the nature of dialectical reasoning as

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opposed to induction and deduction. Finally (D) I will consider the aims of a *critical* theory, and the necessary 'performativity of sociological methods' that follows from this in an age of disenchantment.

#### A

- 1 *The objectivity of our (sociological) knowledge can never be secured exclusively by reference to the use of certain accepted research methods, but must instead be reached by 'granting primacy to the object' of study.* Only the features of the object itself can determine the appropriate methods to use if we are to generate a theory that does not suppress the 'non-identical'. If we seek to validate our sociological knowledge by reference to existing methods alone, we risk never gaining any truly objective knowledge of the object, but instead merely reproducing whatever subjective, and possibly illusory, knowledge we already have of it.
- 2 *Unless the consequences of disenchantment are borne in mind, sociological knowledge will remain a second order reification ('duplication') and thereby exacerbate the opacity of the social world.* Because our experience of the world in everyday situations is already reified, sociological research cannot merely stick to the 'facts' involved in our common-sense conceptions of the world. Our (simple) concepts cannot grasp the claims of the object in its entirety, and sociological knowledge must therefore accept the existence of contradictions that are the traces of the 'non-identical': those aspects of the object that are excluded from our (simple) concepts of them.
- 3 *The creation of a theory of society is the most important goal of sociological analysis.* Sociological theories that seek to provide an understanding only of isolated processes in particular areas of society ('middle-range theories') cannot be considered the ultimate goal of sociology, since these disparate theories can never tell us anything about society as a whole. Instead, we must seek to formulate a theory of society that can serve as an interpretative scheme for disparate 'social facts' in order to read them as expressions of society.

#### B

- 1 *Since the processes of society are intransitive, we can reach an objective understanding of society only by deciphering 'social facts' derived from the 'material of experience'.* Because the 'material of experience' consists of 'social facts' that are mediated by the societal totality, our analysis of these facts cannot be limited merely to connecting these facts to one another. Instead, we must submit these social facts to a process of *deutung* that seeks to reveal traces of society that are immanent in them because of their mutual mediation.
- 2 *The individual 'facts' of the 'material of experience' become meaningful only in the light of the societal totality. At the same time, society as a totality is revealed only through those 'facts' that can be read as expressions of it.* Because society and 'social facts' mediate one another, we cannot consider the two in isolation from each other. An adequate understanding of a 'social fact' always points beyond the immediate context and its place in the societal totality, and society only exists in and through these 'social facts'. It follows from this that we cannot resort to abstract categories in sociological analysis; rather, such abstract categories must be shown in their concrete manifestations, as mediated by 'social facts'.

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#### C

- 1 *Only the use of dialectical logic in sociological research can ensure both that the object of study is respected, and that we can penetrate beneath its immediate appearance to arrive at an objective understanding of society.* Sociological research must combine an inductive approach that respects the object of study and adequately conceptualises it, with a deductive approach that makes use of all the sociologist's creativity (her 'exact fantasy') in dismantling the immediate 'appearance' of the object that prevents us from grasping its 'essence'. A dialectical approach is therefore needed, in which the analysis of the 'material of experience' resembles a spiral, continuously reflecting on both theory and 'social fact' in the light of the knowledge obtained through the research process.
- 2 *Sociological knowledge should be presented in such a way as to overcome the illusions that govern our present understanding of the area investigated, thereby offering the reader a (new) experience.* Sociological research should aim to create 'critical situations' through the presentation of its findings in order that the readers of the study will reconsider their routine understanding of a situation and hence overcome the illusions they may be adhering to. In a disenchanted world this entails exploiting language to its limits, since only by doing so can we hope to escape the reductive consequences of (simple) concepts that prevent us from truly experiencing the object of our studies.

#### D

- 1 *Sociological research can never be completely neutral or apolitical and sociologists must therefore take a critical stance. Otherwise their work will merely serve blindly to reinforce the status quo.* If sociologists choose merely to describe existing society, their adoption of a seemingly neutral stance will nevertheless represent an act in favour of the status quo, not least because the concepts they use will feed back into the self-understanding of the people they study thereby 'duplicating' their reified experiences.
- 2 *The aim of sociology is to evaluate existing society in the light of its inherent possibilities.* This acknowledgement of the fundamentally political character of sociology forces upon the discipline the task of continuously monitoring the extent to which existing society has succeeded in realising its potential. Only by engaging in such monitoring can sociology contribute to the further rationalisation of our society and the hope of realising a better society.

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- DoE: *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- HTS: *Hegel: Three Studies*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993.
- ItPD: "Introduction" in Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann, 1976, pp. 1-67.
- ItS: *Introduction to Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
- ND: *Negative Dialectics*. London: Routledge, 1973.
- OLS: "On the Logic of the Social Sciences" in Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann, 1976, pp. 105-122.
- SaER: "Sociology and Empirical Research" in Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann, 1976, pp. 68-86.
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- SoPs "Sociology and Psychology" in *New Left Review*, No.46/47, 1967, pp. 67-80 & 79-97

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- DoGT: Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded. Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967.
- TCA 1+2: Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1+2*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984/1987.

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### Summary

In the following thesis I have sought to provide a defence of the Critical Theory of Theodor W. Adorno by providing the outlines to a reconstruction of his implicit sociological methodology, his Social Physiognomics. Adorno's thought has been haunted by misunderstandings since his death not least because of his esoteric writing style. However, the influence of the Habermasian reading of Adorno in the social sciences has also played a role in the stereotyped views that exist of him. One of the main tasks of the thesis has therefore been to provide an alternative reading of Adorno.

It is well-known that Adorno takes over the Weberian analysis of modernity and radicalises it in his critique of instrumental reason. However, according to Adorno, the process of disenchantment described by Weber has not only affected our beliefs about the world but has disenchanted our very use of language as well. As a consequence of this the linguistic practices of both science and our everyday life are not wholly rational because the (simple) concepts we use continually overlook that which is non-identical to what we already know. People living in modern societies are thus unable to experience and engage in certain forms of relations towards other people and objects. Insufficiently rationalised linguistic practices have this effect because all our experiences are mediated by language. Adorno's philosophical project could therefore be interpreted as an attempt to resurrect a broader concept of experience that would enable us to overcome (most of) the 'negative' consequence of the 'dialectic of enlightenment'.

This has profound consequences for an empirical science like sociology as well because it relies on experiences as empirical data. I therefore seek to show how the disenchantment of language affects traditional sociological methodologies that do not explicitly take this historical development into consideration. This is done by sketching a critique of two paradigmatic methodologies of sociology: Popper's Critical Rationalism and Glaser & Strauss' Grounded Theory. This critique reveals that both methodologies are problematic because they are essentially subjective, reifying and non-critical and therefore contribute to the very process of disenchantment that helps bring about a process of societal domination.

Contrary to common views Adorno does not think of this situation as inevitable or as incapable of being remedied although this is no easy task. For this reason I end the thesis by a reconsideration of his ideas for empirical sociology and the implicit methodology that can be found in scattered remarks throughout his sociological works. This leads me to conclude that Social Physiognomics must be built on the 'principle of granting primacy to the object' and deciphering the physiognomic appearance of the object in order to read society as an expression in and through this object. Translated into the vocabulary of sociology this means that processes of theory generation must be emphasised because they ideally 'grant primacy to the object'. However, because of the disenchantment the immediate appearance of a social phenomenon cannot be taken for granted and must instead be submitted to an unrelenting critique and process of reflection. By doing so it will become possible to relate the singular phenomenon to other and through these relations gain an insight into the structures of society. This is not done only to arrive at an adequate description of society, but also in an attempt to reveal those aspects of society that contain an unrealised potential. In other words, sociology must be inherently critical and thereby contribute to a (true) rationalisation of society so as to make sure that society never fails to realise some of its inherent potential.