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Thinking in Dark Times (Arendt and Adorno Revisited)

We live in what — following Hannah Arendt and through her Bertold Brecht — can properly be called ‘dark times’. This is how Arendt unpacks the nature and the origins of their darkness:

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by a ‘credibility gap’ and ‘invisible government’, by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral or otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless trivility.¹

And this is how she described its consequences:

¹The public realm has lost the power of illumination which was originally part of its nature. More and more people in the countries of the Western world, which since the decline of the ancient world has regarded freedom from politics as one of the basic freedoms, make use of this freedom and have retreated from the world and their obligations within it... But with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place: what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between the individual and his fellow men.²
Withdrawal from politics and the public realm turns therefore, says Hannah Arendt, into the ‘basic attitude of the modern individual, who in his alienation from the world can truly reveal himself only in privacy and in the intimacy of face-to-face encounters’.

‘In the century of the Enlightenment’, writes Peter Gay in his comprehensive compendium of the ideas that assisted at the birth of our bizarre way of life known under the name of ‘modernity’, ‘fear of change, up to that time nearly universal, was giving way to fear of stagnation; the word innovation, traditionally an effective term of abuse, became a word of praise.’ There was no reason now to be afraid of change, since it was also felt, at least in the Parisian salons and London coffee houses where the members of the Republic of Letters met, that ‘in the struggle of man against nature the balance of power was shifting in favour of man’. Rather than portending a new blow of unpredictable fate, the ‘new’ augured another step on the road to human control over humanity’s destiny. The mood of the time was ‘not the boasting that conceals impotence’ but ‘a rational reliance on the efficacy of energetic action’. ‘Action’ was the name of the game – and where there was the will to act, the know-how and the tools would promptly follow.

It was now felt (at least among the knowledgeable and the thoughtful) that with due effort the passage ‘from experience to programme’, as Gay puts it (or, in other words, from contemplation to action, from theory to practice, from better knowledge to a better world, from reading the designs of nature to designing a new and improved nature), could surely be shortened and quickened. The Enlightenment was the birthplace of what David Hume called the ‘moral sciences’ – sociology, psychology, political economy, modern education – all determined to serve the impending ‘age of administration’ in which the ‘reforming public officials’ were to ‘find themselves in conflict with established bodies and traditional practices’ and where ‘behind the troops of laissez faire marched the clerks of government regulation’. Medicine ‘was strategic to all true knowledge’ and set the pattern for the way to proceed whenever an action was undertaken and whatever its goal: first diagnose the ailment, then design the therapy course, apply it, and make the ill healthy again – or even healthier and
more immune to disease than ever before. ‘Medicine’, says Peter Gay, ‘was philosophy at work; philosophy was medicine for the individual and the society.\textsuperscript{13}

A little more than two centuries later, in a time viewed by a large number of observers as ‘late modernity’, Daniel Galvin, described by Laura Barton as a ‘hair colour doyen’, informs us that ‘hair colour has become an essential part of a woman’s beauty routine, to the extent that hair without colour is like a face without make-up’.\textsuperscript{16} ‘We are caramel one season, mahogany the next, anxiously inspecting our roots to check whether our natural colour is creeping back, like mould,’ confirms Laura Barton, admitting that she herself has brown hair which she dyes brown: ‘It is, of course, my firm belief that I am dyeing it a superior shade of brown.’ And hair is just one of the visible parts of the body that need to chase after the standards of superiority as they sprint ahead. In the last ten years the number of nail salons in the US has more than tripled and the number of cosmetic surgical interventions has more than doubled, reaching 6.2 million procedures in 2002 alone. According to Apostolos Gaitanas, a London plastic surgeon, the number of cosmetic surgeries in Britain is growing by between 10 and 20 per cent every year. Don’t forget the skin, the nose, the waist, the breast . . .

Of the current compulsive obsession with ‘re-engineering’, Richard Sennett writes: ‘Perfectly viable businesses are gutted or abandoned, capable employees are set adrift rather than rewarded, simply because the organization must prove to the market that it is capable of change.’\textsuperscript{7} Sennett quotes Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, writing of another current obsession, ‘flexible specialization’: ‘a strategy of permanent innovation: accommodation to ceaseless change, rather than an effort to control it’.\textsuperscript{8} And listen to our current and would-be ministers and their spokespeople. They sing in many voices, but there is a common motif in all the tunes: modernize, modernize, change or perish. \textit{Tertium non datur}.

There is a striking family resemblance between the main characters of these stories narrating two periods separated by more than two hundred years. The heroes of both stories are restless. They cannot stand still. They are not satisfied with what is, or not satisfied enough to take it as it stands and to allow it to stand like that for long. They wish it to be different; they would want it to
be different even if it were more satisfactory than it is, since making things different, keeping them on the move, is the thing that truly counts: it is the change, and even more the confidence and resolve that things can be changed, that keep the hope of satisfaction alive. And they are doubly confident: first, they believe that things can be made different, and second — they are sure that they can make them different.

That said, let us note some equally striking dissimilarities between the two sets of central characters: three differences in particular.

To start with, the heroes of the first story were bent on running things. They aimed to administer, to rule, to manage. They were after more efficient ways of monitoring and supervising the world, and then using them to transport humans — all humans — to a condition of greater happiness. Happiness, they thought, would be a product of the world well managed — that is, of non-human nature kneaded by human efforts into a shape more amenable to human use and more conducive to human happiness, and of human nature cleansed of anything contrary or ill-fitting to the state of such happiness. The heroes of the second story, on the other hand, are not particularly concerned with the state of the world. They seem to follow the ancient precept: hic Rhodos, hic salta — assuming that Rhodos will not and cannot be replaced with some other place more hospitable to jumpers, and certainly not into a place where one does not need to jump to test one’s own credibility and worthiness. They view happiness as a condition which the state of the world cannot affect by making it either a foregone conclusion or an impossibility. The exit from a state of unhappiness can therefore only be through an operation committed by happiness-seekers on themselves, and each one on their own, not by the many seekers after happiness putting their heads together to design the shape of a better world and then joining ranks and working together to make it better. To cut a long story short: if the pursuit of happiness is to result in happy individuals, it needs to be a collective task for the heroes of the first story — but for the heroes of the second it is a private task through and through, to be individually undertaken and individually performed from beginning to end.

There is another difference. For the main characters of the first story, repairing the extant world or building a new and improved one was a campaign with an end; the condition of the world as
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...found needed to be transcended so that another world could be put in its place—and not just 'another world', but a world which would be unlike the one it replaced in making all further transcendence redundant and uncalled for. A perfect world, in other words; in a state of perfection, as Leon Battista Alberti put it, any change can be only for the worse. The operation which the heroes of the first story intended had a time limit; there would be no point in acceleration unless the purpose of the acceleration was to bring closer the time to slow down and come to a halt. The heroes of the second story, on the other hand, either resent the thought of ever stopping and then staying put, or give no thought to the finishing line at all—focusing their attention and effort on the nearest step and knowing all too well that they cannot know or even guess in advance the step they will have to or will want to take after that. For them, being on the move is not a temporary undertaking that will eventually fulfil its purpose and thereby cancel its own necessity. The sole purpose of being on the move is to remain on the move. If for the heroes of the first story change was a one-off operation, a means to an end, for the heroes of the second story change is an end in itself, expected to be chased in perpetuity.

A third difference: the main characters of the first story were ready to prompt, prod or nag humans into change. Appalled by common human sloth and the dearth of imagination, they believed or suspected that a lot of pushing and pulling would be needed to force humans out of their stupor and into an acceptance of change—to prod them into joining in the effort of changing the world. For the heroes of the second story, on the other hand, such conditions as listlessness, inertia and 'standing still' are not seriously considered prospects. They need not be told, let alone forced, to change. They just would not know how to sit on their hands. Even the rejection of change requires them to act. They are on the move because move they must. They move because they cannot stop. Like bicycles, they keep upright only when spinning along. It is as if they were following Lewis Carroll's precept: 'here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.'

One further remark is in order.

In each of the two stories, characters of a different type have been cast in the hero's role. The heroes of the first story were the scriptwriters, directors, conductors, coaches, stage managers.
("The new style of thought was in the main reserved to the well-born, the articulate, and the lucky; the rural and the urban masses had little share in the new dispensation," explains Gay). In the second story, or in the story of human transcendence in the form in which it tends (and ought?) to be told nowadays, the heroes are the players themselves, all of them — those in the spotlight as well as those staying in the shadow, mute supernumeraries as well as those given lengthy lines. On the way from the first to the second story, the scriptwriters and directors all but vanished from sight, while the stage managers came to be more invisible than ever.

Why did that happen? Why has room not been found for the heroes of the first story in the second? Have they worked themselves out of a job? Are we witnessing a case of mission accomplished, however unanticipated its results may have been? Or did the original heroes grow disenchanted, leave their missionary outposts and move to other, more promising pastimes?

Or did they perhaps melt and dissolve into the crowd on the stage so that they can no longer be told apart from the rest of the cast, let alone put in the centre of the story?

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno's life stretches between the two periods which the two stories, separated in time but reunited in his work, narrate.

Adorno's work does unite the two stories. Adorno's case is that the second story, however different it may seem from the first, can be comprehended only if the first story is fully absorbed and digested. The world narrated in the second story can be understood only when seen as a sequel to the world described in the first.

This does not imply, though, that the first story determines the imminence of the second. On its own, the first story does not permit the second story to be deduced; it could have different sequels. History did not have to take the turn it took and follow the itinerary it did. But once told, the world of the second story clamours for the first to be revisited and given another look. The second story renders a revision of the first plausible, but also imperative. The two stories make sense only in a dialogue. Adorno's work is such a dialogue.

Adorno's work separates the two stories through the act of their unification: the world as described in the second story is a radical
opposition, the negation of the world narrated in the first – but this radical opposition is cast as the end product of the first world's self-destruction. The sharper it is, the clearer becomes the destructive (and indeed self-destructive) potential of the world it opposes. The task of that opposition, in Adorno's own words, 'is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past' – hopes by now dismissed, forgotten and perhaps lost; and this is what all resistance would necessarily have to involve, since in the world portrayed by the second story 'the past is preserved as the destruction of the past'.

The past tends to be relentlessly, systematically destroyed, rendering the redemption of hopes all but impossible, once individuals 'are reduced to a mere sequence of instantaneous experiences which leave no trace, or rather whose trace is hated as irrational, superfluous, and "overtaken" in the literal sense of the word'. When the individuals have been so reduced, they are unlikely to seek security in hope – that is, in a cause that has yet to be consolidated into reality. As Pierre Bourdieu was to point out a few decades later, people who do not have even a modicum of hold on their present (as they don't, given the notorious volatility and shapelessness of experience sliced into short and fast replaced episodes) will not muster the courage required to get a hold on the future. They will hardly consider the impenetrable and notoriously whimsical future as a safety deposit box solid and durable enough to store and preserve their safe conduct passes. The state of precariousness, as Bourdieu would say, 'renders the whole future uncertain, and so forbids all rational anticipation – and in particular disallows that minimum of hope in the future which one needs to rebel.'

Running on through episodes that don't seem to dovetail together into a meaningful, let alone predictable sequence, the individual will be inclined instead, as Adorno puts it, to 'cede himself to the collective: as recompense for his jumping into the "melting pot" he is promised the grace of being chosen, of belonging. Weak and fearful people feel strong when they hold hands when running.' Snubbed and frustrated daily, the individual will find a shelter for personal narcissism in 'collective narcissism': a promise of security that can only be deceptive so far as the salvation of that badly wounded individuality goes – the hope of redemption is doomed
to be frustrated, since the promise of a compensatory self-esteem ‘by proxy’ is proffered by the self-same collective that makes admission conditional on the suspension or surrender of individuality. And yet, given their individual powerlessness, individuals would still be ‘exposed to an unbearable degree of narcissistic injury if [they] did not seek a compensatory identification with the power and the glory of the collective’.

A continuously rehearsed and reiterated surrender of individuality is indeed the (repetitive) act from which are built – and, rebuilt ever anew – the walls of the public hostels offering shelter to the homeless and vagrant individual narcissisms (for a night or two). It is only the huge volume of discarded individualities dumped at the entrance that makes the hostel walls look tried and tested as solid and secure enough to encourage checking in.

Shelters are imagined – but imagination being a notoriously flighty and capricious faculty, the chances are meagre that any shelter will remain a popular and sought-after address for long. Imagined shelters are anything but ‘natural’ or ‘given’. Their life is little more than a succession of moments of resuscitation; a miracle of daily resurrection never certain to be continued. Just like those who seek security inside them, the shelters live from one episode to another. Their frailty, and so also their dubious status as warrants of security (security being a condition which can only be long term since it includes duration as its defining feature), are concealed only by the speed and expediency with which the crowds of seekers after and claimants of shelter run from one refuge to another, from one short-lived episode to the next; from becoming a member of the caramel-haired people to rushing to join the mahogany-haired ones, or from a night vigil against a paedophile released from jail ‘into the community’ to a demo against an asylum-seekers’ camp planned too close to home for comfort.

*Communis opinio* feels like a godsend to individuals whose individually commanded and managed resources stop well short of the quantity needed to separate the truth from ‘mere opinion’ with any degree of confidence. It relieves the individuals from decisions they are anyway impotent to take, and so takes the insult out of the injury and keeps the salt away from the wound. ‘What is true and what is mere opinion’, says Adorno, is decided ‘by societal power, which denounces as mere caprice whatever does not agree with its own caprice. The border between healthy and
pathogenic opinion is drawn in praxi by the prevailing authority, not by informed judgment.¹⁶

A border at last! In its presence all fearful hesitations die down and may be cast aside; one knows now where the inside and the outside are and how to tell one from the other, one can try to stay inside and away from the border guards’ inquisition. Perhaps, just perhaps, staying inside will do for that craved-after yet vexingly evasive security (losers can’t be choosers), whereas for adventurous spirits the sight of a border will at long last offer something to transgress. Seekers after security and adventure addicts are served in equal measure by the authority’s drawing exercises. No wonder they find themselves joining forces in fortifying the border: here is one task they can agree on, and be ready to cooperate in fulfilling, notwithstanding their multiple antagonisms. And who would have noticed the border, not to mention genuflect to its serene and adamant steadfastness, if it were not for their mutually contradictory, but also mutually indispensable, complementary exertions?

A few decades after Adorno sent his Minima Moralia to the publishers Czesław Miłosz, the great Polish poet, suggested that the intellectuals and artists who choose (or are forced to choose) exile – that great unknown beyond the border – gain an insight into the plight of contemporary men and women which they would hardly have achieved if they had stayed inside, even if they had shared in the lot of those whose lives they struggled to understand.¹⁷ Would Joyce have written Ulysses if he had stayed in Dublin all his life? Would Isaac Bashevis Singer have conjured up the world of the shtett had not that world been cast beyond the hope of return? Rhetorical questions, to be sure; they wouldn’t. It takes time to understand that ‘exile does not mean just crossing borders; it grows and matures inside the exiled, transforms them and becomes their destiny.’ There is a blessing (or at least a chance of a blessing) in the dark, off-putting disguise of loneliness, abandonment and alienation. The self-same loss of comfortable, harmonious and unproblematic inclusion in the surrounding space and the impossibility of feeling at home in that space that is so close and yet so distant, so different from the memorized topography of the lands left behind which torment the exile or the refugee, allow them to penetrate deeper into the universal logic and meaning of life in a kind of world (we would say, our liquid
modern world) in which everyone, though mostly unknowingly, shares in the condition of being an exile: 'what has happened in everybody’s life is subjected to a continuous transformation in memory and more often than not gains the features of a lost paradise, ever more bizarre and ever more alien.' Almost everything that one can say in trying to convey the exile’s amorphous and vaguely threatening condition can also be said of all other men and women exposed to the new liquid modern cityscape.

Double loyalty, double jeopardy, doubled chance of self-comprehension . . . 'Exile is a test of freedom', Miłosz concludes, 'and that freedom frightens . . . Exile destroys – yet if you resist destruction the test will make you stronger.'

The prospects of human emancipation appear sharply distinct these days from those that seemed so evident to Marx, though the charges raised by Marx against a world unforgivably inimical to humanity have not lost any of their topicality and urgency, and the failure to find a competent jury with the power to pass a verdict and make it stick, to punish the culprits and compensate the victims, has not offered any clinching proof of the unreality of the original ambition of emancipation. No adequate reason has been supplied to take emancipation off the agenda (if anything, the contrary is the case: the noxious persistence of ills is one more reason to try harder). On this point, Adorno is adamant: 'The undiminished presence of suffering, fear and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded.' Now as then, 'philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world – which could be paradise here and now – can become hell itself tomorrow.' The difference between ‘now’ and ‘then’ ought to be sought elsewhere.

To Marx, the world seemed ready to turn into a paradise ‘there and then’. The world appeared to be prepared for an instantaneous U-turn, because ‘the possibility of changing the world “from top to bottom” was immediately present.’ This is no longer the case, if it ever was (‘only stubbornness can still maintain the thesis as Marx formulated it’). The possibility of a shortcut to a world more fit for human habitation has been lost. One would rather say that between this world here and now and that other world that is hospitable to humanity and ‘user friendly’ there are no visible bridges left, whether genuine or putative. Neither are there
crowds eager to stampede the whole length of the bridge if it was designed, nor vehicles able to take the willing to the other side and deliver them safely. No one can be sure how a usable bridge could be designed and where the bridgehead could be located along the shore to facilitate smooth and convenient traffic. Possibilities, one would conclude, are not immediately present. In Adorno’s words, ‘spirit’ and ‘concrete entity’ have parted ways and the spirit can cling to realities only at its own peril, and so ultimately at the peril of reality itself.

‘Only a thinking that has no mental sanctuary, no illusion of an inner realm, and that acknowledged its lack of function and power can perhaps catch a glimpse of an order of the possible and the nonexistent, where human beings and things would be in their rightful place.’19 ‘Philosophical thinking begins as soon as it ceases to content itself with cognitions that are predictable and from which nothing more emerges than what had been placed there beforehand.’20 ‘Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn’t break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation. The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it . . . objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Open thinking points beyond itself.’21 Philosophy, Adorno insists, means the ‘determination to hang on to intellectual and real freedom’, and only on that condition may it, as it should, remain ‘immune to the suggestion of the status quo’.

I do not know whether Adorno read Franz Rosenzweig, but a reader of both would be surely struck by the elective (though only elective) kinship between the conclusions of the two thinkers, showing clearly through the thicket of differences which divide them – differences in vocabulary, in inspirational sources, in the distribution of emphases and ‘topical relevancies’. For Rosenzweig, much as for Adorno, ‘to be misunderstood by common sense is the privilege, even the duty of philosophy’.23 The alternative can only be the ‘acute apoplexia philosophica’ that reigns supreme in academic offices – even though, or rather because, the ultimate vocation of philosophy is to uplift the human Lebenswelt to a level at which that misunderstanding will no longer be its fate.24

‘Theory’, Adorno insists, ‘speaks for what is not narrow-minded’25 – and common sense most certainly is, for all the
reasons already listed and many others spelled out throughout Adorno’s prolific writings. Practice, and practicality in particular, is more often than not an excuse or a self-deception of ‘scoundrels’, like that ‘idiotic parliamentarian in Doré’s caricature’, who is proud of not looking beyond immediate tasks. Adorno denies practice the esteem that tends to be lavishly poured on it by the spokespeople for ‘positive’ science and those academic philosophy professionals (indeed, an overwhelming majority of them) who surrender to their terror.

Practice is not a test of the truth, let alone its ultimate and clinching test; practice is an obstacle, or a causeway to truth. Practicality, the immediacy of an action’s effects, is not a legitimate measure of a theory’s carrying power nor a credible test of its quality. Practice lost such authority when it abandoned the unfulfilled hopes and promises of the past, leaving theory on its own on the battlefield on which the preservation and redemption of those hopes are fought for and might be eventually attained.

I don’t think Adorno would expect much gain for the spirit from a dialogue with matter – and once thoroughly stripped of their subjectivity and crammed into a loose, straggling and creeping mass, human beings have been reduced to the state of matter. Adorno warned his older friend Walter Benjamin against what he called ‘Brechtian motifs’: the hope that the ‘actual workers’ would save art from the loss of its aura or be saved by the ‘immediacy of combined aesthetic effect’ of revolutionary art. The ‘actual workers’, he insists, ‘in fact enjoy no advantage over their bourgeois counterpart’ in this respect – they ‘bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character’. And then comes the parting shot: beware of ‘making our necessity’ (that is the necessity of the intellectuals who ‘need the proletarian for the revolution’) ‘into a virtue of the proletariat as we are constantly tempted to do’.

‘The world wants to be deceived’: Adorno’s blunt verdict sounds like a commentary on Feuchtwanger’s doleful story of Odysseus and the swine, or for that matter on Erich Fromm’s ‘escape from freedom’, or on the archetype of them all, Plato’s melancholy speculation on the tragic fate of philosophers trying to share with those in the cave the good tidings brought from the sunlit world. ‘People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle… they desire a deception’, ‘they sense that their lives
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would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to satisfactions which are none at all. Adorno quotes with unreserved approval Sigmund Freud's essay on group psychology: the group 'wishes to be governed by unrestricted force: it has extreme passion for authority: in Le Bon's phrase, it has a thirst for obedience. The primal father is the group ideal, which governs the ego in the place of the ego ideal.' And he ascribes the astounding success and unchallenged rule of mass culture 'industry' to its astuteness in pandering to that ideal: 'This longing for "feeling on safe ground" — reflecting an infantile need for protection, rather than a desire for a thrill — is catered for. The element of excitement is preserved only with tongue in cheek... Everything somehow appears "predestined".

If 'emancipation', the supreme objective of social critique, aims at 'the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves', it is up against the awesome resistance of 'culture industry'; but also against the pressure of that multitude whose cravings that industry promises to gratify — and deceitfully or not, does.

So where does all that leave the intellectuals, the guardians of the unfulfilled hopes and promises of the past, the critics of a present that is guilty of forgetting them and abandoning them unfulfilled?

By common opinion, inaugurated it seems by Jürgen Habermas and contested by only a few among Adorno scholars, and only relatively recently, Adorno's answer to these and similar questions is best conveyed by the image of a 'message in a bottle'. Whoever wrote the message and put it in, sealed the bottle and threw it into the sea had no idea when (if ever) the bottle would be spotted and which sailor (if any) would fish it out; and whether that sailor, once he had uncorked the bottle and pulled out the piece of paper, would be able and willing to read the text, understand the message, accept its content and put it to the kind of use the author intended. The entire equation consists of unknown variables, and there is no way for the author of the 'message in a bottle' to resolve it. At best, he could, repeat after Marx, Dixi et salvavi animam meam: the author has fulfilled his mission and done all in his power to save the message from extinction. The hopes and promises he knows, but most of his contemporaries have never learned or have preferred to forget, won't pass a point of no return
on their way to oblivion; they will be given at least the chance of another lease of life. They will not die together with the author – at least will not have to die, as they would have to have died if the thinker himself, instead of using a hermetically sealed bottle, had given himself up to the mercy of the waves.

As Adorno warns, and repeatedly, 'no thought is immune against communication, and to utter it in the wrong place and in wrong agreement is enough to undermine its truth.' And so, when it comes to communicating with the actors, with would-be actors, with abortive actors and those reluctant to join the action in their own time, 'for the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity' for those 'down and out'. Such self-inflicted seclusion is not in Adorno's view an act of treachery – it is neither a sign of withdrawal, nor a gesture of condescension (these being related: 'condescension, and thinking oneself no better, are the same,' Adorno himself points out). Keeping one's distance, paradoxically, is an act of engagement – in the only form which may be taken by engagement on the side of unfulfilled or betrayed hopes: 'The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such.'

The 'message in a bottle' allegory implies two presumptions: that there was a message fit to be written down and worthy of the trouble needed to set the bottle afloat; and that once it is found and read (at a time which cannot be defined in advance) the message will be still worthy of the finder's effort to unpack it and study, absorb and adopt it. In some cases, such as Adorno's, entrusting the message to an unknown reader in an undefined future may be preferred to consorting with contemporaries who are deemed unready or unwilling to listen, let alone to grasp and retain, what they hear. In such cases, sending the message into unmapped space and time rests on the hope that its potency will outride its present-day neglect and survive the (transient) conditions that have caused the negligence. The 'message in a bottle' expedient makes sense if (and only if) the person who resorts to it trusts values to be eternal, believes truths to be universal, and suspects that the worries that currently trigger a search for truth and a rallying in defence of values will persist. The message in a bottle is a testimony to the transience of frustration and the dura-
tion of hope, to the indestructibility of possibilities and the frailty of adversities that bar them from implementation. In Adorno’s rendition, critical theory is such a testimony – and this warrants the metaphor of a message in a bottle.

Let us note on this occasion that the fact that it is such a testimony sets Adorno’s critique sharply apart from the ‘radical thought’ of the nihilist current in postmodern thought with which it tends all too often to be confused. I agree with Jean Baudrillard, the foremost spokesman for the latter, that such ‘radical thought’ is neither dialectic nor indeed a ‘critique’; and I would suggest that this is because it rejects both the assumptions to whose acceptance by Adorno his critical theory bears vivid testimony. In Baudrillard’s programmatic manifestos, radical thought refuses to engage in the meaning negotiation which is the substance of critical theorizing; the prime stake of ‘radical thought’ is not a reinterpretation or explanation of events, but an act of defiance against their reality and the validity of thought aimed at its explanation; the debunking and demotion of the latter is a mere replication in thought of the ‘symbolic destruction’ perpetuated by the ‘event’. ‘Radical thought’ is not born of philosophical doubt or of frustrated utopia. It moves all the way towards questioning the world, including its utopian critique and the philosophy arising out of the void separating the two. The practitioners of radical thought in Baudrillard’s rendition ‘dream of a world in which everybody laughs spontaneously when someone says “this is true”, “this is real”’. In such a world, we may comment, time is suspended, and questions of durability and transience are meaningless, as is the gesture of consigning a bottle to the sea.

Whether the ‘message in a bottle’ simile is a shorthand description of Adorno’s factual intentions and deeds rather than an attempt to grasp, with the help of a metaphor, the sense of the scattered programmatic reflections is a contentious matter. This is particularly so when it comes to an evaluation of the post-exile career of the Frankfurt Institute and its acknowledged spiritual leader, after their ‘homecoming’ from the obscure periphery of the American academic establishment to the brightly lit centre of German, and soon after the European, intellectual life; that is, during the only time of Adorno’s life when critical theorists were offered positions of power and the material resources that allowed
them to put into practice what their theory recommended as its most desirable content. As Adorno and Horkheimer mused, in their American exile, 'the history of the old religions and schools like that of the modern parties and revolutions teaches us that the price for survival is practical involvement, the transformation of ideas into domination.' Horkheimer as Freiburg Rector and Adorno as the head of the resurrected Institute were given the chance of such a transformation.

Some influential studies, confirming retrospectively the verdict passed by the rebellious students of 1968, aver that Adorno settled fairly comfortably in the new situation, concerned more with domination and its administrative instruments than with the recovery and preservation of the purity of ideas. He and Horkheimer, it has been suggested, melted more or less smoothly and with little if any compunction and few second thoughts into the 'establishment' (whatever that overused and misused name may refer to), thereby confirming, even if inadvertently, Adorno's repeated warnings about the absorptive potency of administration, being able to reshape after its own image even the staunchest opposition to itself. Recently, however, quite a different version of Adorno/Horkheimer's role in postwar Germany has been gaining influence among Adorno's students: a story of the critical theorists' version of the 'long march through institutions', of a resolute, methodical and consistent effort to deploy their newly acquired prestige and authority for the purpose of shaking the extant academic institutions and the intellectual milieu in general out of their conservative stupor and making them receptive to critical thought and hospitable to the long-term undertakings that critical theory implied.

In the above dispute, clearly a topic for historians to tackle and resolve, I regrettably lack the competence needed to take sides. I will consider instead the contents of the 'message in a bottle': of the advice which can be posthumously reclaimed from Adorno's writings by the intellectuals of our generation (that is, let me recall, a generation coterminous with the era described in the second of our two stories); and the relevance of that advice to the challenges and tasks with which this generation, and so its intellectuals, are confronted.

Let me observe first that neither of the twin accusations raised by Karl Marx almost two centuries ago against capital – its waste-
fulness and its moral iniquity – has lost any of its topicality. Only the scope of the waste and injustice has changed: both have by now acquired planetary dimensions. And so has that formidable task of emancipation whose urgency prompted the establishment of the Frankfurt Institute more than half a century ago and continued to guide its labours.

In his recently published historical study of the ‘cultural turn’ in the concerns of American and British intellectuals, Michael Denning quotes Terry Eagleton to the effect that ‘if the 1930s left [meaning the left intellectuals] had undersold culture, the post-modern left overvalued it’ – only to object that it was not the reaction to ‘undervaluation’ that necessitated the original watershed of the ‘cultural turn’, nor the reaction to ‘overvaluation’ that prompted the current ‘post-cultural studies’ turn, but the fact that the ‘historical moment’ of the three-way split in the planet (a moment that made the ‘culture’ of ‘cultural studies’ plausible) has now passed. It is the world that has changed; the age of the first, second and third worlds has ended, clearing the site for ‘the moment of globalization’, and the refocusing of scholarly attention and the resulting theoretical shift merely followed. It is that new moment which in Denning’s view bears most of the responsibility for the current shift of interest from the question of ‘how peoples’ (nations, ethnicities, races, etc.) ‘are produced’; and for the drift away from the critique of ‘state ideological apparatuses’ and ‘culture industries’ to the recording of the ‘emergence of a global culture’, to ‘transnational cultural critique’, and to the new vocabulary of ‘hybridity’, ‘creole’ or ‘diapora’.

Let me note however that it is the increasingly ‘transnational’ knowledge elite, the ever more assertively and blatantly extraterritorial class of symbol-makers and symbol-manipulators, that stands at the forefront of ‘globalization’ – that shorthand for the genuine or putative, gradual yet relentless weakening of most distinctions that are territorially fixed and the replacement of territorially defined groups and associations with electronically mediated ‘networks’ negligent of physical space and cut loose from the hold of localities and locally circumscribed sovereignties. And let me note that it is the knowledge elite, first and foremost, that experiences its own condition as ‘transnational’, and that it is this kind of experience which it tends to reprocess into the idea of ‘global culture’, with ‘hybridization’ as its dominant trend: an
image that the less mobile remainder of humanity may well find
difficult to adopt as a fair representation of their own daily
realities.

This is no doubt a seminal watershed – though mostly in the
social location, ambition and function of the knowledge elite.
However much they have changed on the way from the ‘three
worlds’ planet to the ‘moment of globalization’, the present
realignment of culture study concerns is anything but sudden; it
was prepared and gestated well before the advent of globalization
was announced. Its roots can be spied in the 1960s New Left,
when their concern was, to quote Denning’s felicitous phrase,
‘how to invent a Marxism without class’.

Let me add: a Marxism without a historical agent; a Marxism
without the most Marxist of Marxist beliefs – that each histori-
cal era breeds a carrier of its own revolutionary transformation.
It was not just the proletariat that was written off as a lost cause
and bidden farewell. Its departure left the intellectualist discourse
in the sole company of whatever remained of the ‘general intel-
lectuals’, once charged with the task of locating, enlightening and
guiding the agents of historic change – the task which the ‘partial
intellectuals’, invited by Michel Foucault and his numerous fol-
lowers to replace them, were neither willing nor advised to under-
take. The compact between ‘the intellectuals’ and the ‘people’
whom they once undertook to uplift and guide into history, has
been broken – or rather revoked as unilaterally as it was
announced at the threshold of the modern era. The descendants
of the intellectuals of yore, the knowledge elite, having shared in
the ‘secession of the contented’, now move in a world sharply dif-
ferent from, and certainly not overlapping with, the many and
different worlds in which the lives and the prospects (or their
absence) of the ‘people’ are ensconced and locked.

And yet . . .

Marx’s critique of the exorbitant human costs of capital set free
from political and ethical constraints was launched at the thresh-
old of the era of the building of the nation-state. Before that era,
subordination of economic activity to a broad spectrum of human
needs and commonly accepted standards of decency and fair play
was exercised at the level of the local community and sustained
by similarly local institutions such as municipalities, manors,
parishes and craft guilds. By the end of the eighteenth century, all
Thinking in Dark Times

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those elements of the regime soon to be dubbed ancien were
subject to strains they were unprepared and unfit to endure. They
were in a state of advanced putrefaction, no longer capable of
effective control. Above the local level and its increasingly impor-
tent institutions, a new ‘socially extraterritorial’ space emerged
out of the bounds of local authorities – and there was as yet no
other authority willing and able to take over supervision of the
patterns of human relations and the fairness of human exchanges.
The immediate outcome of such an emancipation of economic
activity from any criterion except profitability and any purpose
other than the multiplication of profit was an unprecedented
upsurge in wealth production and accumulation, but also a sharp
and violent polarization of living standards, a rapidly expanding
mass of ‘wasted humans’ (redundant, superfluous and function-
less, and therefore excluded from the company of bearers of
human rights and denied human dignity), accelerated devaluation
and the subsequent extinction of customary ways of gaining a
living; all that topped up with a fast and relentless disintegration
of the habitual safety nets woven of human bonds, obligations and
commitments. The dismantling/incapacitating of the extant social
mechanisms of normative regulation was welcomed by entrepre-
neurs as a triumph of freedom over economically senseless and so
‘retrograde’ restraints. By those at the receiving end of the ‘great
transformation’ it was perceived as, first and foremost, a loss of
security.

What Marx (and not only Marx) took for a presage and augury
of a post-capitalist order, an order that would render freedom a
universal property instead of a privilege of the few, and for an
incipient sign of a imminent rebellion of the exploited masses
against the specifically capitalist form of unfreedom, may be seen
with the benefit of hindsight as an earnest and desperate, yet inept
and doomed attempt to ‘stem the tide’ and ‘stop the rot’; as
diffuse, unfocused manifestations of resistance against the denial
of customary security, against the new precariousness of social
standing and prospects of survival, against enforced eviction from
the network of human bonds that used to warrant a living seen
as decent according to the accepted standards – in short, against
the ‘double whammy’ of a threat to survival and a denial of
dignity. Unrest was fuelled by the loss of security – it was not a
frustrated leap to freedom.
It was the missing and painfully missed security that inspired
the invention and mushrooming of trade unions, friendly societies
and consumer cooperatives: and it was the promise of restoring
the lost security by other than traditional means that underlay the
claim of the rising nation-state to legitimacy and obedience. The
long and ultimately victorious advance of the modern nation-state
was punctuated by factory bills setting limits to hitherto unfer-
tered profit-making freedoms, culminating in the establishment of
the ‘social state’, that is of collective insurance against individual
or categorial misfortune.

That chapter of modern history is finished, however – at least
in the part of the planet where the projects of emancipation con-
tained in Adorno’s legacy have been scripted and put in bottles.
In this part of the world, the ‘nation-state’ method of settling the
problems generated by the compulsive production of waste,
inequality and indignity, that endemic tendency and the trademark
of a capital-run market economy, has run its course. The capital
and commodity markets have now moved into a new societally
extraterritorial space, situated well above the realm of nation-
states’ sovereignty and so beyond the reach of their supervisi-
ing/balancing/mitigating capacity – with nation-states cast on the
receiving end of that capital globalization process, into a position
similar to that occupied by local authorities at the beginning of
the building of the nation-state. It is now the turn of nation-states
to stand accused of authoring ‘economically senseless’ and so ret-
rograde constraints on economic activity, and being pressed or
coerced into surrendering all rights and intentions of political
interference in matters to do with the capital-and-commodity
global flow.

The social outcomes of that second emancipation – this time at
the emergent planet-wide level – are also strikingly similar to those
recorded at the level of the emergent nation-states two centuries
ago, during the interim period that separated the liberation of
business from local/communal constraints from its enclosure in
the frame of new regulations, administered and policed by the
political institutions of the nation-state. For a large majority of
the planet’s residents, the sum total of the current transformations
(code-named ‘globalization’) amount to a sharp deterioration in
their life conditions – but above all to the advent of an unfamil-

iar insecurity of existence, or insecurity in a new and unfamiliar
form stripped of earlier and routine defences and remedies. To redeploy Pierre Bourdieu's apt expression: at its receiving end, the one-sided globalization limited to business enterprise is perceived first and foremost as a loss of a grip on the present and an incapacity to foresee what the future may bring, and so also an inability to devise the means of bringing the future under control. More and more, the appeals to more freedom, the presentation of more freedom as a universal cure for all present and future ills, and the demands to dismantle and push out of the way the residual constraints that cramp the movements of those who expect to make good use of being on the move look suspiciously like an ideology of the emergent global elite. They fall on deaf ears as far as the rest of the planet's population is concerned, and are fast turning into a major obstacle to a planetary polylogue.

One may wonder what its readers would make of Adorno's message were the bottle to find its way to the South Seas, to the coasts of sub-Saharan Africa or the shores of Asia... Would they understand it? And if they did, would they not take it for another insult, or perhaps for a hint that another enemy assault was being plotted? Would they be able, and would they have the time and patience, to set it apart from the messages pumped daily through media satellites up there -- the messages referred to by Osama Siblani, publisher of the Arab American news, when he wrote in October 2001 that 'the United States [read: the affluent minority of the planet] lost the public relations war in the Muslim world [read: the downtrodden majority of the planet] a long time ago... They could have the prophet Mohammed doing public relations and it wouldn't help.' The spokespeople for the affluent world complain untringly that they cannot 'get their message through'. They will hardly be able to, given that the mass privatization and deregulation they have promoted under the umbrella of that message 'have bred', to quote a pithy summary of Naomi Klein, 'armies of locked-out people, whose services are no longer needed, whose lifestyles are written off as "backward", whose basic needs are unmet'.

All these departures not only raise the question of ethical responsibility for the less fortunate majority of the human species; they force on to the 'emancipation agenda' a new and unprecedented convergence of ethical precepts and interests in survival -- the joint,
shared survival of (as Kant would have put it) _allgemeine Vereinigung der Menschheit_, the universal unification of mankind. The conditions required to assure human survival (or at least to increase its likelihood) are no longer divisible and ‘localizable’. Our present-day misery and present-day problems in all their many forms and flavours have planetary roots and call for planetary (if any) solutions.

As no island, even one so big as to claim the status of a continent, can bid for genuine autonomy on a full planet, the messages of emancipation need to be legible to sailors sailing all of the planet’s oceans and seas, to stand a chance of having a radical effect. Just as the cause of human emancipation cannot be effectively pursued and defended in one country, or a group of countries, oblivious and indifferent to what occurs outside their closely (yet ineffectively) watched borders, it won’t do to address the message to a selective and similarly confined audience. And yet it seems to be so addressed; not because it is kept secret from the other potential readers (no message can remain secret for long on a planet criss-crossed by information highways), but because it tends to ignore that even though the worldwide triumph of the ‘modern way of life’ means that the urge to set an agenda may by now be a universal, planetary phenomenon, the issues that clamour for a high place on such an agenda remain as territorially differentiated as before (or perhaps even more so) – just as the consequences of globalization are.

Although all residents of the planet are, so to speak, in the same boat from the point of view of their survival prospects (their only choice being between navigating together or sinking together), their immediate tasks and so their preferred destinations differ sharply, making the actions and purposes which inform them jarringly out of joint – breeding antagonisms where solidarity is the imperative of the day.

Adorno’s precept – that the task of critical thought ‘is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past’ – has lost nothing of its topicality; but it is precisely because of that precept’s continuing topicality that critical thought needs continuous rethinking in order to remain equal to its task. As before, the hope of striking an acceptable balance between freedom and security, the two not immediately compatible yet equally crucial, _sine qua non_ conditions of humane society, needs
to be placed at the centre of the effort of rethinking. Among the hopes of the past that need to be most urgently redeemed, those preserved in Kant's *Ideen zur eine allgemeine Geschichte in weltbürgerliche Absicht* can rightly claim the status of a meta-hope: a hope that makes all hoping possible.

It is enough to look around the planet to realize what a tall order this is, and how high the hill is that will need to be climbed in the struggles ahead.

But armed – blessed or cursed – with language, with that curious particle 'no', that declaration of denial, rejection and refusal which lifts us, human beings, above the evidence of our senses and sets appearances apart from the truth, and that similarly bizarre (to think of it) future tense that drives us beyond the immediate and the given, we, human beings, can't stop imagining how things can be different from what they are now. We just can't settle for 'what is' because we cannot grasp what it 'is' without reaching beyond it. We ask the 'is' awkward questions that demand explanation and apology. We expect things to change – and we resolve to change them. Small things and big things alike.

Armed – blessed and cursed – with the knowledge of good and evil, we, human beings, are judged and sit in judgement – as to what has happened and as to what have we done or desisted from doing. We place the 'should' on the jury benches and put the 'is' into the defendants' dock. We carry the presiding judge (commonly called 'conscience') with us (inside us) wherever we go and whatever we do. And we believe that coming to a judgement makes sense: it has the power to change us and the world around us – for the better, or at least less evil.

As inevitably as the meeting of oxygen and hydrogen results in water, hope is conceived whenever the imagination and moral sense meet. As Ernest Bloch memorably put it, before being *homo sapiens*, a thinking creature, man is a *hoping* creature. It wouldn't be too difficult to show that Emmanuel Levinas meant much the same when he insisted that ethics came before ontology. Just as the world out there must prove its innocence in the court of ethics and not the other way round, hope does not and need not recognize the jurisdiction of 'what merely is'. It is the reality that must explain why it failed to rise to the standard of decency set by hope.

Drawing the maps of utopia that accompanied the birth of the modern era came easily to those who drafted them: they were just
filling in the blank spots or repainting the ugly parts in the grid of public space whose presence was, and with good reason, taken for granted and seen as unproblematic. Utopias, images of the good life, were matter-of-factly social since the meaning of the ‘social’ was never in doubt – it was not yet the ‘essentially contested issue’ it was to become in our day, in the aftermath of the neoliberal coup d’état. Who it was who would implement the blueprint and preside over the transformation was not a problem: despot or republic, king or people. One or the other was firmly in place, apparently only waiting for enlightenment and the signal to act. No wonder that it was the public or social utopia that fell as the first casualty of the dramatic change undergone by the public sphere these days.

Like everything else that was once securely located in that sphere, utopia has become the game and prey for lone rangers, hunters and trappers; one of the many spoils of the conquest and annexation of the public by the private. The grand social vision has been split into a multitude of private, strikingly similar but decidedly not complementary portmanteaus. Each one is made to the measure of the consumer’s bliss – intended, like all consumer joys, for utterly individual, lonely enjoyment even when it is relished in company.

Can public space be made once more a place of lasting engagement rather than of casual and fleeting encounters? A space of dialogue, discussion, confrontation and agreement? Yes and no. If what is meant by ‘public space’ is the public sphere wrapped around and serviced by the representative institutions of the nation-state (as it was through most of modern history), the answer is probably no. That particular variety of public stage has been stripped of most of the implements and assets that enabled it to sustain the dramas staged in the past – and even if the old paraphernalia had stayed intact, they would hardly suffice to service the new, increasingly massive and complex productions with millions of characters and billions of supernumeraries and onlookers. Those public stages, originally constructed for the political purposes of nation and state, remain stubbornly local – while contemporary drama is humanity-wide, and so obstreperously and emphatically global. The answer ‘yes’, to be credible, requires a new and global public space: a politics that is genuinely planetary (as distinct from ‘international’) and a suitable plane-
tary stage. And a truly planetary responsibility: an acknowledgement of the fact that all of us who share the planet depend on each other for our present and our future, that nothing we do or fail to do can be indifferent to the fate of anybody else, and that none of us can any longer seek and find a private shelter from storms that may originate in any part of the globe.

The logic of planetary responsibility is aimed, at least in principle, at confronting the globally generated problems point-blank — at their own level. It stems from the assumption that lasting and truly effective solutions to planet-wide problems can only be found and only work through the renegotiation and reform of the web of global interdependencies and interactions. Instead of aiming at local damage limitation and local benefits derived from the capricious and haphazard drifts of global economic forces, a new kind of global setting needs to be pursued, in which the itineraries of economic initiatives anywhere on the planet will no longer be whimsical and guided by momentary gains alone, with no attention paid to side-effects and ‘collateral casualties’ and no importance attached to the social dimensions of balances of cost and effect. In short, that logic is aimed, to quote Habermas, at the development of a ‘politics that can catch up with global markets’.

We feel, guess, suspect what needs to be done. But we cannot know the shape and form it will eventually take. We can be pretty sure, though, that the shape will not be familiar. It will be different from everything we’ve got used to.