



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

DEPARTMENT FOR  
CONTINUING EDUCATION

# Philosophy of History

Week 9: Adorno

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- ‘such things [the gas chamber and the atomic bomb] have a kind of retroactive force [...] [which] raises the question whether the view of history as a continuous progression does not include the catastrophes that we are experiencing today’ (*History and Freedom*)

# Adorno's approach

- Dialectical
- Interpretative
- Combinatory
  - *constellation* (from Benjamin)
  - 'allusive array of mutually correcting concepts'

- ‘a theory of progress must absorb the kernel of truth contained in those invectives against the belief in progress. It must do so as an antidote to the mythology from which the theory of progress ails.’ (*History and Freedom*)

- ‘No universal history leads from savagery to humanity, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.’ (*Negative Dialectics*)
- ‘In psychoanalysis, only the exaggerations are true’ (*Minima Moralia*, §29)

- ‘Society preserves itself not in spite of its antagonism but through it; the profit-motive, and thereby the class relationship, are objectively the motor of the process of production on which everyone’s life depends and whose primacy has its vanishing-point in the death of all.’ (*Negative Dialectics*)

- ‘Material want which long seemed to mock progress has been potentially eliminated. Thanks to the current state of technological development, the fact that there are still countless millions who suffer hunger and want must be attributed to the forms of social production, the *relations of production*, not to the intrinsic difficulty of meeting people’s material needs.’ (*History and Freedom*)

# critique of technological progress

1. Subjectively: instrumental rationality; develops means (*not* ends)
2. Objectively: domination of external nature; exploitation, subjection to human purposes
3. Subjectively: domination of *inner*, human nature.

- Reconciliation – subject and object / subject and subject harmony
- ‘progress means escaping from [...] the spell of progress’ (*History and Freedom*)

# two German words for 'history'

- *Historie* [Greek: ιστορία, 'knowledge acquired by investigation' (as with our 'history')]
- *Geschichte* [German: 'that which has happened']
- 'natural history' – initially *Historie* not *Geschichte*.
- But then properly historical *Naturgeschichte*.

# The nature / history dualism

## **Nature**

- Static
- Cyclical
- Causal determinism
- Matter, substance

## **History**

- Dynamic
- Progressive
- Freedom
- Spirit

# Natural history

- The task: ‘to see all nature, and whatever installs itself as such, as history and all history as nature, “to comprehend historical being in its uttermost historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as itself a natural being, or to comprehend nature as a historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.”’ (*Negative Dialectics*)

# history as nature / nature as history

- *chiasmus*: a sequence of two phrases which are parallel in syntax but with a reversal of the order of the corresponding words
- *allegory*: the 'as' – i.e. interpretation of hidden meaning

# History as nature

- ‘The objectivity of historical life is that of natural history.’ (*Negative Dialectics*)
- ‘[Hegel’s] world-spirit is the ideology of natural history.’ (*Negative Dialectics*)

- ‘progress [...] humanity becomes aware of its naturalness [...] call a halt to its domination of nature, a domination which enables that of nature to be perpetuated’ (*History and Freedom*)
- ‘absolute domination of nature is absolute submission to nature’ (*History and Freedom*)
- ‘Human history, progressive natural domination, continues the unconscious one of nature, of devouring and being devoured.’ (*Negative Dialectics*)

- ‘The traditional antithesis of nature and history is true and false; true, insofar as it expresses what the moment of nature experienced; false, insofar as it apologetically repeats, by virtue of its conceptual post-construction, the concealment of the natural growth of history by the latter itself.’ (*Negative Dialectics*)

# Nature as history

- Walter Benjamin: in German baroque tragedy nature is understood 'as eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of this generation recognize history' (cited by Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*)
- Adorno's 'melancholy science' (*Minima Moralia*, 'Dedication')