'The world spirit on the fins of a rocket'
Adorno’s critique of progress

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The ideology of progress, born (in its modern guise) during the Enlightenment, finds its culminating philosophical expression in Hegel’s conception of history. Here, everything that happens marks a further step in mankind’s march towards freedom: watching Napoleon ride into his home town, Hegel is convinced that he has witnessed ‘the world spirit [Weltgeist] mounted on horseback’.

The thought of Theodor Adorno is at the furthest possible remove from such optimism and progressivism. For Adorno, there was no possibility of identifying with the all-conquering advance of Reason. Writing during the Second World War, he parodied Hegel’s metaphor in a bitterly ironic passage of Minima Moralia: he too had seen a ‘world spirit’, he said, but it was mounted not on horseback but ‘on the fins of a rocket’. The history of the twentieth century was a sufficiently striking refutation of Hegel’s philosophy.

Apart from a lecture given in 1962, Adorno never offered a ‘systematic’ or detailed account of his views on progress. Nonetheless, the critique of ‘progressivist’ illusion runs right through his work. It is central to his historical vision and decisively important in the development of his ideas on art, literature and culture.

The critique of progress was, of course, already a familiar theme in Central European culture and philosophy. Adorno’s reflections on the topic draw on a large stock of (often bitter) polemic against bourgeois modernity. They form part of the broad Romantic current which has flowed through German, and European, cultural history from the late eighteenth century right up to the present. Romanticism is to be understood here not simply as a literary movement, but as a world-view whose basis is a critique of modern capitalist/industrial society founded on pre-capitalist social and cultural values. The two high points of his critique are the moment of ‘classic’ Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, and the so-called ‘neo-Romantic’ phase of the late nineteenth century, which was especially influential in academic circles. These two moments are of fundamental significance to Adorno’s view of progress, though he evidently reinterprets and reworks them in the terms of a philosophy which remains in the last analysis wedded to the tradition of the Enlightenment.

Thus Adorno acknowledges the (admittedly partial and limited) legitimacy of the Romantic critique of modernity and of the Enlightenment: insofar as it is pure instrumentality, ‘a mere construction of means, the Enlightenment is as destructive as its romantic enemies accuse it of being’. Even in its most reactionary guise, as for instance in Catholic reaction, Romanticism justly criticizes Enlightenment liberalism insofar as the latter is shown to transmute freedom into its opposite through the operations of the market economy. In some respects, Adorno came close to sharing the cultural elitism of the mandarins of the late-nineteenth-century German academy, with its hostility to the positivistic and utilitarian values of a modern mass society dominated by the market and by technology. This is the case even though he took radically different positions in his Marxist social views, his allegiance to aesthetic modernism, and his rejection of any restoration of the aristocratic privileges of the past.

Such a position may seem to be in contradiction to Marxism’s faith in progress. But this depends how we read Marx: and the texts are susceptible of very divergent interpretations ... For Adorno, the Marx of the Critique of the Gotha Programme is to be understood as rejecting the view that the doctrine of labour as the sole source of social wealth necessarily led to an endless growth of well being: Marx also admitted ‘the possibility of relapse into barbarism’. Such a reading – which is selective, but not necessarily mistaken – allows Adorno to mitigate the tensions between his deep and sincere commitment to
the Marxist project of social emancipation, and his sympathy for the cultural critique of progress. His friend Walter Benjamin had already interpreted Marx along these lines, and Benjamin’s writings were undoubtedly the most important and immediate source of Adorno’s ideas in this domain. Adorno offers a close reading of works by two twentieth-century writers, Aldous Huxley and Oswald Spengler, which he takes to illustrate both the value and the limitations of such a ‘reactionary’ critique of progress, based upon the values of the past.

In both Minima Moralia and Dialectic of Enlightenment, Huxley figures – together with Jaspers and Ortega y Gasset – as a typical exponent of the ‘reactionary critique’ of civilisation, based on nostalgia for the past and carried out in the name of the defence of culture. Adorno develops this analysis in an essay written in 1942 (and collected in Prisms), in which he assesses the content of Huxley’s Brave New World. Adorno sees the novel as an expression of the panic which the intellectual feels when face to face with the universal and unchallenged sway of the brute mechanism of market exchange. It is to Huxley’s credit that he ‘makes no concessions to the childish belief that the alleged excesses of technical civilization will be ironed out automatically through irresistible progress’: he ‘projects observations of the present state of civilisation along the lines of its own teleology to the point where its monstrous nature becomes immediately evident’. Nonetheless his book is ultimately a failure. It has a reactionary aspect: Huxley ‘cannot understand the humane promise of civilisation’ because he does not recognize that reification has a positive dimension (however ‘brittle and inadequate’). In his puritanism, he ‘fails to distinguish between the liberation of sexuality and its debasement’. He betrays his affinity with romantic philistinism when he opposes man to the machine and humanity to technology, mistakenly viewing ‘the limitations imposed by the relations of production (the enthronement of the productive apparatus for the sake of profit)’ as ‘properties of the human and technical productive forces per se’. The book reveals his unreflecting individualism, latter-day romanticism and nihilist ethics: it ‘is to be criticised ... for its failure to contemplate a praxis which could explode the infamous continuum from the world of today to the ‘Brave New World’ it depicts.9

This is surely an unduly harsh judgement, which ignores the richness and power of the novel. Indeed, the premises of the critique seem rather un-Adornian: would Adorno have charged Beckett or Kafka with failing to imbue their ideas with the notion of a transforming praxis? This rather strange article contains a number of passages which put one in mind more of Lukács’s attacks on the ‘nihilism’ of modern writing than of the literary aesthetics we associate with the philosopher of negative dialectics.

It is paradoxical that Adorno should treat Huxley less sympathetically than he does Spengler. Oswald Spengler, the ‘Prussian socialist’ (subsequently a National Socialist), was after all a conservative ideologue. His sympathies lay uncomplicatedly with the ruling class, and his philosophy of history underwrites the legitimacy of the existing order. Like Comte, ‘he made positivism into metaphysics, subordination to the given into amor fati, swimming with the stream into cosmic tact’. Nonetheless, ‘Spengler is one of the theoreticians of extreme reaction whose critique of liberalism proved itself superior in many respects to the progress one’, for progressive critics never took seriously the ‘real possibility of a regression into barbarism’.7

Adorno regards as unjustified the oblivion into which the author of The Decline of the West fell following his death. ‘Spengler found hardly an adversary who was his equal; his oblivion is the product of evasion.’ To read the critical literature on him up to 1922 is ‘to see how completely the German mind collapsed when confronted with an opponent who seemed to have inherited all the historical force of its own past’.8 Spengler was acute enough to perceive ‘the dual character of enlightenment in the era of universal domination’. His ‘specific prognoses’ are equally striking: in the arts as in the press, in warfare as in economics, the state of affairs we know ‘coincides with Spengler’s prognosis clearly enough’. Those who oppose him can hardly do so from any ‘blissful confidence’ in ‘the health of culture’: the sole reply to Spengler will be that uttered by those whom history throws aside and annihilates, in whose desperate protest lies ‘the only hope that fate and power will not have the last word’.10

This surprising over-valuation of Spengler may give us pause,11 as may the parallel disparagement of Huxley; but it makes clear Adorno’s readiness to take seriously the romantic critique of the conformist ideology of progress. But Adorno altogether rejects the anti-Enlightenment premises of that critique, with their retrogressive and conservative bias. His approach to this current of thought is very clearly brought out in a fine passage in Minima Moralia: ‘One of the tasks confronting thought – and not the least of those tasks – is to bring into the service of Aufklärung and of progress all the reactionary arguments that have been moved against Western civilisation.12 The whole of his philosophy of history, and particularly his meditations on progress, can
be understood as an attempt to realise this programme, which he restates as follows in his 1962 lecture on 'Progress': 'A theory of progress must acknowledge the pertinent aspects of invectives against progress, as an antidote to the mythologies to which it may otherwise succumb.'

Such an approach implies an attitude towards the past quite different from that of those romantics who seek to restore former glories. For Adorno, the point is not to conserve the past, but to realise the hopes of the past. This means that whatever survives of the old pre-bourgeois world is valuable only insofar as it may contain the germ of the new.

**A constant tension**

It is odd that in considering romantic critiques of progress, Adorno confines his attention to those who have spoken in reactionary, conservative and counter-revolutionary accents. He seems unaware that within this same cultural milieu, romanticism has spoken with a revolutionary voice: the voice of Rousseau, Blake, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. Adorno's neglect of this revolutionary romantic tradition is all the more surprising when we recall that in the development of his own conception of progress, Benjamin's work was (despite the difference between the two men) a constant point of reference.

In particular, Adorno was deeply influenced by Benjamin's 1940 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Of particular significance was Thesis VII, in which Benjamin represents the Angel of History as propelled towards the future by a storm which drives it away from Paradise — a storm which piles ruin upon ruin, and whose name is 'Progress'. This allegorical figure is reproduced almost exactly in a passage in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'The angel with the fiery sword who drove man out of paradise and onto the path of technical progress is the very symbol of that progress.'

In his 1962 lecture, Adorno refers to Benjamin's 'Theses', praising them for their effective critique of the notion of 'progress' in favour among 'those who have been classed (rather too hastily) as politically progressive'. He aligns himself with Benjamin in a common refusal to regard the progress of knowledge and technology as identical with the progress of humanity; and, like Benjamin, he is convinced that true progress involves a redemptive moment, even if this now takes a secular form. But he rejects, as 'ahistorical theology', any direct assimilation of these two moments: as St Augustine realised long ago, 'redemption goes hand in hand with history, and is not to be confused with it.'

In comparison with Benjamin, Adorno takes a nuanced view of progress, being prepared at times to acknowledge its positive aspect. However, his views involve a constant tension. Indeed, his refusal to resolve this tension is fundamental to his whole approach, which — consistently with his basic distrust of abstract conceptualisation — rejects any totalising concept of progress. His unwillingness to make progress into a 'conclusive category' derives from his respect for the 'dialectical taboo against fetish-concepts', which epitomises the self-critical spirit of Aufklärung to which despite everything Adorno remains committed.

From this standpoint, we can see his writings as marked not so much by a vacillation between positive and negative judgements as by a true dialectic which both draws upon and participates in the dialectic of Enlightenment. This dialectic is already at work in his writings of the early 1930s, in the reservations about Western rationalism that he expresses in 'The Actuality of Philosophy'. Of all the inner circle of the Frankfurt School, Adorno — following Benjamin in this — probably showed the strongest doubts about the progressive dynamic of Reason. This scepticism receives full expression in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where progress appears as the embodiment of progressive domination. This work was admittedly the result of Adorno's collaboration with Horkheimer, in whose subsequent writings (such as 'The End of Reason') this negative historico-philosophical attitude largely persists. Horkheimer, however, was less directly concerned with the epistemological implications of the critique of Aufklärung, whereas for Adorno those implications were a theme of constant reflection from the 1940s onwards. Concerns of this kind, which confront philosophy with the primary task of reflecting upon its own aporia, provide the framework within which the idea of a dialectic of progress is developed.

Just as the dialectics of Enlightenment presuppose a point of view at once internal to and critical of Aufklärung, so the dialectics of progress imply a point of view that criticises the idea of progress without banishing that idea beyond the conceptual horizon. It is along these lines that Adorno interprets, and adapts, Benjamin's critique of social-democratic progressivism, according to which progress (says Benjamin) was the progress 'of humanity itself (and not of its capacities and knowledge)'. Adorno reads this passage as addressing a certain conception of progress, rather than as seeking to banish progress from critical theory. Critical theory cannot do without the idea of progress, which conveys the hope that 'things will get better, and one day men will be able to breathe more freely'. Without progress, there is no good, and no trace of the good. Or rather,
progress consists in the struggle against the triumph of ultimate evil, the fight to resist the constant danger of regression, and the possibility of avoiding complete disaster. 20

Reification is forgetting

Underlying both the dialectics of Enlightenment and the dialectics of progress is an ethical position whose criterion is neither the degree to which human understanding advances, nor the emancipatory potential of that advance, but rather the degree to which this promise of emancipation has been realised. This refusal to dissociate progress in knowledge and understanding from the progress of humanity highlights the ‘double character’ of a dynamic which ‘has always developed the potential for freedom simultaneously with the reality of oppression’: 21 ‘Every progress made by civilisation has renewed together with domination [the] prospect of its removal.’ 22

The double character of progress is evident from the outset in technological and scientific development. Within any sphere – the introduction of machinery, the development of communications media, the further refinement of the division of labour – it is always possible for progress to become regression. This imbrication of regressive possibilities within the possibility of progress is apparent, Adorno argues in Minima Moralia, as soon as we take stock of the technical means that are now at our disposal. 23 If we consider the example of mechanical reproduction, it is plain that advances in the processes of production take place at the expense of production according to need: indeed, the new processes themselves come to dominate, and need adapts itself to them. Worse still, in the realm of both cultural and material goods, progress is regarded not as a matter of how far productive techniques meet human needs, but as inherent in the productive process itself regardless of what it reproduces.

Technical progress is marked by a modernising spirit of rational calculation. In consequence, modern societies have lost something relative to pre-modern ones: there has been decline and degradation. Under the impress of technical progress, human gestures have lost any quality of reticence, circumspection, refinement; experience and attainment have dwindled and grown desiccated, talent has degenerated. In a word, progress means that ‘mankind has lost the human dimension of culture’. The great art of modernism, the work of writers such as Beckett and Kafka, bears anguished witness to the declension of human subjectivity in modern life. This is why Adorno prizes those pre-capitalist survivals which can still be found in twentieth-century Europe – which, unlike North America, has not been entirely ‘modernised’. In Germany, for instance, certain cultural and artistic institutions, such as the academy, the theatre, museums, remain outside the sway of market mechanisms: these institutions, the legacy of the absolutist period, have passed into the control of political powers which have ‘assured their independence from the forces that dominate the marketplace, just as the feudal princes and lords of the nineteenth century did’. In America, by contrast, the antinomies of progress stand revealed in all their paradoxical inhumanity: there is a complete lack of that snobbery towards the dishonourable element which lies, to the feudal mind, in the exchange relation, the democratic aspect of the profit motive is acknowledged, and this ‘contributes to the maintenance of anti-democracy pure and simple, of economic injustice, and of human degradation. Nobody can conceive that goods might exist which cannot be expressed in terms of their exchange value.’ 24

Just as reason must fall short of achieving its own realisation if its emancipatory goals are blocked, so technological progress, reason’s especial means of expression, becomes transformed into progressive domination as soon as it loses touch with the ends which it is supposed to serve. In this sense, what allows the machine to be turned into an instrument of domination is not the development of science or technology, but the adaptation of machinery itself to the ends of power. The manipulation of the collective consciousness by what Adorno termed the culture industry, and the use by Fascist barbarism of technology in its most sophisticated forms, constitute two crucial aspects of this reversal of scientific progress.

However, the double character of progress is not a matter only of the abuse of science. A more fundamental issue is the existence within the roots of the very project of science of a potential for dehumanisation. In pushing their exploration of the Dialectic of Enlightenment back to the emergence of Western reason, Adorno and Horkheimer delineated a tendency towards ‘progressive domination’ which they saw as bound up with the enunciation of two founding aspects of the scientific project: the reduction of qualitative difference to quantitative identity (which was to reach its apogee in the precept ‘Science is Measurement’), and the search for mastery over nature. Instrumental manipulation of nature led inexorably to an instrumental view of human beings, just as the transformation of the world into mere object led to the reification of human relationships. 25 Humanity’s blindness towards mastered nature’s grief and suffering, a necessary condition of scientific progress, led – as if brutalised nature were taking its revenge – to humanity’s blindness towards the sufferings
of fellow-humans. This analysis seems strikingly contemporary, although Adorno and Horkheimer were not thinking of questions of ecology so much as of the way in which men had suffered disastrously because of their alienation not only from the nature over which they exercised their mastery, but also over that within themselves which was connected with nature. Progress, which had begun by demystifying the superstitions of animism, according to which things possessed a soul, had ended up under the sway of a far more powerful magic—the magic of a world in which men’s souls are transformed into things. Modern man, forgetful of his ancient unity with the natural world, remained in a state of enchantment: reification, noted Adorno and Horkheimer, always involves forgetfulness and oblivion.

In Adorno’s consideration of progress, the theme of the ‘return to nature’ constantly recurs, sometimes as a reflection on ‘the revenge of brutalised nature’ and sometimes as an emphasis on the need for ‘reconciliation’. In ‘Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality’ (in Dialectic of Enlightenment), the ‘return to nature’ denotes not simply a regression to a state prior to civilisation, but a moment of civilisation itself: Juliette embodies (in psychological terms) neither unsublimated nor regressive libido, but intellectual pleasure in regression—a joy intellectualis diaboli, the pleasure of attacking civilisation with its own weapons. Horkheimer expressed this differently in Eclipse of Reason, where he depicted fascism as a satanic synthesis of reason and nature, the diametrical opposite of the reconciliation of those two extremes of which philosophy had always dreamed.

The fate suffered by women in modern civilisation can stand as a paradigm of the dehumanisation which follows, according to Adorno, from the double precondition of progress: the levelling out or refusal of qualitative difference, and the search for mastery over nature. Women, who bear the indelible marks of a naturally imposed and irreducible difference, become the favoured objects of domination. As the representative of nature in a civilisation which glories in its oppression of nature, woman becomes ‘the substrate of never-ending subsumption notionally, and of never-ending subjection in reality’. Insofar as she is the most visible sign of the impossibility of humanity’s ever becoming absolutely autonomous of nature, she draws upon herself an unbounded hatred, whose depth is revealed more fully in Sadean violence than in the benevolent pretences of bourgeois paternalism. Women’s subordination is an emblem of the fate of modern man in a society ruled by coercion and reification. Denied access to the status of individuality, she is merely ‘an example of the species’—just as modern men, deprived of their individuality, become representatives of their species, rendered identical by their isolation from each other. As with the oppressed indigenous peoples of colonial states, or with the Jews among the ‘Aryans’, so ‘women’s defencelessness is the legal title of their oppression’. This is why women figure as a minority even where they constitute the actual majority. This powerlessness, together with women’s long exclusion from any exercise of power, in their turn confirm their closeness to nature. However, this closeness to nature, like the ‘nature of women’ itself, is actually the product of oppression. What patriarchal and bourgeois logic designates under the term ‘nature’ is nothing other than ‘the stigmata of a social mutilation’: far from being bound up with ‘instinct’, femininity consists in ‘what every woman must force herself—with a force that is masculine—to become’. In other words, ‘woman as an alleged natural being is a product of history, which denatures her.’

This is a profoundly pessimistic appraisal. Progress, far from laying to rest the more destructive and maleficent elements of nature, has brought us close to the threat of final destruction. There is no universal history that leads from savagery to human civilisation, Adorno remarked bitterly in Negative Dialectics, but there very probably is a universal history that leads from the catapult to the atomic bomb. This bleak assessment is the background to Adorno’s desperate appeal for reconciliation, an appeal based upon nostalgic visions of a distant past in which man lived in harmony with nature. If there is a utopian dimension to the mimetic aspect of art, this is because mimesis preserves a memory of that lost harmony and prefigures the possibility that it will one day be restored. The pages of Dialectic of Enlightenment are haunted by the memory of a long-lost, primordial happiness, in a prehistory which knew neither domination or discipline. However, as Martin Jay rightly remarks, Adorno (for all his deeply nostalgic tone) does not appeal for complete reconciliation with
nature in the sense of a restoration of total identity. Such
an identity would not be desirable even if it were
possible: the point is not to make man subject to the
forces of nature, but to preserve as far as possible32 the
living memory of his original unity with nature, as an
antidote to the baleful enchantments of reification.
Domination is to be opposed not so much by nature itself
as by the memory of nature.

It should be possible to make good the ravages of
progress, Adorno argues, 'by making use of the forces of
progress itself, but never by restoring the previous
situation'. In refusing to entertain retrogressive illusions
about a return to the past, Adorno is concerned both to
preserve the promise and the emancipatory potential of
progress, and to keep alive the memory of those former
injustices against which progress pitted itself. There was
the promise that a better world would come, in which
hunger would no longer exist; the promise, too, of that
'socialist element in progress' which meant that all social
functions would be open to everyone. Even the
quantitative logic of exchange and 'identity thinking',
and their accompanying zeal for comparative
assessment, bore within them the promise of that ideal,
free and fair exchange – even if that ideal had in truth
served as a pretext for injustice. In truth, moreover,
comparative assessment, insofar as this has involved
quantitative measurement, has been employed to reduce
what is qualitatively different to a set of quantifiable
determinations, while whatever has not been amenable
to quantitative normalisation has been relegated to the
status of otherness and inferiority. Without comparison,
however, there can be no grounds on which we can
legitimately proclaim the equality of all human beings as
something more than the quality of humanity which they
have in common. It is the principle of identity which
legitimates the comparison between the social position
of the masters and of those whom they oppress, and
which allows the latter to say: We too ... And in this,
that principle reveals its subterranean affinity with the anti-
authoritarian tendency of Reason, which, as Horkheimer
and Adorno note, is a less loyal servant of the powers of
domination than were the ideologies of antiquity. Indeed,
this blow struck at the legitimacy of domination
constitutes perhaps the sole progress achieved in history,
since it has given energy to every revolt against
oppression and injustice. To abandon comparison on the
grounds of an alleged respect for the irreducible element
of the qualitative would be, in Adorno's view, 'an excuse
for returning to the old injustice'. There is every reason
to pay heed to this warning in our own times, when the
'right to difference' is becoming the rallying-cry of
inequality, racism and xenophobia.33

**Anti-progressivism as despair**

In historical terms, the dialectic of progress receives a
largely negative appraisal. For, whereas 'real history is
woven out of a real suffering that is not lessened in
proportion to the growth of means for its abrogation',34
the realisation of the perspectives of human progress has
always remained a potential, a promise. Adorno
concludes from this that we must reject any positive
philosophy of history which implies finality, pre-
established laws, and linear temporality. But if history
certainly cannot be seen as a progression towards
freedom and emancipation, neither can it be seen as a
gradual descent into hell. It contains the possibility of
ruptures, which break into its previous course and open
onto radically different prospects. For a philosopher of
the Frankfurt School, the threatening implications of
such a view were all too evident, after Dachau and
Hiroshima. But there was also the potential for those
messianic moments cherished by Adorno's friend Walter
Benjamin. In such a vision of history, the past can at any
moment break through, either as a recurrence of the
eternally repeated spectacle of domination, which has
never ceased to haunt humanity, or as the recollection of
messianic hopes of radical change.35

Pessimistic though he may have been, Adorno
consistently refused to make an ontological fetish of
decline, any more than of progress. His dialectical
approach is founded not only (and obviously) on his
critique of Aufklärung, but also on the epistemological
and political implications of that critique. That approach
was announced in the 1930s, when he insisted that 'the
interpretation of any given reality is bound up with its
abolition'. And to the extent that an actually transforming
praxis became hopeless, it was all the more necessary to
turn, as one's only resource, to the struggle in thought
against existing reality.36 These are the concerns which
underlie his rigorous critique of both progressivist and
anti-progressivist philosophies of history. For both
tendencies threaten to legitimate the existing order, by
eliminating forever that utopian possibility which resides
in the consciousness that things might be transformed.
Progressivism naturalises what is, all that humanity has
created: everything becomes a positive fact, and imposes
itself on human consciousness as self-evident or
ineluctable, to the point where revolutionary
consciousness becomes ashamed of itself and of its
utopianism, degenerating into a docile confidence in the
objective tendencies of history. Anti-progressivism turns
historical despair into a norm which we must respect:
there has been no progress up till now, therefore there
will never be any. In both we find the same positivistic
tendency, which proclaims that whatever men have
lacked has been denied to them by an ontological fiat.37

Faithful to his fragmentary method, Adorno nowhere in his writings offers a systematic critique of progress. Nor does he offer a theory of history which might form the basis of such a critique. On the contrary: he proceeds by a succession of brush-strokes to delineate a most rich and nuanced dialectical problematisation of the notion of progress. Going beyond bourgeois myths and reactionary nostalgia, transcending the one-dimensional optimism of positivist Marxism and the mystifying apologetics of liberalism, he sets forth the contradictions and antinomies of progress and highlights the dangers and the promises which it bears. His thought, wracked by inner tensions, never comes to rest and can find no satisfactory conclusion. This unfinished symphony is dominated, nonetheless, by a melancholy and pessimistic tone: it refuses to succumb to the siren songs of progress and modernity.

Adorno’s reflections draw upon the historical experience of his generation. To be more precise, they originate in the experience of a Central European Jew brought face to face with two perverse (and certainly very different) aspects of twentieth-century progress — fascism, and the American way of life. The pessimistic note is understandably most audible in his writings of 1944–1948, Dialectic of Enlightenment and Minima Moralia, composed during the Second World War and while he was exiled in the USA. However, his writings as a whole bear witness to a consistent dialectical approach, and to a consistent and desperate struggle to retain some hope in a future emancipated from the baleful magic of interlocking ‘progress’ and ‘regression’.

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Notes


References to works by Adorno are made using the following editions:

Dialectic of Enlightenment (with Max Horkheimer, 1947), translated by John Cumming, Verso, London, 1979 [DE];


For terminological consistency, translations of quotations have sometimes been made from Lowy and Varakís’s citations of French editions. References are given to the equivalent passages in the English translations.

1. MM, p. 55.
2. DE, pp. 42, 90.

4. ‘Progress’, p. 100.
7. Ibid., p. 65.
8. Ibid., p. 54.
9. Ibid., p. 58.
10. Ibid., pp. 71, 72.

11. Martin Jay points out that Adorno’s subtle, and controversial, treatment of Spengler and of other apparently reactionary thinkers stems from his desire to rescue what is valuable in the romantic critique of capitalism. See M. Jay, Adorno, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 17.
12. MM, p. 192.
13. ‘Progress’, p. 94.
17. Ibid., pp. 100-101.

19. Adorno argues that for Benjamin, ‘the concept of progress draws its legitimacy from the theory that the representation of the happiness of generations yet unborn — without whom it is impossible to speak of progress — is inevitably accompanied by the representation of the idea of redemption’: ‘Progress’, p. 85.

22. DE, p. 40.
23. MM, p. 118.
26. DE, p. 94.
29. ND, p. 320.
30. See Jay, Adorno, p. 156.
31. See Jay, The Dialectical Imagination, pp. 266-7, and Adorno, pp. 64-5.
32. Some degree of forgetfulness is inevitable: see the letter from Adorno to Benjamin (29 February 1940) which Jay quotes in The Dialectical Imagination, p. 267.
33. ‘Progress’, pp. 97, 100; ND, pp. 146-50.
34. DE, p. 40.
35. See Jay, Adorno, p. 104.
37. ‘Progress’, pp. 87-8, 94-5.