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Chapter 27
Concrete Negation: The Dialectic of Culture's Self-Destruction in Cassirer and Adorno

Stefan Niklas

Abstract This paper concerns the problem of "negation" in the context of a philosophy of culture. The leading question is whether the *concrete negation* of culture – that is, its destruction – can be thought consistently. Ernst Cassirer's rather constructive take on negation as a necessary element in the process of cultural formation is considered with a focus on the dialectic of mythical consciousness. This view is, then, contrasted with Theodor W. Adorno's decidedly negative philosophy, and his understanding of cultural criticism in particular – including the infamous statement about poetry after Auschwitz. My interpretation of Cassirer seeks to reveal his rich and complex view on cultural progression as the continuous self-transgression of symbolic forms which, in truly Hegelian spirit, is driven by contradiction. In discussing Adorno, I show how his philosophy – arguably the most consequent negative philosophy at hand – allows to address devastating destruction without diminishing it. While this seems an advantage over Cassirer, it turns out that Adorno's view cannot make intelligible how the process of culture goes on after what he calls the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. In the end, neither perspective can offer a fully satisfactory way of theorizing the negation of culture consistently, yet both are needed as steps towards a comprehensive theory of cultural destruction.

1 Introduction

Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* has come to be regarded as a central classic within the European tradition that offers a systematic program for a philosophy of culture. Since I am inquiring the philosophical status of negation in and for the process of culture, I will address the problem of negation regarding Cassirer's philosophy. More specifically, I will focus on a particular passage from the end of

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the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* where the role and the implications of negation are addressed directly. This passage deals with the dialectic of mythical consciousness, which in Cassirer's view marks the original impulse of human culture to constantly transgress itself. This self-transgressive and therefore transformative internal negation is the very motor of the continuation and "progress" of human culture. Having drawn this view from Cassirer, I will contrast it with that of Theodor W. Adorno, who is the foremost representative of a "negative" philosophy in twentieth-century Western thought. Adorno's call for a dialectical criticism of culture seeks to address culture's destructive and guilt-laden core, without resolving the negative again into some kind of ruse, an inverse moment of culture's overall progress. Adorno's rigorous and consequent way of advocating unresolved negation in cultural criticism finds exemplary expression in his infamous statement about poetry after Auschwitz which, in my view, reveals possibilities and limits of his understanding. By way of a contrastive comparison of Cassirer's and Adorno's views on negation in the process of culture, I hope to find decisive clues as to how a philosophy of culture – one that has grown in the long shadow of Hegel – can and must account for *concrete negation*, which is another name for *destruction*. I consider both Cassirer's and Adorno's views as indispensable for a philosophical understanding of culture's destructive self-negation. However, the relation between the two, as it will turn out, is neither complementary, nor mutually exclusive. Their contrast is rather a striking example of a perspectivism; each of them offers something that the other cannot, and each of them lacks something that the other might offer. This is why neither perspective can be missed, and yet they resist being reconciled with one another.

I have already used the term "concrete negation" which serves as the guiding thread of my interpretation of Cassirer and Adorno respectively. It means that negation equals plain destruction when the dynamics of cultural forms are concerned. More precisely, when negation becomes *concrete* in the dynamics of culture, it means material eradication. I use the term concrete negation not only as distinct from abstract negation (where things are simply different, yet unrelated as regards their respective claims), but also as a further specification of determinate negation (i.e., the defining contradiction which unmistakably shows what something is not, and what it therefore is). Concrete, in this sense, means that something is not only negatively defined but that the act of negating it also directly defies and destructs its positive existence.

With this concept in mind, I will now investigate the works of Cassirer and Adorno, focusing on some specific passages of their works while offering an interpretation of their overall intellectual attitudes towards the problem of culture's concrete self-negation. Their differing ways of receiving Hegel's negative philosophy is the background against which their respective understanding of negation – both as the motor of the process of culture as such and as the core concept of its philosophical critique – shall come to the fore.

2 Cassirer and the Dialectic of Mythical Consciousness

Cassirer concludes his book on *Mythical Thought* (or *Mythical Thinking*),[1] which is the second volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, with a chapter on "The Dialectic of Mythical Consciousness". It is in this chapter that Cassirer explains his conception of progress, or more precisely the progression (*Fortgang*) of "the unitary energy of the human spirit" that articulates itself in what he calls symbolic forms.

This term, "symbolic forms," denotes the media of the formation of sense or meaning. "Symbolic" is used in a most comprehensive sense that refers to the fundamental process of creating meaning in the connection of material signs with various multifaceted significations. Cassirer's understanding of "symbolic" emphasizes the acts of symbolization rather than the results of such acts. The resulting symbols are rather the passing coagulations of the process of symbolization, the material for ever new configurations. Cassirer thinks of the great cultural domains – religion, language, art, history, science, technology, and first of all: myth[2] – as each exemplifying such a medium of the perpetual formation of symbols. In Hegelian terms, symbolic forms are different forms of objective spirit.[3] Yet, unlike Hegel's Spirit, the symbolic forms do not build up a "system", but an open set that keeps progressing and knows no complete or definite version.

That Cassirer introduces his notion of progress specifically in the context of mythical consciousness is no surprise, since he identifies the starting point of the whole dynamic of culture in myth. Though all symbolic forms are basic modes of human expression and understanding, myth is the *most* basic symbolic form in the sense that it is logically prior to the emergence of other symbolic forms (thus even prior to language).[4] I regard the passage in which Cassirer explains the dialectical progress of myth as central to the whole enterprise of a philosophy of symbolic forms. It provides a key to understanding Cassirer's ideas about the principles of the perennial *process* of the symbolic forms, as much as it highlights the pervasive dialectical character of his project. For Cassirer explains that progress is possible only by way of negation: "The progress of myth does not mean merely that certain

[1] In the older translation by Ralph Manheim from 1955, "Mythisches Denken" appears as "Mythical Thought," whereas in an upcoming translation by Steve Lofts the more active form "Mythical Thinking" is used.

[2] These are the symbolic forms Cassirer discusses in his (published) writings. His late introduction called *An Essay on Man* (ECW:23, originally published in 1944) gives an extensive overview while excluding technology, which was discussed in a separate essay in 1930 called "Form und Technik" (ECW:17).

[3] For a reconstruction of Cassirer's philosophy as a philosophy of objective spirit, see Kreis (2010).

[4] Since the logical and genetic aspects of myth's priority are inextricably tight to each other, it would be fair to say that myth is *genea-logically* prior to other symbolic forms if it was not for the confusion with Nietzsche's understanding of the term (and later Foucault's), from which Cassirer would most likely have distanced himself.

basic traits, certain spiritual determinations of earlier stages are developed and completed, but also that they are negated and plainly eradicated."[5]

In other words, the progress of myth as a basic cultural form is driven by the negation and plain destruction of its own basic traits and earlier stages. This concerns not only the internal change or replacement of certain contents of mythical consciousness, but also the very function of mythical formation as such which results in the transition towards new, entirely different cultural forms (like religion, art, science etc.). Yet, neither the internal changes nor the overall transition to other forms is not imposed from without – say in the struggle between different symbolic forms – but occurs as a negation *from within*, as part of the dynamics of myth itself. Thus, the negation of myth means a transformative self-negation that, on the one hand, destructs for the sake of internal reconstruction, and, on the other hand, destructs for the sake of breaking through the confinements of myth as a form.

The different aspects of the overall function that Cassirer ascribes to negation within the dialectical progress of mythical consciousness can be summarized as follows: (a) The negation of myth takes place *from within* the dynamics of myth itself; (b) it functions as the very *motor* of these dynamics; (c) it concerns the *whole* of myth, and not just specific aspects of it; (d) therefore myth ultimately *turns on itself*; (e) but it does so for the sake of *preserving* itself; (f) and not just to preserve, but to even *transcend* itself; (g) and to be thereby *sublated*.

Cassirer clarifies his dialectical view on myth, and on cultural forms in general, by presenting it in harsh opposition to Comte's positivistic understandings of the 'development' of culture.[6] The most important point distinguishing these two perspectives consists in Cassirer's emphasis on the productive force of negation as transformation, which finds no place in Comte's or any other positivist account of reality. If a cultural form like myth survives its own dismissal in the course of new developments, the positivist understanding can only regard it as a primitive remnant. The dialectical understanding advocated by Cassirer, however, does not follow such a logic of developmental excretions; rather it seeks to re-integrate what has been negated according to its function within the multiplicity of cultural forms. In fact, this function is determined more clearly by way of negation.

Furthermore, Cassirer's dialectical understanding conceives of the negated form not as the passive object, which the positivist theory seems compelled to make of it, but rather as the actual impulse, thus the subject, of its own negation. The reason why it negates itself is that it has encountered the limits of its own possibilities to

[5] Cassirer (1955, 235). The translation is slightly modified: Ralph Manheim translates "schlichtweg ausgelöscht" as "totally eradicated", whereas I think that Cassirer's wording should rather be translated as "plainly eradicated". The difference is that Cassirer is not so much emphasizing that a spiritual determination is destructed *in its entirety*, but that certain events in the process come down to *nothing but* eradication.

[6] Cf. Cassirer (1955, 236–237).

symbolically express human thought, intuition, and social life.[7] That does not mean that the mythical function has become worthless or expandable, but that it has given rise to problems and questions it can no longer respond to by its own means. Therefore, it calls for new forms that can respond in other, different ways than myth does – whereas responding differently means to offer different kinds of symbolic transformation.[8] These other ways to respond to questions that have arisen within mythical consciousness itself are thus no outer contrasts. Rather, they are the continuations of what myth has started by other means. As productive determinate negations of myth they first allow to conceive of it as a functional whole. Religion, for instance, evolves from mythical consciousness and keeps close ties with it, while at the same time contradicting some of its fundamental traits. Especially Judaism, as Cassirer explains a noteworthy essay, is an anti-mythological religion in that it not only breaks with imagery ("[f]or imagery is the very core of mythical thought"[9]), but also establishes the ideal of individual moral responsibility. The latter is unconceivable within mythical thought which has no concept of moral subjects but knows only collective guilt.[10]

Cassirer describes the transformative negation of mythical consciousness as the double act of self-completion and self-transcendence: "in completing its own cycle it ends by breaking through it."[11] But how exactly should this self-completion of myth be interpreted? Does it mean myth's fulfillment according to its own goals or self-chosen destiny? And does myth stop existing, or at least stop functioning, after its self-transcending completion? The answer to both questions is a clear *no*. Frist of all, the self-transcendence of mythical consciousness is not itself a conscious act. Cassirer emphasizes that myth is not the kind of medium that allows to reflect on its own conditions and foundations, and it does even less try to deliberately get out of itself. On the contrary, mythical consciousness stays within itself even while the possibilities of myth's formative powers have reached its limits and are about to trespass into a new realm.[12] This is to say that, even after exhausting its capacity as a medium of understanding the world, the mythical function very much remains intact. It keeps producing ever new images, rites, and narratives that allot a place to every phenomenon within the cosmic whole, pushing back the perennial fear of

[7] That myth is a symbolic form means that it is a form of thought, intuition (*Anschauung*), and social life. The second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is organized according to these three constitutive aspects.

[8] The term "symbolic transformation" is actually Susanne K. Langer's (1942). I take it to capture quite succinctly the process or activity of what Cassirer describes as symbolic forms – namely different ways of symbolic (trans-) formation. I do not mean to thereby level out the differences between Langer's and Cassirer's philosophical programs, but I believe that the vicinity and mutual inspiration of their respective works legitimizes this terminological borrowing.

[9] ECW:24, 199. This quote is from the essay "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths" from 1944 (197–208).

[10] ECW:24, 203–204.

[11] Cassirer (1955, 236).

[12] Cf. Cassirer (1955, 235).

nature and death.[13] This means, furthermore, that myth does not proceed according to any goals outside of itself: it does not have a telos other than its own way of operating, and it keeps operating by assuming ever new shapes which are but variations of the ever-same motives.

Myth has ended and keeps existing. The end of myth means the end of its possibilities to further develop as a form; in other words, the possibilities of this fundamental mode of responding to the world have been fixed.[14] Thus, the kinds of questions it has given rise to (for instance the question about moral responsibility) has created new needs and new demands which make its own consciousness call for other things than images. Since myth can answer the demand for something other than images only with *more* images, mythical consciousness must contradict itself – thereby ceasing to be *mythical* consciousness – in order to take a qualitative leap or positive *metábasis* into another form of objective spirit, one that responds differently to the new needs and new demands. For Cassirer it is precisely this contradiction which secures the persistence of mythical thought, its *Aufhebung* (sublation). As seen, Cassirer is aware that this act of sublation is not a merely formal consequence, but a materially destructive process. In his words:

> To the continuous building up of the mythical world there corresponds a continuous drive to surpass it, but in such a way that both the position and the negation belong to the form of the mythical-religious[15] consciousness itself and in it join to constitute a single indivisible act. The process of destruction proves on closer scrutiny to be a process of self-assertion; conversely, the latter can only be effected on the basis of the former, and it is only in their permanent cooperation that the two together produce the true essence and meaning of the mythical-religious form.[16]

This passage shows that myth is internally divided: it keeps building its inner world, while it inevitably transgresses this very world. Since the world of myth is by definition a closed one, its transgression and the initiation of other forms of objective spirit (i.e. culture) means a contradiction. However, this contradictory division between a closed world and the transgression towards the open realm of multiple new forms is the constitutive negative principle of mythical consciousness. As a principle it describes the unity of mythical consciousness (the "single indivisible act"), but it describes it as the un-reflected negative unity of itself and its opposite. Yet, the second part of the above quote shows that, after all, this negative principle reconverts into a positive one: The negative work of destruction never goes all the way. If the "process of destruction proves on closer scrutiny to be a process of self-assertion," thus the negation of its own negation, then it is actually a constructive

[13] Cf. ECW:25, 49–51.

[14] There is an obvious analogy between the end of myth in Cassirer and the end of art in Hegel. However, exploring this analogy is beyond the scope of this paper.

[15] To be clear, Cassirer frequently shifts between a focus on the continuity of myth and religion, and what distinguishes them. I have emphasized a distinguishing aspect in my example about Judaism in accordance with the late Cassirer. The examples of art or science would highlight the transformative contradiction of myth and religion alike.

[16] Cassirer (1955, 237). ECW:12, 277.

principle according to which the affirmation of culture ultimately gains the upper hand. Insofar he considers destruction as a necessary moment of the progression towards new and other expressions of human culture, Cassirer shows himself as a particular kind of Hegelian for whom nothing is ever really lost, since all is salvaged along the way – "aufgehoben" in the double sense of abolished and secured.

Cassirer's reliance on the negation of negation is not just the expression of a dialectical conviction (which, by the way, does not quite fit the popular image of a neo-Kantian[17]), it also fulfills a systematic function by establishing myth's autonomy in relation to other symbolic forms. While the destructive self-negation becomes the vehicle of myth's forward-pressing transgression, this very transgression also delimits the destruction of myth, preserving it on a different (though not necessarily higher) level. For Cassirer, the destruction was never meant to be absolute.

Limiting the destruction of myth, however, is possible only if myth's realm within the whole of human culture is also limited. Myth now exists relative to the new realms it has given rise to and, therefore, its position and legitimacy is negatively determined by the strenuous relations it is forced to establish towards such forms as science, history, or art. Yet, it is only in these relations that the specific claims that myth makes on understanding the world become explicit, since these claims are contested by those of the other symbolic forms. The coupling of the negative determination from without with the positive determination of its claims from within is precisely what marks the autonomy of myth as a symbolic form.[18] Myth's autonomy does not mean that its inner conflict was in any way resolved, but only that it has its own – forever relative, yet relatively stable – location within the larger field of conflicting forms.

Although Cassirer focusses specifically on the dialectic of mythical consciousness when discussing the problem of destructive negation, he does aim at the whole of cultural progression. The point is, in other words, that the fundamental tension, the structural imbalance that Cassirer describes for myth, returns as a constitutive moment in every symbolic form. Any symbolic form is driven by inner negation. The target of progressive negation is of course different in every symbolic form since the defining function is a different one in each of them. The functional

[17] The question whether Cassirer is a neo-Kantian or not, whether he perfectly represents it or marks its endpoint, has sparked a debate in Cassirer scholarship. To give a few examples: Krois (1987, 2011) and Schwemmer (1997) see Cassirer as strictly departing from Marburg neo-Kantianism, whereas Luft (2015) firmly places him back into this movement. Friedman (2000) and Ferrari (2003), although their reconstructions of Cassirer are very different from one another, both contextualize Cassirer within neo-Kantianism while emphasizing also his Hegelian and romanticist leanings. Hegelian readings of Cassirer can be found in Kreis (2010) and Moss (2014). Nordsieck (2015), to name one last example, untightens Cassirer's bonds to Kantianism and Hegelian alike and instead offers something quite different by putting him into a constellation with Bergson and Whitehead.

[18] The problem of myth's autonomy as a cultural form must certainly be discussed more extensively. Therefore, it is very welcome that Gregory S. Moss currently pursues a project in this direction.

equivalent to myth's production of ever new images and narratives in language, for instance, consists in the great capacity of transforming experience into concepts. At some point this capacity reaches the limit at which it has exhausted its means but needs to "say more". This makes language transcend itself towards, say, the symbolic form of art, or towards purely formal "languages" in mathematics and its applications in science and technology.

There is, however, a peculiar aspect about myth and the dialectic which pushes it beyond itself – an aspect which might explain myth's persistence. The dialectical leap of mythical consciousness is namely an effect of its perpetual insistence on identity, and accordingly its inability to account for relations which results in the compulsion to let all difference collapse into sameness again.[19] This inability to account for differences – or, the ability to imagine identity in everything – establishes the perennial contradiction between myth and any other mode of symbolic transformation. Moreover, mythical consciousness shows itself to be incapable of reflecting the unity of itself and its opposite, the unity of identity and difference. In Hegelian terms, myth is denied from entering the level of reflective self-consciousness.

The rule of *identity*, however, though it should be strictly exclusive to myth, proves to be a pitfall also for the other symbolic forms which in principle establish symbolic order according to *difference*. All the forms that have arisen from myth's initial impulse to transgress itself not only repeat this impulse within their own dynamics, they also remain prone to occasionally fall back into the mythical domain of identity-thinking, thus undermining their own ways of understanding the world in its linguistic, artistic, scientific, and historical *relations*. That culture, especially in the form of enlightened civilization, can and does fall back into mythical thought is precisely the topic of both Cassirer's *Myth of the State* and Horkheimer/Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and it shows the perpetual debt that human culture in its entirety owes to myth as its great generator. This indebtedness does in no way mean that all of culture could be reduced to myth, but rather the opposite: the persistence of myth as an option or threat means that *contradicting* myth remains an impulse of much of culture's various developments and inner struggles.[20]

Cassirer calls the contradictory moment of self-transgression – occurring within any symbolic form – a *metábasis eis állo génos.*[21] This expression, coming from Aristotle, means the passage or leap into a different realm and is traditionally used to refer to a certain logical mistake. Cassirer, however, uses the term affirmatively and thus emphasizes that in the logic of cultural progression it is not a mistake at all, but a necessity to break through the boundaries of a given order of thought,

[19] Cassirer (1955, 250–251); ECW:12, 293–294.

[20] The interaction with myth must, of course, not be made an absolute principle. It certainly is a motif within the sciences, but also within a great deal of 'rationalized' religion, as much as in methodically working historiography. Also, art can work as a way to negotiate the mythical remainders as well as mythical needs within (aesthetic) culture – a topic on which I will have to expand elsewhere.

[21] ECW:13, 476. See also Freyberg/Niklas (2019, 54).

intuition, and self-understanding. The *metábasis* means that gradual changes turn into qualitative change by way of a rupture. In this respect Cassirer is very much in agreement with Engels, who famously declared the turn of quantity into quality as a fundamental principle of dialectics[22] – even though Cassirer would probably not like being put into the vicinity of Marxism at all. Yet, Cassirer's philosophy – despite its rather linear narrative – seeks to distance itself from all speculative philosophy of history, including Hegel's, that construes the dynamics of historical change as one single process and emphasizes the plurality of actual developments instead.

Cassirer's philosophy denies the possibility of an all-encompassing, self-completing system of the forms of spirit, and thus the possibility of absolute knowledge. To Cassirer's mind, such an attempt belongs to the kind of speculative metaphysics against which the whole project of his philosophy holds the open set of ways to give form to the world: an unpredictable multitude of ways to shape and determine reality.[23] Despite the bright Hegelian colors in which I have tried to picture Cassirer, it is those metaphysical commitments (or the denial thereof) that mark the stark differences between Hegel's original conception and the way Cassirer adopts dialectics within his own. Admittedly, the whole insistence on dialectics is far less present in Cassirer's publications before and after the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Cassirer's last book, *The Myth of the State*, even includes a fierce – and somewhat unfair – critique of Hegel's practical philosophy.[24] Nevertheless, there is a pervasive dialectical attitude in Cassirer's writings which expresses itself as the refusal to prematurely discard any philosophical outlook as nonsense, or to degrade it to a mere stage of the pre-history of what is now conceived as true and right. Especially Cassirer's works in the history of philosophical and scientific problems – above all the monumental work on the *Erkenntnisproblem* (*The Problem of Knowledge*)[25] – show his determination to learn from everything along the way, and to advance philosophical insight especially from the tensions and contradictions between intellectual attitudes and convictions. In other words, he looks for truth in what is not by itself just true, and he thus acknowledges in his own way what Horkheimer and Adorno called the "temporal core" of truth.[26]

One might be content with saying that Cassirer rejects Hegel's metaphysics but embraces the insight into the dialectical movement of cultural progression. Yet, there is more that Cassirer shares with Hegel than the basic role of negation alone. I have already touched upon this when saying that for Cassirer nothing was ever really lost in the whole of culture. Like Hegel, he offers a philosophy in which everything can find its proper place, not by being violently subsumed so as to fit the place that is allotted to a given phenomenon, but by establishing such a place by and

[22] Cf. Engels (1990, 348–353).

[23] For exemplary passages see ECW:13, 40–47, 475–477.

[24] Cassirer depicts Hegel as contributing to an intellectual attitude that eventually leads to a proto-fascist myth of the state. Kervégan (2018) powerfully counteracts such interpretations.

[25] ECW:2–5.

[26] Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, xi).

for itself. The difference is surely that whereas in Hegel everything is integrated into an absolute system which knows a clear hierarchy of forms, in Cassirer all things perceived, felt, and known find their place within the open, ever-growing field of the infinite expressions of human culture. My point is, however, that in both philosophers the prevailing attitude is that of trust in the whole.[27] The conception of the whole of human spirit or culture as a concrete whole (rather than a regulatory idea alone) forms the central demand of Hegel's and Cassirer's respective philosophies – even though they differ greatly as regards the logical nature, truth, and knowability of this concrete whole.[28] This trust in the idea of the whole makes it difficult, if not impossible, for both Hegel and Cassirer to philosophically account for a destruction of truly devastating, annihilating consequences. In other words, in their respective pursuit of the concrete whole, both cannot think of negation as the kind of concrete negation that leaves little to nothing behind for creating something new. While for the traditional grand dominions of culture one may argue that some destruction is necessary, one can hardly claim any such constructive *metábasis* for the kind of eradication that not only concerns the content or function of a cultural form, but also its very substrate. One of the names for the latter kind of destruction is genocide.

And even though Cassirer was himself threatened by the genocide that was in the making when he left Germany, his philosophy does not offer (at least not without a great deal of further re-interpretation) the means for understanding such destructive events as the very products of civilization. Only in his late *The Myth of the State* does he try to counteract this inability (or maybe: this earlier naiveté) when focusing on the technological (i.e. propagandistic) abuse of myth, as well as the destructive forces of myth that aspire to chaos if they go unchecked.[29] And yet, in *An Essay on Man*,[30] which Cassirer wrote right before *The Myth of the State* and which was the last to be published during his lifetime, Cassirer still displays a striking optimism in emphasizing mostly the communicative and liberating forces of culture in its various forms. On the whole, Cassirer tends to tone down the consequences of negation, destruction, and the contradictory relations between the different symbolic forms in general. Ultimately, he is not a thinker of ferocious negativity, but rather tries to deal with negativity by negating it, thereby making way for the intellectual affirmation of human life as an open project. This made him struggle with the obvious tension between culture as a plurality of mere differences, and culture as a plurality of manifest contradictions. Whereas culture as an unfolding of difference amounts to a utopia of plurality as universal coexistence, the historical situation of Hegel's, Cassirer's and our own time might, as Adorno holds,[31] in fact be marked by unsurmountable contradiction.

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[27] Robert Brandom's recent book shows how Hegel's *Phenomenology* (1970) can in its entirety be read as expressing *A Spirit of Trust* (2019).

[28] ECW:11, 13.

[29] ECW:25, 294.

[30] ECW:23.

[31] Cf. Adorno (2015, 105–106).

3 Adorno and the Negative Dialectic of Culture and Barbarism

Adorno is the foremost representative of a negative philosophy in the dialectical tradition, a philosophy which radicalizes Hegel's by negating the negation of negation. His *Negative Dialectics* – being both the title of a major book as well as the apt description of the program of his cultural criticism expressed in various essays written over four decades – is still the central reference point for any philosophy that tries to think consequently in negative terms. According to Adorno's view, conceptual sublation must be avoided since the social world itself, i.e. reality as we are forced to experience it, prevails in completely unsublated contradictions.

The differences between Adorno's and Cassirer's philosophical programs and their respective conceptions of dialectics is obvious: whereas Cassirer stays closer to Hegel's original idea about double negation as a constructive force of spirit or culture, Adorno not just doubles but triples down on the negations. There is nonetheless huge common ground between the two when it comes to what needs to be refuted in the name of dialectics, namely both positivism and overly ontologizing tendencies in philosophy. As Adorno points out, this double front already marks the stance of Hegel's original project[32] – and one can add that it remains a central impulse of any dialectically inspired philosophical critique – be it Marx's, Dewey's, or Fanon's.

In the following, I will confine myself to contrasting my reconstruction of Cassirer with a set of assertions made by Adorno. I take these assertions, for the most part, from an exemplary essay which lends itself for discussing the significance of negation in the dynamics of culture and its critique, namely Adorno's famous text on "Cultural Criticism and Society",[33] which includes his infamous dictum about poetry, Auschwitz, and barbarity.

The contrast between Adorno and Cassirer starts with the different ways in which they use the term "culture". For Cassirer the extension of this term is more or less identical to that of civilization, if both mean the "second nature" of the human being. This open, all-encompassing term contrasts with Adorno's understanding of culture as denoting mostly *aesthetic* culture – thus only a specific part of what is meant by Cassirer's holistic notion. While Cassirer discusses culture through a variety of examples, starting with language, myth, religion, and science, Adorno mostly thinks of culture as the traditional forms of bourgeois high-brow culture and thus treats art as its epitome. The normative charge of Adorno's notion of culture contrasts with Cassirer's largely descriptive use of the term (and it is precisely the descriptive – or: non-*pre*scriptive – attitude which marks the normative

[32] Cf. Adorno (2015, 158).

[33] Adorno (1983).

commitment of Cassirer's philosophy).[34] Yet, Adorno's concept of society as a totalizing whole may in some ways correspond with Cassirer's all-encompassing concept of culture insofar as both designate a process of integration (though again with differing evaluations of this process). But while Adorno thinks of it as the real process of enlightened totalitarian society (as insistently described together with Horkheimer[35]), Cassirer thinks of it as a limit-concept, putting the programmatic (in the end: ethical) emphasis on plurality.

Bearing in mind that Adorno and Cassirer speak on clearly different levels when it comes to "culture" as a concept, one can still compare or relate the two. For this purpose, Adorno's use of culture – especially as employed in his text on cultural criticism – must be linked to what in Cassirer's conception is the symbolic form of art which, in turn, must be regarded as that particular form which paradigmatically reflects what human culture means in an emphatic sense. At least this is what I suggest in order to be able to proceed with the comparison. Fortunately, this suggestion can rely on Cassirer's own treatment of art as "an organon of our self-knowledge"[36] and as the manifest form of "poiesis" which underlies all of human activity as expressing itself in the different forms of culture.[37] So, if this establishes a conceptual relation that allows to treat Cassirer and Adorno as speaking about the same problem, then what is it that Adorno asserts about culture?

Adorno's fierce criticism of culture does not just concern specific parts of it, but the whole. This is not mean, however, that he thinks all of culture was as such "bad". Rather, he holds that the "truth" of culture and reality in general can only be assessed through its falsity (which is a radicalized version of Hegel's idea that truth is attained through mutual contradictions). Adorno's understanding of criticism is based on the conviction that the critic should not try to come up with a synthetical view that harmonizes position and negation; but to stick to the praxis of contradiction instead, in order to dissolve the badness or wrongness of reality without reifying it by way of a constructive (pseudo-) synthesis.[38] Elsewhere Adorno makes very clear that the idea of a dissolving synthesis is most alien to Hegelian dialectics, despite the popular caricature of the "triplicity" of dialectics.[39] The compulsion to form tranquilizing syntheses rather belongs to the schematic view of positivism which Hegel defied.

The greatest problem that Adorno sees in culture – as represented by bourgeois art – is its constitutive tendency to affirm reality. Even though the very same art, as Adorno asserts in his numerous writings on aesthetics, may function as a stand-in

[34] I am not saying that Cassirer's notion of culture was without bias. There is, of course, a lot of prejudice invested into his descriptions and various implicit and explicit presuppositions that go into his judgments. The point is that the meaning and function of his concept of culture is first of all to understand (reconstruct, analyze) the modes in which human life takes shape before measuring them against some kind of ideal (like freedom).

[35] See Horkheimer and Adorno (2002).

[36] ECW:23, 206.

[37] Cf. Lauschke (2007).

[38] Cf. Adorno (1983, 27, 29, 34), Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 202).

[39] Cf. Adorno (2015, 70–71), Adorno (1997:6, 159).

for a yet undetermined better praxis of social life,[40] the apologia of culture as *tradition* – which, by definition, is to be uncritically embraced – always bears the mark of "bad" affirmation. It is bad, because it ultimately leads to the defense of those conditions that made possible the atrocities of the twentieth century, and Auschwitz in particular.[41]

For Adorno culture always pertains to its opposite called "barbarism". This utterly touchy term has a multifaceted, often ambiguous meaning in Adorno.[42] In the given context, however, "barbarism" clearly refers to Auschwitz as the real, concrete negation of enlightened culture – which, to repeat the argument of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is possible only because of enlightened culture itself. Adorno reaffirms Walter Benjamin's famous dictum about the dialectic of culture and barbarism ("[t]here has never been a document of culture, which was not simultaneously one of barbarism"[43]) and radicalizes it by stating that after Auschwitz said dialectic has reached its "final stage".[44] Barbarism is at the same time culture and its negation; in short, it is negative culture. When entering its final stage, the dialectic of culture and barbarism can no longer be reversed, which is to say that there is no positive culture that can rise from the negative work of barbarism anymore. From Adorno's point of view there is a turning point in this dialectic from which onwards the fundamentally barbaric character of culture is no longer just a devastating *moment* that inevitably occurs as the flipside of cultural development; rather, it has become the *defining* aspect that shows culture to be nothing but its self-eradication. Still, culture is fated to keep existing in a zombie-like state, feeding false consciousness while glossing over its lethal consequences.

While for Cassirer the constructive function of culture always re-integrates the necessary occurrence of destruction, and thus underscores culture's overall tendency towards creating productive syntheses, Adorno tries to show the opposite, namely how the inner friction between culture and barbarism affects every formative process with destruction, thus turning cultural formation into the deformation of human life. In other words, for Adorno the monuments of culture are not *also* barbaric, they have become *essentially* barbaric (hence the radicalization of Benjamin's dictum). But while there is no ruse of cultural progress that could undo or sublate the barbaric character of culture as such, Adorno nevertheless holds that culture and enlightenment – being two words for the historically developed human capacity of critical self-reflection – remains all we have. There is no other means to oppose barbarism than the culture that has itself created it. Enlightened culture is as

[40] Cf. Adorno (1997:7, 26).

[41] This is expressed not only in the essay on "Cultural Criticism and Society," in the vast majority of the essays collected in *Prisms* (1983) and the *Critical Models* (1998); both in Adorno (1997:10).

[42] For a more extensive interpretation of Adorno's use of the term "barbarism," see: Niklas (2022).

[43] Benjamin (1974, 696). Translation by Dennis Redmond: https://folk.uib.no/hlils/TBLR-B/Benjamin-History.pdf

[44] Adorno (1983, 34).

much the precondition for the "new kind of barbarism"[45] as it is the promise of its remedy. This seemingly paradoxical consequence highlights that Adorno's philosophy, after all, maintains hope. It is certainly a dim kind of hope, but at least one that does not give in to illusions.

What keeps this hope alive are momentary flashes of possibility;[46] residual moments of the virtual experience of liberation and happiness which serve as "the sources of normativity."[47] Such experience is typically provided by two paradigmatic sources: first, moments of accomplished art, which keep alive the possibility of liberation; and second, memories of momentary happiness, especially childhood happiness, which confirm that happiness is, or was, in fact possible. Yet, the experience of these possibilities is either imaginary or bygone, which means there is no way to say whether liberation and happiness are *still* possible. So, if hope is what Adorno's philosophy can offer, it still gives little to no reasons for believing in what it hopes for, namely that radical self-reflection may in the end turn things around and save barbaric culture from itself. In other words, Adorno's philosophy may be hopeful, but it is nevertheless pessimistic – which, for once, is not a contradiction at all.[48] Cassirer, by contrast, does not retreat to mere hope, but remains an optimist,[49] i.e., someone who actually trusts, if not in the best possible outcome, then at least in the continuation of culture as the road towards human freedom. From Adorno's point of view such optimistic trust has completely lost its legitimacy.

It is, then, in the infamous remark on poetry after Auschwitz that Adorno seeks to drastically show (to avoid the term "clarify") the consequences of the distinctly *negative* dialectic of culture and barbarism as a medium of radical self-criticism. Here is the passage, including the sentence on poetry and Auschwitz, at some length:

> Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind

[45] Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, xiv). Horkheimer and Adorno distinguish the "new kind of barbarism", which culminates in genocide and is glossed over by the culture industry, from an old kind which is not the outcome of enlightenment, but rather stands at its beginning. See Niklas (2022).

[46] Cf. Macdonald (2019).

[47] This expression is taken from Peter E. Gordon whose Adorno lectures in 2019 (forthcoming), as well as a briefer lecture he gave in Amsterdam, were entitled "Theodor W. Adorno and the Sources of Normativity." See http://www.ifs.uni-frankfurt.de/wp-content/uploads/Adorno-2019-Flyer.pdf

[48] The difference between hope and optimism has been expressed quite beautifully by Terry Eagleton's *Hope Without Optimism* (2017). Yet, Eagleton is concerned not so much with Adorno as with Ernst Bloch and the critical idea of utopia. Still, the description of being hopeful without being optimistic holds just as well for Adorno.

[49] As Klaus Christian Köhnke (2019, 273) shows, optimism, or more precisely: the "optimism of reason," is the central characteristic of the intellectual attitude that gave rise to the project called "philosophy of culture" in the context of German-Jewish philosophy in the nineteenth century.

> entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.[50]

Admittedly, this passage does not come across as hopeful at all, but only as pessimistic, and even more so as apodictic in its relentless judgment. Still, what it expresses is a call to the rescue of critical intelligence. This would be absolutely pointless if it was not driven by the hope that this could still be done; that intellectual progress could still avoid its self-destruction; that it could undo its absorption by the absolute reification it has produced; that critical consciousness could still stop its degeneration into idle chatter; that self-satisfied contemplation, which is the actual sin of affirmative culture, can still be abandoned. By means of drastic, purposefully exaggerated words,[51] the quoted passage urges the critical reader to help doing these things by, first of all, acknowledging their own involvement in the barbaric condition of culture. It opposes the surrender to fatalism of "the most extreme consciousness of doom" – whereas opposing fatalism can only mean to be hopeful.

Although in the context of the longer quote the remark on poetry after Auschwitz appears as being made almost in passing, it did not miss the effect Adorno surely intended with it.[52] To refer specifically to poetry is to refer to the epitome of constructive, formative, tender-minded, humanistic high-brow culture. If this culture shall still be bearable in a world in which Auschwitz could happen, has happened, and might happen again, then it must acknowledge its own moral impossibility. In this sense one can read: *even* poetry is barbaric, and it is *especially* barbaric since it keeps up the illusion of a cultivated life that in reality has abolished itself. Therefore, poetry must be negated. Yet, this negation does neither just cancel poetry, nor is it meant to restore it on a higher level; rather the negation of poetry must consist in the overt acknowledgment that it is precisely what it is not supposed to be, namely barbaric. Giving up on its own constructive transgression is the only way in which poetry can still retain a chance at self-transgression. To further dramatize this conclusion: this culture which made Auschwitz possible must be negated, not because negation will save it from its own (further) destruction, but because nothing else can. Only a negation of culture that no longer gambles for reconciliation can offer a dim but genuine hope for such reconciliation.

If the conclusion I draw from my reading of Adorno is correct, then what his criticism leaves us with is one great paradox. Even if it represents the dialectical nature of the process of culture, it does not clarify much in terms of what poetry, and culture in general, are supposed to become; or what people who make poetry, or who practice cultural criticism are supposed to do. Adorno takes answering such questions to fall outside of his philosophical responsibility: only the wrong and bad

[50] Adorno (1983, 34).

[51] For the rhetorical device of exaggeration in Adorno (and Horkheimer) see: Niklas (2022), Jenemann (2020), and Honneth (2000).

[52] Cf. Skrike (2020).

life that we should undo can be determined at all, while the right and good life cannot even be fathomed. At best we can take pains to live less wrongly.[53]

Adorno thus finds a way to avoid dissolving destruction and its devastating consequences. He acknowledges destruction and unreconcilable contradiction for what they are without trying to intellectually minimize, tame, or harmonize them. This makes his philosophy an important – in my view: indispensable – perspective for a truly *critical* philosophy of culture. Yet, with negation as the unsurmountable bedrock of Adorno's philosophy it becomes virtually impossible to understand the further progression of culture after its destruction. What are the conditions of the possibility of an impossible culture that keeps existing?[54]

4 Instead of a Conclusion

If the question was how a theory of concrete negation would look like that allows to think destruction consistently, then neither Cassirer's nor Adorno's perspective offers a fully satisfying answer. However, this might say less about the success or failure of their respective philosophies than it is says about the concept and phenomenon of destruction itself, namely that it is not a consistent phenomenon that could possibly be grasped by an equally consistent account.

To sum up the results from the discussions of Cassirer and Adorno rather brutally, they agree that the concrete negation of culture, its destruction (also called barbarism) is itself part of culture and necessarily belongs to its progress. That which negates culture is culture itself, and Cassirer and Adorno also agree that it affects every department of human culture and/or society. The question about which they disagree is whether the inevitable destruction of cultural forms has a formative function after all, serving as some kind of boost for the overall constructive dynamics of culture in which even the destructed is somehow retained; or whether the destruction is total in the sense that it does not allow for any formative synthesis or sublation as it leaves nothing behind but a completely deformed life against which only the hope for radical self-reflection can be upheld.

Cassirer's constructive and on the whole optimistic view cannot do justice to real destruction and devastation of the unspeakable horrors of genocide, slavery, and all kinds of oppression. Adorno, in turn, cannot offer an understanding of the real development of cultural forms after their destruction, because this would require precisely what he opposes, namely to at some point resolve destruction into cultural reconstruction. Adorno does not really offer arguments against reconstruction, but a normative attitude; his critical theory means an imperative to refrain from positive construction, and to instead make philosophy all about the repudiation of injustice

[53] Freyenhagen (2013) interprets Adorno's practical philosophy to be about living less wrongly, given that no right living is attainable.

[54] Adorno is aware of this problem and indeed confronts it by asking how life after Auschwitz can be possible (legitimate) at all, cf. Adorno (1997:6, 355); see also Niklas (2022).

and all shades of the negative.[55] The contrast between the two highlights what Cassirer can only express indirectly at best, namely that the claim about destruction as a positive function of culture can only be based on a normative claim. This means that the question whether destruction is ultimately formative or deformative cannot be answered without a strong normative commitment. Furthermore, since this commitment is about the very concept of the progression of human life (culture) as such, it is not just normative, but also metaphysical.

It might seem tempting to have Cassirer's and Adorno's views complement each other, thus gaining a view that could both: do justice to the devastating nature of real destruction; *and* offer a theory of cultural change as the progression of the plurality of forms. Such a combined position would seemingly solve the problem. But only seemingly. A synthesis of this kind would precisely undermine the strength of Adorno's theory which evaporates without its perennial insistence on contradiction. In effect, Adorno would become a vicarious agent of Cassirer's outlook. The opposite option would be to accentuate the indissoluble contradiction between Adorno's and Cassirer's views, leading to a kind of theoretical impasse. If this would do more justice to Adorno's style of theorizing, while sidelining Cassirer's, it would also run the risk of fetishizing negation – which runs against the intentions of both these thinkers. The best thing to do, then, is to leave the decision open. As perspectives for the understanding of concrete negation neither can be missed – not although but precisely because the problem of culture's self-destruction escapes the exhaustive explanation of any singular perspective.

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[55] Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 181).

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