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### Adorno (and Horkheimer) on Barbarism

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## 6. FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE PRESENT

### 6.1. Adorno (and Horkheimer) on Barbarism

*Stefan Niklas*

#### 6.1.1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On March 25, 1964, Adorno dreamt<sup>2</sup> he had gathered a mob in order to kill a psychotherapist. This psychotherapist was about to give a lecture on Schubert, but first wanted to create some ‘atmosphere’ by singing one of Schubert’s songs in a fashion that the dreaming Adorno deems a Hollywood-like smudging of the difference between this artform and an operetta. Everyone tolerating such barbarity—so Adorno’s dream avatar argues to agitate the audience—would be a barbarian themselves. Apparently, this argument is compelling enough to make the audience gang up and draw the seemingly inevitable conclusion that the psychotherapist (who is by the way singing with a weepy Viennese accent)<sup>3</sup> must be beaten to death. All this brings the dreamer into such a heat of passion that he wakes up.

Adorno took notes of his dreams, because he trusted in the systematic interconnection of their motifs and was hoping to gain self-knowledge drawn from the unconscious<sup>4</sup>—an attitude which is clearly based on his appreciation for the writings of Sigmund Freud. Finding himself initiating a lynching, as described above, or being involved in mass-executions<sup>5</sup> and other such ‘barbaric’ acts, seem to form a particular motif in Adorno’s reported dreams. Apparently, Adorno was haunted by the idea of barbarism which he then tried to reflect philosophically.

In a famous passage from *Negative Dialectics* (*Negative Dialektik*), Adorno most openly admits that he takes central motifs of his dialectical philosophy from such dreams that reflect the nightmare called reality. Talking about the drastic guilt of someone like himself, “who accidentally escaped and by all rights ought to have been murdered” (“wer zufällig entrann und rechtens hätte umgebracht werden müssen”),

1 Next to the editors of this volume, I would like to thank Nadia Ben Hassine and Josef Früchtl for their critical comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

2 This is what the note or “protocol” of the dream tells us; see Adorno 2018, 77.

3 Vienna is the city in which Adorno received a great deal of his musical education—and, of course, it is the home of psychoanalysis.

4 On Adorno’s motivation to protocol his dreams see Müller-Doohm 2011 and Reemtsma 2018.

5 See Adorno 2018, 33 and 77.

Adorno says: “As if to make up for this he is secretly haunted by dreams in which he no longer lives, but was gassed in 1944, as if his entire existence after that was purely imaginary, an emanation of the vagrant wish of someone who was killed twenty years ago” (“Zur Vergeltung suchen ihn Träume heim wie der, daß er gar nicht mehr lebte, sondern 1944 vergast worden wäre, und seine ganze Existenz danach lediglich in der Einbildung führte, Emanation des irren Wunsches eines vor zwanzig Jahren Umgebrachten,” Adorno 1997, vol. 6, 355–56; my translation, St.N.).<sup>6</sup>

As I will point out later, for Adorno the sheer survival in a world after Auschwitz inevitably shares the kind of coldness without which Auschwitz could not have happened. The motif of Adorno’s dream, in which calling out a certain aesthetic barbarism provides a cause to act in a most barbaric kind of way, reflects this share in the existential coldness which gives rise to the most heated acts. These dreams are, in other words, about one’s own complicity with the barbaric condition of modern human life. The point of dialectically reflecting barbarism is to at least try to become less complicit with it.<sup>7</sup>

In the following I will demonstrate how Adorno addresses the problem of barbarism and how he utilizes it in the light of two exemplary texts. The first one is the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which on the whole is concerned with the sources, structures, and effects of “a new kind of barbarism”; and the second one is Adorno’s essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” which contains his infamous statement about the barbaric character of poetry after Auschwitz. Since Adorno wrote the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* together with Max Horkheimer, the latter’s views on barbarism are to some extent also reflected here. I will argue that Adorno’s notion of barbarism should not be considered as a concept in the strict sense, but rather as a term which gains its clear meaning from the respective constellations in which it appears. Above all, the use of the term ‘barbarism’ serves as a means of exaggeration (to which I will return below), which in turn is a fundamental means of Adorno’s overall style of philosophizing, a necessary exaggeration against the excessive measures of reality itself. I claim that due to its deliberately exaggerated character the notion of barbarism becomes a medium of a radical, negative self-reflection in Adorno.

### 6.1.2. The New Kind of Barbarism — *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

The question that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*; Horkheimer and Adorno 2004, 2002)<sup>8</sup> sets out to answer is “why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (2002, xiv; “warum die Menschheit, anstatt in einen wahrhaft menschlichen Zustand einzutret-

6 My translation is based on the translation that Dennis Redmond has made available online ([http://monkeybear.info/ND\\_Full.pdf](http://monkeybear.info/ND_Full.pdf)), but also deviates from Redmond’s, because his use of *they* instead of *he* blurs the fact that Adorno is giving a most personal account here.

7 This formulation is an allusion to the phrase *living less wrongly*, which is the subtitle of Fabian Freyenhagen’s important study of Adorno’s practical philosophy (Freyenhagen 2013).

8 In the following, reference to Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 and 2004 is abbreviated by omitting the names of the authors, i.e., using only 2002 (for the English translation) and 2004 (for the German original).

en, in eine neue Art von Barbarei versinkt,' 2004, 1). So, right at the beginning of the book, the ongoing barbarism is not only declared the ultimate problem of the dialectical considerations to follow, but it is also already qualified as being new in kind.<sup>9</sup> If the ongoing barbarism is new, there must also be an 'old' kind of barbarism—and the distinction between the two raises expectations about the conceptual clarification of barbarism in general. So, what is this new kind of barbarism and how does it differ from other, supposedly earlier kinds of barbarism?

Although it is far from clear where exactly Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of barbarism should be located within the three-stage model of *savagery–barbarism–civilization*, they certainly use it in the modern, temporalized sense.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, 'barbarism' denotes some kind of developmental stage, characterized by superstition and brutality, which civilization in general and enlightened thought in particular seeks to overcome. In referring to barbarism as *new in kind*, however, they do not indicate a recourse into an earlier stage somewhat before civilization, and neither do they use it as a discriminatory label for 'others' on the 'outside'; rather, they employ it in order to address the consequences of civilization itself—the sinking into *highly civilized* barbarism.

Generally speaking, Horkheimer and Adorno use the term 'new kind of barbarism' as a normatively charged way to describe, or at least to refer to, the atrocities at the beginning of the twentieth century that culminated in Nazism and the unspeakable mass-murder that has come to be known as the Holocaust. The signature of these atrocities—so the argument or narrative of the *Dialectic* goes—is already present in every moment of modern life in the 'administered world,' since standardization, reification, and calculability pervade every department of it. Enlightenment set out to free humankind from the fear of the unknown and from the bounds of nature by disenchanting or demystifying the world through a scientific system of explanation that would give (intellectual as much as juridical) order to the world, allotting its accountable place to everything there is. The important turn in Horkheimer and Adorno's argument is that the fear of the unknown, which drives the enlightenment, is the same fear that gives rise to myth. As such, myth does not establish a systematic way to confront and overcome the fears it expresses but rather seeks to make fear more bearable. Enlightenment, therefore, tries to get rid of myth in order to get rid of the fear it expresses.

On its journey towards freedom from mythical fear the system of enlightened reason rigidifies itself and becomes totalitarian. This has two implications. First, it means that enlightened reason does not restrict itself to the realm of scientific knowledge anymore, but makes positivistic science, and formalistic thought in general, the dominating force of all of society. Second, it means that everything that cannot be fitted into the system—everything that is incommensurable, and thus not identical

9 It is worth noting that in the first version from 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno were speaking only of a "renewed" barbarism.

10 The model and the historical and conceptional relations between the terms have been laid out by Christian Moser in vol. 1, chapter 2.1 of the present study (especially p. 60). I get back to the three-stage model below when discussing Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of the Polyphemus episode.

with it—is denied existence within a society that is now ruled by the “principle of immanence” (2002, 8; “Prinzip der Immanenz,” 2004, 18) which expresses the desire that there should no longer be anything unknown. Enlightenment, not despite but precisely because of its commitment to demythologization, becomes “mythical fear radicalized” (2002, 13; “die radikal gewordene, mythische Angst,” 2004, 22).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the struggle of human beings in the enlightened world, which is a world “radiant with triumphant calamity” (2002, 1; “strahlt im Zeichen triumphalen Unheils,” 2004, 9), becomes a mere struggle for self-preservation. The modern subject (prefigured in Odysseus) is forced to use all of its cunning to find loopholes in the (natural) laws and contracts that make the totalitarian system of society. Reason is thereby reduced to instrumental reason, to skills for survival and private profit. This is the story of the first excursus of the *Dialectic* on “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment.” The second excursus on “Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality” adds that instrumental reason ultimately denies any fundament for morality: in the end, enlightened reason cannot even provide a single conclusive argument against murder, systematic exploitation, and the subjugation of others as means for one’s own preservation, profit, and pleasure. On the contrary, where a true moral imperative is lacking, acting in a way that treats everything and everyone (the latter being treated as things anyway) as instruments for one’s own purposes becomes (the morally indifferent) imperative.

The reduction of reason to instrumentality and the turn of systematic thought into a totalitarian system mark the loss of self-reflection and thereby “the self-destruction of enlightenment,” which is the overall topic of the book (2002, xvi; “die Selbsterstörung der Aufklärung,” 2004, 3). The great promise of reason, before its conversion to a function that merely determines the applicable means for whatever ends (be it the efficient supply of food, education, or Zyklon B), was freedom as realized in reflecting on goals worth pursuing.<sup>11</sup> Reason, in other words, was supposed to be the capacity to perform (critical) self-reflection, and to provide at least a residue of human freedom. As reason becomes identical with logistics,<sup>12</sup> its promise is broken, and the residue eradicated.

In the (in)famous chapter on the “Culture Industry” Horkheimer and Adorno try to show that the totalitarian system takes rather subtle measures to silence the disturbing effects of self-reflection: it comforts the people by means of the deceiving technologies and formats of mass-media. Enlightenment turns into mass-deception through the surrogative fulfillment of fake needs in order to repress incommensurable (non-identical) desires and needs. In this respect, there is no substantial difference between the use of mass-media for the spreading of political propaganda by the Nazis and for the sustainment of the cheerful and fatalistic labor-forces in advanced capitalist society by means of Hollywood movies and Disney comics. For Horkheimer and Adorno, both are expressions of the same barbaric trait of enlightened culture. More precisely, the barbarism of the “Culture Industry” consists in the betrayal of the

11 See the first chapter “Means and Ends” in Horkheimer 2013.

12 The term denotes both the reduction of thought to logical expressions (in the style of the Vienna Circle and other positivists), as well as the construction and sustainment of infrastructures to dispose arbitrary items.

human need for genuine self-expression by offering only obsolete formats which are “infecting everything with sameness” (2002, 94; “schlägt alles mit Ähnlichkeit,” 2004, 128). The structurally ever-same stories, plots, patterns, melodies, and characters are presented as if these were new. Following the recipe of “getting into trouble and out again”<sup>13</sup> (2002, 123; 2004, 161), the Culture Industry provides standardized responses, actually molds, to make one’s (social) fate bearable. At the same time it deprives the individual subjects of the means for actual self-reflection and spontaneity that would allow them to respond to current, individual, unaccounted-for needs which would require new formats for self-reflection and spontaneity. By making fate look more bearable, the Culture Industry reveals its mythological function.

The imperative of the Culture Industry is to laugh off the un-comprehended tragedy of implacable modern life. This way, Horkheimer and Adorno hold, the products of standardized mass-culture can perform more effectively the task that (bourgeois) culture has always contributed to, namely “the subduing of revolutionary as well as of barbaric instincts” (2002, 123; “Bändigung der revolutionären wie der barbarischen Instinkte,” 2004, 161). The barbaric instincts referred to here are those impulses which, according to Freud’s later work, the process of cultivation is directed against—impulses which, in turn, threaten the very order established by enlightened civilization (1994). If revolutionary instincts are about transcending the current order of things towards the future, the barbaric instincts are about undoing the current order while going back towards an imaginary past. Accordingly, these latter instincts do not concern the new kind of barbarism that is itself the outcome of enlightened culture, but something archaic, or in any case older than the current stage of civilization (to which I will come back below). In other words, subduing the archaic barbaric instincts is not only necessary for civilization, but is consequently also part of the new kind of barbarism that expresses itself in the products of the Culture Industry.

How these barbaric instincts are barbarically subdued is described in the sentences following the one just quoted. Here, Horkheimer and Adorno try to qualify the difference between the oppressive tendencies that were always part of culture and the way the Culture Industry radicalizes the oppressive character of culture: “Industrialized culture does something more. It inculcates the condition on which implacable life is allowed to be lived at all. Individuals must use their general weariness as a motive for giving themselves up to the collective power of which they are weary” (2002, 123, translation modified: St.N.; “Die industrialisierte [Kultur] tut ein übriges. Die Bedingung, unter der man das unerbittliche Leben überhaupt fristen darf, wird von ihr eingeübt. Das Individuum soll seinen allgemeinen Überdruß als Triebkraft verwerten, sich an die kollektive Macht aufzugeben, deren es überdrüssig ist,” 2004, 161). The barbarism of the Culture Industry consists, as it were, in the way it wears the individuals down, so as to make them finally affirm their fate of being powerless and unfree.

One could argue, however, that the Culture Industry is not so much an expression of the new barbarism itself, but only of the conditions that make it possible: movies

13 Horkheimer and Adorno use the English phrase in the German original.

and advertisements may systematically silence reflection, criticism, and spontaneity, and they may in the end make true compassion for the fate of others virtually impossible. But, after all, they do not kill! Such an argument would lead to distinguishing between the ‘conditions for’ and the ‘actuality of’ new barbarism and it would allow us to reserve this fickle term for the cold and blatant violence of the systematic mass-murder which takes measures that go beyond the mere taking of lives.<sup>14</sup> Yet, this interpretation goes against the intentions of Horkheimer and Adorno, who deliberately undo such conceptual differentiation for the sake of exaggeration.<sup>15</sup> Within the administered world—which, according to its principle of immanence, integrates everything there is into its system of subordination—Horkheimer and Adorno hold that exaggeration has become the sole way to still be able to disclose any truth at all. In other words, theory must not just arm itself, but turn itself into a kind of intellectual weapon to break through the “steel-hard casing” (to use Weber’s famous words) not only of the Culture Industry, but of the totalitarian system of enlightenment in general. Exaggeration is such a weapon. Thus, using the term ‘barbarism’ at all is itself a powerful way to launch it. In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno’s style resembles the use of rhetorical ‘barbarisms’ in the sense of linguistic deviance (the deliberate use of what appear as mistakes, excessive elements etc.).<sup>16</sup> In fact, expressing their thought as *Philosophical Fragments* (as the original title from 1944 and later subtitle of the book goes) corresponds with a stylistic ‘barbarism’ that Horkheimer and Adorno adopt from the early Romantics and Nietzsche: if comprehensive theory-building only reaffirms ‘the system,’ the strategy of exaggeration requires that theory must be shattered into some sharp pieces that might still allow to cut through it.

This strategy is obviously not about differentiation. Making a distinction between mere conditions and actual manifestations of the new kind of barbarism would, therefore, undermine the very impulse of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For its underlying argument is rather that the barbarism of the death camps begins everywhere, in every department and aspect of the administered life. Thus, the Culture Industry is not just a condition, but already a constitutive part of the barbaric constellation leading to the inhumane exploitation and mass-murder committed in and by enlightened society.

But even if the highly civilized barbarism is omnipresent, there might still be reason to identify different degrees (or intensities) of barbarism—and, therefore, there might also be a need to distinguish between more implicit and more explicit forms of it. In fact, the fifth chapter of the *Dialectic* on “Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment” addresses this distinction in terms of the different phases of antisemitism, which is a specific expression of the new kind of barbarism. Con-

14 Or as Adorno puts it: “Death in the concentration camps has a new horror: since Auschwitz the fear of death means, to fear things worse than death” (“Neues Grauen hat der Tod in den Lagern: seit Auschwitz heißt den Tod fürchten, Schlimmeres fürchten als den Tod”), Adorno 1997, vol. 6, 364; translation is Redmond’s.

15 Axel Honneth calls exaggeration one of the *Dialectic’s* great “rhetorical devices” (2000, 125).

16 See chapter 1.2.1 by Winkler in vol. 1 of the present study, especially the passage on Quintilian (p. 13).

sisting of seven extensive theses, this chapter tries to show the different sources of antisemitism and its underlying mode of operation. Although its origins have to be sought also in the economic and religious functions of antisemitism, Horkheimer and Adorno point out that the most important aspect of modern antisemitism consists in turning into an ethno-nationalist (*völkisch*) ideology that is based on nothing but idiosyncrasy (as described in the fourth and fifth thesis). In this context, idiosyncrasy simply means racism: “For the fascists the Jews are not a minority but the antirace, the negative principle as such; on their extermination the world’s happiness depends” (2002, 137; “Für die Faschisten sind die Juden nicht eine Minorität, sondern die Gegenrasse, das negative Prinzip als solches; von ihrer Ausrottung soll das Glück der Welt abhängen,” 2004, 177).<sup>17</sup>

The basis of Horkheimer and Adorno’s account on how antisemitism operates is a psychoanalytic theory of false projection (as set forth in the sixth thesis). False projection is a pathological malfunction of the kind of projection that is constitutive, and thus unavoidable, in every act of perception. False projection means the excessive investment of certain images into the object of perception so as to fixate it and disrupt any reflexive responses. The feedback loop between subject and object, which usually corrects the projections invested into the act of perception, is suspended so as to leave the projections unrestricted and the object unprotected against the fancy of the subject. To put it drastically, if somebody is taken for a Jew, but does not sufficiently look like one, the projected image of Jewishness must be punched into this person’s face.<sup>18</sup> No matter how exhaustive this theory may be, it can at least encompass the different origins of antisemitism, and account for the changes from practices of exclusion to such of direct physical harm—and finally to the systematic extermination of Jews. In this sense, one can say that there is an increase in the intensity of violence, and thus an increase in explicitly barbarous *acts* as opposed to the underlying barbarous *structures*.<sup>19</sup> However, the point of Horkheimer and Adorno’s seventh thesis, which is dedicated to what they call the “ticket mentality,”<sup>20</sup> is to show that antisemitism has disappeared from the surface of society and withdrawn into a state of latency. Due to this withdrawal, the whole system of ideological tickets is rendered antisemitic, which means that it does not even have to assume the form of *explicit* antisemitism anymore, as Horkheimer and Adorno express in the sarcastic

17 The following passages further explain the racist idiosyncrasy against Jews: “whatever is not quite assimilated, or infringes the commands in which the progress of centuries has been sedimented, is felt as intrusive and arouses a compulsive aversion” (2002, 147–48; “was immer nicht ganz mitgekommen ist oder die Verbote verletzt, in denen der Fortschritt der Jahrhunderte sich sedimentiert, wirkt penetrant und fordert zwangshaften Abscheu heraus,” 2004, 189). “Because they invented the concept of the kosher, they are persecuted as swine” (2002, 153; “Weil sie den Begriff des Koscheren erfunden haben, werden sie als Schweine verfolgt,” 2004, 196).

18 Compare for this example: 2002, 153.

19 This increase in such acts is historically speaking not without precedence as, for instance, the Spanish inquisition shows.

20 This last thesis was added to the body of the “Elements” for the revised (and then actually published) version in 1947. See the editor’s notes: 2002, 273. Horkheimer and Adorno deliberately use the English term “ticket” (“Ticket Mentalität”) referring to the single election choice in US elections.



statement: “But there are no longer any anti-Semites” (2002, 165; “Aber es gibt keine Antisemiten mehr,” 2004, 209). Structural antisemitism—which, in fact, is a specific mode of structural racism—means a transformation of explicit antisemitism that does not make it lose any of its power. On the contrary, in this new phase, antisemitism (and racism in general) becomes ever more pervasive, precisely because it remains mostly implicit: its omnipresence persists by not presenting itself as what it is. This kind of structural or latent antisemitism (racism) adds a new quality to the barbarity that not only clothes itself as civilization but is itself a result of modern civilization.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, and classic Critical Theory in general, it is clearly the order of enlightened, civilized (class) society to which antisemitism is bound: “The persecution of the Jews, like any persecution, cannot be separated from that order. Its essence, *however it may hide itself at times*, is the violence which today is openly revealed” (2002, 139;<sup>21</sup> “Die Verfolgung der Juden, wie Verfolgung überhaupt, ist von solcher Ordnung nicht zu trennen. Deren Wesen, wie sehr es sich zu Zeiten verstecke, ist die Gewalt, die heute sich offenbart,” 2004, 178). It is this order that creates the projection of ‘race,’ which is a radicalized, pseudo-biological version of projecting ‘others,’ the persecuted ones, as barbarians. The function of this projection is pinned down as follows: “Race today is the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual, integrated into the barbaric collective” (2002, 138; “Rasse heute ist die Selbstbehauptung des bürgerlichen Individuums, integriert im barbarischen Kollektiv,” 2004, 178). Not only does this definition emphasize the direct relation between racism and barbarism, but by mirroring back the mark of barbarism it also performs the kind of inversions that are characteristic of Horkheimer and Adorno’s dialectical thinking: the establishment of oneself as a ‘race’ against a barbaric ‘antirace’ in fact establishes the barbaric nature of this very assertion and the order which it sustains.

So far, Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of race and racism did not have much of an impact on more recent Critical Race Studies—and the same goes for Frankfurt School Critical Theory in general (Farr 2018). This is no surprise given that Horkheimer and Adorno have not been very vocal about extending their concept of race towards other kinds of racism like, for instance, anti-Black, anti-Muslim, or anti-Asian racism (nor did their views already allow for something like intersectionality). It would nevertheless be worthwhile—to name but one way in which the use of Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory could be reassessed—to relate their theory of false projection to Fanon’s reflections about racialized individuals being “fixed” (Fanon 2008, 95; see also Mbembe 2017, 43, 110–13).

Now that the new kind of barbarism has been delineated, something must be said about the complementary notion of an archaic barbarism that presumably preceded enlightened civilization. While enlightenment’s devastating result is the new kind of barbarism, its own impulse is directed against a former stage of superstition and the sheer rule of force. Calling such a developmental stage “barbaric” conforms to the temporalized understanding of barbarism. This (early) modern understanding forms the necessary contrast against which the whole notion of a *new* kind of barba-

21 Emphasis mine, St.N.

rism can first start to make sense. Accordingly, the idea of an old barbaric age must be implied in the text of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. And, indeed, there is an important passage from the first “Excursus” (the second chapter) which is revealing in this respect. The excursus offers an interpretation of Homer’s *Odyssey* as the original history (*Urgeschichte*) of the modern bourgeois subject which learned to sacrifice itself—its needs and desires, and ultimately its identity—in order to survive. Odysseus is presented as the model of the modern entrepreneur, whose adventures are a business, and whose profit consists in self-preservation and domination. His major asset is his cunning, the ability to use (instrumental) reason for the sake of exploiting everything and anything as means for his purposes (without losing time by reflecting on ‘reasonable’ goals).<sup>22</sup> Odysseus, in a word, represents the enlightened, civilized subject struggling with the old mythological gods and titans. When turning to the episode in which Odysseus encounters the Cyclops Polyphemus, Horkheimer and Adorno have the original hero of enlightenment look into the one eye of “a truly barbaric age” (2002, 50; “das eigentlich barbarische Weltalter,” 2004, 71). Interestingly, this age is already ‘later’ than a stage of brutish subsistence, or the state of intoxication and complete unconsciousness (as presented by the episode about the Lotus-eaters which precedes the one about the Cyclops). As a shepherd and a hunter, the Cyclops appears to be already a step further, i.e., already at the beginning of a societal order. This order, however, is “a patriarchal society based on kinship and the suppression of the physically weaker,” which “is not yet organized on the model of fixed property and its hierarchy” (2002, 51; “eine bereits patriarchale Sippengesellschaft, basierend auf der unterdrückung der physisch Schwächeren, aber noch nicht organisiert nach dem Maße des festen Eigentums und seiner Hierarchie,” 2004, 72). In other words, the barbarism of the Cyclops is not characterized by the total absence of structures, but by the lack of their systematization: “For Homer,” so Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation goes, “the definition of barbarism coincides with that of a state in which no systematic agriculture, and therefore no systematic, time-managing organization of work and society, has yet been achieved” (2002, 50; “Die Bestimmung der Barbarei fällt für Homer zusammen mit der, daß kein systematischer Ackerbau betrieben werde und darum noch keine systematische, über die Zeit disponierende Organisation von Arbeit und Gesellschaft erreicht sei,” 2004, 72). This is exemplified by the description of the Cyclops as a “lawless-minded monster” (2002, 51; “gesetzlos denkendes Scheusal,” 2004, 72). This lawlessness refers not so much to Polyphemus’ lack of a moral law, but more generally to his style of thinking as “lawless, unsystematic, rhapsodic” (2002, 51; “gesetzlos, unsystematisch, rhapsodisch,” 2004, 72–73). If the cruelty of the new barbarism is the result of a totalitarian system of thought which has hollowed out any binding moral principles, the cruelty of the archaic barbarism results from the lack of such a system.

Odysseus eventually outsmarts Polyphemus, like he outsmarts every other superior force on his journey. He does so by exploiting the instrument of self-sacrifice to the full when he denies his identity by calling himself “Nobody” (“*Udeis*”). He thus breaks through the magical unity of word and object and utilizes their difference,

22 The concept of instrumental reason, which is precisely what Odysseus represents in Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation, is set forth in Horkheimer 2013 (1947).

which the 'stupid' barbarian is incapable of. But this time Odysseus ultimately makes a curious mistake through which he most openly displays the barbarity of defeating the old barbarian. Odysseus' mistake consists in his own relapse into the magical unity of word and object, as he cannot refrain from eventually revealing his identity before getting away—as if “he would fear to become Nobody again if he did not re-establish his own identity by means of the magical word which rational identity had just superseded” (2002, 53; “[als ob er] fürchten müßte, Niemand wieder zu werden, wenn er nicht die eigene Identität vermöge des magischen Wortes wiederherstellt, das von rationaler Identität gerade abgelöst ward,” 2004, 75).<sup>23</sup> This shows that not even the old barbarism has completely vanished from the mind of the culture-hero; it is only repressed into the unconscious. Yet, it is not the return of repressed mythological barbarism that makes the overcoming of the old barbarian so utterly barbaric, nor is it the sheer use of violence when blinding the one-eyed creature in the struggle to survive. Rather, it is Odysseus' indifference towards Polyphemus' fate, his reluctance to recognize himself in the suffering of the Cyclops, that reveals his barbaric character. After all, the monster cares more about his sheep than Odysseus does for the members of his crew, some of whom he coldly sacrifices when trying to get away. The enlightened barbarism, which is built on cunning, makes the “truly barbaric age,” which is built on “stupidity,” look more humane. Or in Horkheimer and Adorno's words: “The giant's stupidity, the basis of his barbaric brutality as long as his cause prospers, represents something better once it is overthrown by one who should know better” (2002, 52; “Die Dummheit des Riesen, Substanz seiner barbarischen Rohheit, solange es ihm gut geht, repräsentiert das Bessere, sobald sie gestürzt wird von dem, der es besser wissen müßte,” 2004, 74). The “truly barbaric age” may have been characterized by a war of all against all, but it was also a state of abundance, during which the strong took the best and the most, but the weak could still hide and—if they were lucky to survive—take from what is left, which might still have been enough.

Finally, it is worth noting that the single-eyed and simple-minded Polyphemus was originally not referred to as a barbarian. In the Homeric text he is rather presented as a *savage*, characterized by his solitary existence and his cannibalism.<sup>24</sup> In treating Polyphemus as barbarian rather than savage, Horkheimer and Adorno are placing the Cyclops not outside of civil society, but at the beginning of it—a beginning which, according to the dialectical nature of society, might at the same time be its end. Consequently, the status of this kind of barbarian can be described as an in-between: neither savage, nor civilized. In any case, Horkheimer and Adorno do

23 The seriousness of this mistake is that Odysseus further incurs the wrath of Poseidon, who is the father of Polyphemus and the god whose rage first caused the whole *Odyssey*. Furthermore, it is also a mistake in that Odysseus' gesture of reclaiming his identity is inconsistent with his usual cunning. On the whole, this mistake expresses what Horkheimer and Adorno call “the dialectic of eloquence” (2002, 53): Odysseus can talk himself right into trouble just as much as he can talk himself out of it.

24 See chapter 2.1.1.2 by Moser in the first volume of this study. Moser also points out that already Aristotle treats the Homeric cyclops as a barbarian rather than a savage. It is very unclear, however, whether Horkheimer and Adorno were aware of the ‘precedent’ that Aristotle's reading has created.

not make a clear distinction between barbarism and savagery. In fact, they do not dwell on the term savagery at all but confine themselves to barbarism as the problem that is at stake in enlightened civilization and its mythological prehistory.

Coming back to the *Dialectic's* overall diagnosis that humanity is sinking into a new kind of barbarism, the text leaves little doubt about the fact that this sinking is directed backwards. This becomes especially clear when the self-destruction of enlightenment is called a “regression” or “relapse” (2002, xvi; “Rückschritt”, “Rückfall,” 2004, 3).<sup>25</sup> Also, the central claim of the book, which is supposed to explain the sinking into the new kind of barbarism, goes: “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (2002, xviii; “schon der Mythos ist Aufklärung, und: Aufklärung schlägt in Mythologie zurück,” 2004, 6). Regardless of how one would like to interpret this claim on the whole, the important aspect in the present context is that barbarism is conceptually tied to (if not simply identical with) mythology, which accordingly means that the reversal into mythology is equivalent to the path towards the new kind of barbarism. This seems to amount to the paradox of sinking back into something that is new.

For Adorno, however, this paradox simply expresses the dialectical situation of reality itself, in which aspects of progress and regression are always woven into one another.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the *falling-back-into-something-new* has two aspects: first, the atrocities observed by the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* mark a new way of falling back. Never before has the road to barbarism reached such heights of civilization, which makes the fall ever more drastic and violent. Second, even though entering barbarism by definition entails a regression, the state of barbarism one regresses into is radically changed. Through the radicalization of mythical fear<sup>27</sup> and the all-pervasiveness of a hardened systematic constellation that blocks emancipation and liberation, barbarism becomes ever more devastating when executed by those “who should know better.”

The miracle of going forwards and backwards at the same time is somewhat resolved if the course of civilization and barbarism is pictured as cyclical. To be clear, a cyclical movement does not necessarily form a closed circle but may as well form an outwardly expanding spiral (to which I will come back below). The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* implies a version of such a cyclical model of civilization, which had been popularized by Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West (Der Untergang des Abendlandes, 1918–1922)*.<sup>28</sup> But far from sharing Spengler's commitment to prognostic determinism—which, as Adorno has shown elsewhere, simply gives in to the motif

25 On the figure of ‘relapse into barbarism,’ see Winkler's observations above, chapter 5.3.1.

26 Adorno expresses this conviction at many occasions. One very clear instance of it is to be found in a letter he wrote to Benjamin (about his book on Wagner): Adorno and Benjamin 1994, 345.

27 “Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized” (2002, 11); “Aufklärung ist die radikal gewordene, mythische Angst” (2004, 22).

28 Spengler builds his view on cultures as developmental cycles on his interpretation of Goethe's morphology, holding that cultures, like plants, follow a strict course from growth to blossoming to decay.

of domination<sup>29</sup>—Horkheimer and Adorno rather adopt the model of cyclical pro-/regression from Vico. Horkheimer had already emphasized the significance of Vico's theory of recourses in his 1930 book on *Beginnings of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History* (*Anfänge der bürgerlichen Geschichtsphilosophie*). Although he distances himself from what he takes to be Vico's "bare belief in the recurrence of human affairs" ("ein bloßer Glaube an die Wiederkehr der menschlichen Dinge"), Horkheimer still grants him "that the possibility of a relapse into barbarism is never completely excluded" (Horkheimer 1987, 75;<sup>30</sup> "daß die Möglichkeit des Rückfalls in die Barbarei niemals völlig ausgeschlossen ist," Horkheimer 2012, 268). To be sure, when the *Dialectic* was being written in the early 1940s, this "relapse" is no longer a mere possibility but an actuality.

Vico's *New Science* does not say quite as straightforwardly what Horkheimer ascribes to it.<sup>31</sup> Yet, if one accepts Horkheimer's interpretation, Vico's doctrine, which might seem to determine the regression to barbarism as the necessary endpoint of each cycle of civilization, can nonetheless make conceivable why the barbaric stage of such a cycle is always a different one. For even if the cycles build closed circles, and even if their circularity follows a regular form, the respective cycles are by no means identical with one another: each cycle has its own developmental stages, and accordingly also its own barbaric stage. Consequently, the succession of different cycles of civilization—an eternal recurrence in difference, as it were—implies a succession of different barbarisms. If that is an advantage of Vico's approach, then its disadvantage is the assumption of a closed, circular structure of the cycles (which will also be central to Spengler's ever more deterministic view). Due to their dialectical way of thinking, Horkheimer and Adorno are compelled to diverge from a perspective like Vico's, because they cannot allow for the closed unity of the cycles and their discrete succession. Through the lens of a Hegelian philosophy of history, the cycles, as already mentioned, must rather form an outwardly expanding spiral.<sup>32</sup> Falling back does not make the movement of history return to its precise point of departure, but only to a transformed or even deformed version of it. From there a new cycle of the same spiral departs and eventually falls back differently again—and so on. In Horkheimer and Adorno, the spiral movement, however, loses the comforting metaphysical character it used to have when it was understood in terms of Hegel's Spirit. It no longer expresses a great synthesis in which all destructive moments are sublated into the overall unfolding of Spirit or civilization. If in Hegel the spiral movement culminates in absolute knowledge, in Critical Theory it culminates in enlightenment's "triumphant calamity" ("triumphales Unheil"). Adorno also addresses

29 See Adorno's essay on "Spengler nach dem Untergang" (which is also part of the *Prisms*, Adorno 2016). On this essay, see also Winkler's chapter 5.3.3.6 in the present volume.

30 Only the chapter "Vico and Mythology" appeared in English translation in 1987 in *New Vico Studies*.

31 For the ambiguities and different ways to understand Vico's at times rather cryptical text, see Kent 2018. See also the introduction to the Cambridge edition of *The First New Science* (Vico 2002, xix-xxxviii) and Albrecht 2016.

32 The spiral as the model of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is reconstructed most clearly in Förster 2012.

this calamity as the final stage of the dialectic of barbarism and culture, to which I turn in the next section.

### 6.1.3. The Barbaric Character of Poetry (and Life) after Auschwitz: “Cultural Criticism and Society”

The term *barbaric* marks Adorno’s most discussed and most remembered statement, namely the one on poetry after Auschwitz. Here is the passage including the sentence in question:

Noch das äußerste Bewußtsein vom Verhängnis droht zum Geschwätz zu entarten. Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben. Der absoluten Verdinglichung, die den Fortschritt des Geistes als eines ihrer Elemente voraussetzte und die ihn heute gänzlich aufzusaugen sich anschickt, ist der kritische Geist nicht gewachsen, solange er bei sich bleibt in selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation. (Adorno 1997, vol. 10, 30)

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 entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (Adorno 1983, 34)

The statement appears at the very end of Adorno’s essay on “Cultural Criticism and Society” (“Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft”), written in 1949, first published in 1951, and then published again as the opening essay of the collection called *Prisms (Prismen)* in 1955.<sup>33</sup> It caused a heated debate among intellectuals in West Germany, as well as poetic attempts to respond to Adorno’s dictum. Adorno’s essay is not specifically about poetry, but rather concerns the question of the possibility of cultural criticism today—yet Adorno’s ‘today’ may well be extended until the present day.

The problem that cultural criticism constantly faces, Adorno explains, is that it necessarily partakes in that which it criticizes, namely the official culture as represented by poetry, theatre, visual arts, (classical) music, etc. Furthermore, such criticism necessarily affirms its target, since it measures culture against its own ideal; cultural criticism, in other words, must commit itself to the ideal of culture. It thereby becomes complicit with culture’s restorative tendencies—i.e., the affirmation of reality—which shrouds the atrocities that have happened and are still happening. By upholding the ideal of traditional European culture—which Auschwitz has definitely

33 See editor’s afterword in Adorno 1997, vol. 10, 838.

proved to be obsolete—culture turns into a fetish that “gravitates towards mythology” (Adorno 1983, 23; “[d]er Fetischismus gravitiert zur Mythologie,” 1997, vol. 10, 17). Cultural criticism shares the blindness of its fetishized object: it remains under the spell of culture insofar as it distracts from the horror—and it thereby determines culture to complement the horror it sought to oppose. Thus, even the opposition to the Culture Industry, which otherwise defines high culture, becomes void.

Yet, if the valuable task of cultural criticism shall be continued, it cannot be performed without this criticism taking part in the culture it criticizes. The legitimacy of such criticism is in fact based on expertise and intimate knowledge of its object. The radical consequence of simply abandoning the products of high culture to get rid of its blinding, affirmative character, would also mean losing culture’s grain of truth, its potential to negate reality, and to resist ideology. This potential is inherent in the aesthetic means of semblance (*Schein*). Adorno ascribes this consequence to the socialist criticism of culture and, in another essay, also to Veblen (Adorno 1997, vol. 10, 84). Wiping away high culture in favor of less differentiated and less complex forms develops “an affinity to barbarism” in equal measure (Adorno 1983, 31; “Affinität zur Barbarei,” 1997, vol. 10, 26). And so does the bourgeois tendency to discard solely the criticism to make way for the untroubled affirmation of culture as a whole. Because when culture is at stake, getting rid of barbarism is simply impossible.

It is in Adorno’s late work, the *Aesthetic Theory* (*Ästhetische Theorie*), that the consequences of his negativistic theory become most apparent: not even those works of art which Adorno acknowledges as authentic ones—be it by Beethoven, the early Schönberg, Beckett or Kafka—are free from barbarity, domination, and violence. They all remain entangled in the *Weltgeist*, which for Adorno means the overall guilt from which they could break free only by means of self-abolishment. But this would mean to surrender to dumbness and to completely yield to barbarity, instead of opposing it (Adorno 1997, vol. 7, 310). For true works of art—unlike the products of the Culture Industry, which to Adorno appear as nothing but barbaric—can at least reflect their own barbaric conditions.

If this is the answer that the *Aesthetic Theory* gives to the problem of barbarism’s all-pervasiveness on the level of artistic production, Adorno’s essay on “Cultural Criticism and Society” already presents an answer (though not a solution) on the level of cultural criticism. It roughly goes like this: the praxis of cultural criticism must be radicalized so as to become a *dialectical* critique of culture. Such a critique applies the act of negation, which in Adorno’s sense is ‘the truth’ within cultural criticism, to the very concept of culture itself. Not only does this critique leave nothing uncriticized, least of all itself, but it also understands it cannot fully succeed: “Even the most radical reflection of the mind [*Geist*] on its own failure is limited by the fact that it remains only reflection, without altering the existence to which its failure bears witness” (Adorno 1983, 31–32; “Selbst der radikalsten Reflexion aufs eigene Versagen ist die Grenze gesetzt, daß sie nur Reflexion bleibt, ohne das Dasein zu verändern, von dem das Versagen des Geistes zeugt,” 1997, vol. 10, 27–28). Aware of this limitation, dialectical critique cannot stay within itself to find comfort in its own idea; it must rather recognize the claim of the specific cultural object it focuses on—and contemplate how this claim reflects or resists the totality of society. The necessary attachment of the critic to the culture they criticize must also be pushed

beyond mere reflection; they must refrain both from the cult of spirit (the fetish of the “higher” forms of cultivation), as much as from the hatred of it: “The dialectical critic of culture must both participate in culture and not participate. Only then does he do justice to his object and to himself” (Adorno 1983, 32; “Der dialektische Kritiker an der Kultur muß an dieser teilhaben und nicht teilhaben. Nur dann läßt er der Sache und sich selber Gerechtigkeit widerfahren,” 1997, vol. 10, 29). Differently put, the critic must stay with the particular in which alone culture can still reveal a bit of truth, without buying in on the comforting illusion of the whole of culture. For “the whole is the untrue” (“Das Ganze ist das Unwahre,” Adorno 1997, vol. 4, 55), as Adorno famously put it in aphorism 29 of *Minima Moralia*. In the context of cultural criticism, this means that the comforting whole of culture fosters barbarism by denying it, whereas it is only in the acknowledgment of its own barbarism that culture can still reveal a little bit of truth. This is incidentally as much hope as one can get from Adorno.

The dialectical critique of culture is thus a critique of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. When Adorno speaks of this dialectic, he invokes Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum<sup>34</sup> that “[t]here is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 1968, 256;<sup>35</sup> “Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein,” 2010-WuN, vol. 19, 86).<sup>36</sup> As seen in the long quote above, Adorno deems this dialectic to have reached its final stage, which means—among other things—that it has become impossible to still tame or embank it. The manifest culmination of highly civilized barbarism in Auschwitz<sup>37</sup> has shown that the barbaric side of all culture has not only gained the upper hand, but reached a point at which everything that does not strictly oppose it is made questionable. And if poetry is the epitome of the most tender and sensitive expression of culture, the most cultivated form that language can take, then this makes poetry an ever more drastic expression of the barbarism that has always been its flipside, and which culture has now definitely turned into. The promise of cultivation that poetry stands for is betrayed, because poetry is just as complicit as everything else with a reality in which Auschwitz has happened. It is in this sense that poetry has become normatively impossible.

34 Winkler discusses this sentence from Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte”) in chapter 5.3.3.6 of the present volume.

35 Translation modified, St.N. The translation of the *Illuminations* by Harry Zohn uses “civilization” instead of “culture.” I have chosen the latter to highlight that Adorno and Benjamin are using the same words.

36 Benjamin’s dictum resounds in a passage on marriage in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “In it [i.e., marriage] reconciliation grows around subjugation, just as in history up to now true humanity has flourished only in conjunction with the barbaric element which is veiled by ‘human values’” (2002, 59; “Versöhnung wächst in ihr um Unterwerfung, wie in der Geschichte bisher stets das Humane gerade und allein am Barbarischen gedeiht, das von Humanität verhüllt wird,” 2004, 83).

37 Adorno uses the concrete name of this place to give the whole horror of the Holocaust a concrete address. This is an attempt to keep these horrors from being abstracted and thus made more bearable.



Adorno's verdict can, of course, be understood in quite different ways. In his thorough analysis of what the phrase "After Auschwitz" means in Adorno, Christian Skirke identifies four possible readings:

Adorno's statement can be understood as (i) an authoritative *prohibition* to practice art after Auschwitz, (ii) a *dismissal* of existing art after Auschwitz in the sense that art after Auschwitz is a failure, despite the artists' best efforts, (iii) a *reprimand* against those who produce or discuss art after Auschwitz for their complicity in barbarism, (iv) or a *reminder* for artists, their public, and their critics that art after Auschwitz has lost its poetic powers of redemption. (Skirke 2020, 569)<sup>38</sup>

Due to its uncompromising rhetoric, Adorno's statement was met with equally harsh replies and has been received, for the most part, according to the first sense, namely as an authoritative prohibition that amounts to censorship. The German poet and essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger understood, however, that this cannot be Adorno's intention and instead took the statement as a decisive challenge for poets: "If we want to continue to live, this sentence has to be refuted" ("Wenn wir weiterleben wollen, muss dieser Satz widerlegt werden," Enzensberger 1959, 772; translation qtd from Skirke 2020, 569). Enzensberger's understanding of Adorno's statement matches the second dimension that Skirke identifies, according to which art after Auschwitz must fail, no matter how hard artists may try and how good their intentions may be. Yet both understandings are equally mistaken—just like the third meaning, according to which Adorno's statement is basically read as personally accusing those who are still doing poetry of their complicity with barbarism. Obviously, Adorno calculated the provocation of his statement including its likely misunderstandings. This also granted him a chance to come back to it in his later essays<sup>39</sup> in order to defend himself against such readings and to clarify his actual intention. This intention comes down to what Skirke has identified as the fourth possible understanding of the statement, and which I would like to reformulate as follows: Adorno wants to publicly remind all the stakeholders of traditional European culture that all hope in aesthetic redemption is vain—as was made blatantly clear by Auschwitz, the synecdoche of highly civilized (efficiently mechanized) barbarity. Poetry, far from being prohibited, is now burdened with the task to acknowledge and to radically reflect on its own barbaric character, which is to say its share in the overall barbarism. Ultimately, this self-criticism amounts to the self-negation of poetry—at least in its current form. In other words, the acknowledgment of its own impossibility is the only mode in which poetry is still possible. To secure this possibility to still be needed and still be able to give expression to human needs and human suffering, and to also still have a right to do so, poetry and its criticism must reflect barbarism as the attribute of one's very own form of civilized life.<sup>40</sup>

38 The following passage owes a lot to Skirke's careful and most convincing analysis.

39 The most important ones may be "Commitment" ("Engagement," Adorno 1997, vol. 11), "Those Twenties" ("Jene zwanziger Jahre," 1997, vol. 10), which are both from 1962, and "On Tradition" ("Über Tradition," 1997, vol. 10), which is from 1966.

40 See also Skirke 2020.

Adorno's statement that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric may be read as another exaggeration in the name of truth. Coming back to this statement once more in his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno at first glance seems to eventually tone it down: "[I]t may have been wrong to say that poetry could not be written after Auschwitz" ("darum mag falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz ließe kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben"), because "[p]erennial suffering has as much right to express itself as the tortured to scream" ("[d]as perennierende Leiden hat soviel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu brüllen," Adorno 1997, vol. 6, 355).<sup>41</sup> Notably, he does not refer to the question of whether or not poetry is barbaric, but only to the question of whether it can be written. So, it may still be possible to write meaningful poetry, as he admits now, but this does not imply that poetry was thereby also cleared of its barbarism. In a move so very typical of Adorno, he not only reconfirms his verdict in a kind of maneuver, but he even amplifies it by extending the question about poetry to the question about how to go on living at all: "What is not wrong however is the less cultural question of whether it is even permissible for someone who accidentally escaped and by all rights ought to have been murdered, to go on living after Auschwitz" ("Nicht falsch aber ist die minder kulturelle Frage, ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse, ob vollends es dürfe, wer zufällig entrann und rechters hätte umgebracht werden müssen," Adorno 1997, vol. 6, 355; Redmond's translation). As someone who was spared, he finds himself sharing the ineffable guilt, because his and everyone's "continued existence already necessitates the coldness, of the basic principle of capitalist subjectivity, without which Auschwitz would not have been possible" ("[s]ein Weiterleben bedarf schon der Kälte, des Grundprinzips der bürgerlichen Subjektivität, ohne das Auschwitz nicht möglich gewesen wäre," Adorno 1997, vol. 6, 355–56; Redmond's translation). Adorno has expanded on the term *coldness* in a radio speech that was published as "Education after Auschwitz" ("Erziehung nach Auschwitz," in Adorno 1997, vol. 10). The question of whether this human coldness—which for Adorno signifies a general human indifference towards the fate of others—is only the precondition or already the expression of civilized barbarism cannot be answered here. What is relevant for the current argument is that a life sustained by such coldness is inevitably a life within the *barbaric condition*. In this sense, conscious life in general must follow the task that Adorno had already set for poetry in particular: to still be permissible or possible at all, life must undergo a radical kind of critical self-reflection in view of its share in the overall guilt. This includes confronting the question of the very legitimacy of the fact that life in general just goes on.

How exactly this kind of radical self-reflection can be performed is far from clear—even though Adorno's *Minima Moralia* can be understood as an attempt to sound out how far human beings are actually capable task of self-negating criticism. But if idle consolation and self-satisfied contemplation—which were the actual targets of Adorno's statement about poetry after Auschwitz—can be pushed from the

41 I follow Skirke's translation here, who in turn follows Dennis Redmond.

throne of “culture,” then the little something that enlightenment can still do has been achieved.<sup>42</sup>

#### 6.1.4. Conclusion: The Exaggeration of Barbarism

I have not discussed every instance or every context in which the term barbarism appears in Adorno. To be clear, Adorno is not very consistent in his use of it.<sup>43</sup> While the “new kind of barbarism” can refer to modern life in general, or specific violent events in particular, as well as the sheer fact that people are suffering unnecessarily, Adorno also uses the term barbarity for something he regards as an aesthetic failure (a practice he shares with Nietzsche and the humanistic tradition),<sup>44</sup> as is exemplified by the dream protocol I used at the beginning of this chapter. Furthermore, it is not clear how (if at all) he distinguishes between barbarity and savagery, as the treatment of the Cyclops-episode from the *Odyssey* shows. The shifting functions of the term barbarism/barbarity reflects the way it appears in everyday language, namely as a curse and an expression of indignation with hardly any strict terminological meaning. However, when pushed to clarify the meaning of barbarism (as he is asked to do in a talk with Hellmut Becker on “Erziehung zur Entbarbarisierung” [*education towards de-barbarization*]), Adorno avoids giving a definition of the term by stating the following: “My suspicion is that barbarism is present whenever a relapse into primitive physical violence occurs without any transparent relation to reasonable ends of society, that is, where there is identification with the outbreak of physical violence” (“Mein Verdacht ist, daß Barbarei überall dort vorliegt, wo ein Rückfall in primitive physische Gewalt stattfindet, ohne daß er in einer durchsichtigen Beziehung zu vernünftigen Zwecken der Gesellschaft steht, wo also die Identifikation mit dem Ausbruch physischer Gewalt gegeben ist,” Adorno 2017, 124; my translation, St.N.). That the “ends of society” are “reasonable” means that they aim at creating humane conditions for social life. Adorno further relativizes the focus on physical violence by stating that the vilifying words shouted at the opposing sports team or protesting students are equally barbaric, while physical violence used transparently in the service of humane causes is not (or at least not necessarily). Consequently, determining the meaning of barbarism is not a conceptual but a practical problem: what barbarism ‘is’ depends entirely on the specific social context and constellation.

Yet, however unstable the denotation of the term barbarism may be in Adorno, there is a central function that the choice of the word fulfills. As indicated above, this function consists in the rhetorical shrillness of the word, the exaggeration which calling something out as barbaric inevitably entails. On top of the normative charge that the very word *barbarism* has by itself, Adorno seeks to turn it into an intellectual weapon. This weapon is directed against enlightened civilization (as the equivalent of barbarism) but in the very name of enlightened civilization (as the opposite of

42 See also Adorno’s surprisingly hopeful message at the end of his “Erziehung nach Auschwitz” (“Education After Auschwitz”), 1997, vol. 10, 690.

43 Nosthoff 2014 seems to suggest otherwise.

44 See Winkler’s chapter on Nietzsche (3.4.2) in vol. 1 of the present study.

barbarism). It becomes a tool for the self-criticism of enlightenment and culture, thereby inverting the original index of calling something or someone barbaric. Yet, although barbarism may become a medium of critical self-reflection, the point of its use is precisely to *not* mediate, but to account for an extreme reality by taking extreme rhetorical-conceptual measures: an exaggerated rhetoric against an exaggerated civilization that is unresponsive to conciliatory arguments. In this sense, barbarism is another name for the exaggeration which is reality under the conditions of enlightened civilization. The plausibility of this ‘method’ of (counter-)exaggeration depends on the plausibility of Adorno’s negativistic theory of society as a whole: if one does not share such a view at all, the use of a rhetorical mace such as “the new kind of barbarism” can hardly be convincing.<sup>45</sup> Certain concrete atrocities of our own time, however, might keep us from abandoning the negativistic accent of early Critical Theory too quickly; this seemingly outdated theory might still provide a vocabulary for understanding the present.

As already mentioned, there is no such thing as a definite concept of barbarism in Adorno. Rather, there is the purposeful use of this word which gains its conceptual import in and through the constellations in which it appears. Its effect in all these constellations is to revert the reference from ‘the other’ and ‘the earlier’ back to the enlightened ‘self’ itself, thereby raising the question: ‘Who is the barbarian now?’ The answer is: it is us, our enlightened civilization, our cultural goods. Barbarism does not consist in mere rudiments; instead, enlightened civilization and its goods have normalized barbarism and constantly reproduced it all along (Adorno 1997, vol. 10, 86). An adequate response to this insight would consist in a *praxis* that is less complicit with the barbaric conditions of modern human life.

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45 It has been argued recently that decrying dehumanizing atrocities like mass-murder (and the Holocaust in particular) as a *relapse* into barbarism does not help anymore if that relapse is not translated into legal terms like *crimes against humanity* or *genocide*. In a most interesting study on barbarism and the state of nature, Eberl (2021) insists that calling such crimes a *relapse* keeps ignoring the way European society is essentially tied to colonialism as a continuous crime against humanity. In this sense, the rhetoric of barbarism does not help the urgent endeavor of decolonization.