

## Chapter 1

# From Mimetic Expression to the Rational Mastery of Nature

### The Discourse of Enlightenment in Early Critical Theory

Political philosophers and political theorists have recently debated the merits of a revival of realist understandings of democratic politics. Although review of these debates stands beyond the scope of this book, this renewed energy for political realism has also served to reinvigorate critical theory. At the center of this revival lay work by Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams. Both political philosophers decry what they see as the dominance of so-called ethics-first or moralizing approaches to the study of politics since the 1970s, and link this dominance to some of the most telling failures of liberal-democratic ideology and practice over the same period.<sup>1</sup> From the political realist perspective, what is important about interpreting, explaining, and so acting in politically effective ways is not that inquiry begins from a clear and rational idea: an ethical ideal, moral assertion, or I add, a naturalistic ontological truth. Rather, political realism seeks to uncover the justifications that different actors offer for supporting or challenging the use of power by a prevailing authority, and to explain why it is that some succeed and others fail at such tasks. The approach is to begin from plain-language statements that address observable consequences of the exercise of political power in a given historical context. Hence, Geuss and Williams are concerned that theory be not only realistic but also in some way critical of the illegitimate exercise

of authority. Indeed, both engage closely with work developed at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, the so-called Frankfurt School of critical theory. Of particular interest to both are early iterations of critical theory developed under the practical leadership of Max Horkheimer and the philosophical leadership of Theodor Adorno. Yet, both Geuss and Williams are themselves critical about this body of work. While Geuss reads Adorno's work approvingly, he holds significantly strong reservations concerning more recent iterations of critical theory in a neo-Kantian vein, such as developed by Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, as well as by the avowed liberal John Rawls. For Williams, the problems of critical theory begin with its obfuscatory style of thought and culminate in an erroneous emphasis on freedom instead of the theory of justice. Both Geuss and Williams fault critical theory and especially its more recent highly normative iterations for prioritizing moral concerns with the essence of freedom over political concerns with the relationship between freedom, authority, and its legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, both Geuss and Williams adapt early critical theory to develop a political realism that might adequately serve to critique some of the terms on which the dominant justify their authority within the given political order and on which the dominated grant legitimacy to or challenge that authority.

In Geuss's view, while there is "no *single* invariable notion of 'criticism,'" the idea of a realist critique is more often than not inseparable from, and so shaped by, someone's lived experience of domination.<sup>3</sup> For Williams, "the power of coercion offered simply as the power of coercion cannot justify its own use," because for several hundred years, at least, political power has rested on the legitimacy of political authority.<sup>4</sup> In light of their work, a critical political realism would focus on those aspects of the political order that allow some to dominate others in ways that the dominated find unjust. Informed by these views, critical inquiry might ask how and under what circumstances authority acquires certain values, how it comes about that some values trump others, and who is benefited and who is disadvantaged by a political order in which such values circulate. Criticism would be, in the realist view, first and foremost historical, contextualizing and focused on neither solely ideas and values nor actions and practices. Rather, it would focus on the uses and abuses of ideas by actors in the historical conditions that such actors themselves help to constitute and reconstitute over time.

A critical, politically realistic account of the relationship between radical and Green critics of the political order in the United States since

the 1970s might therefore begin by recounting the genesis, triumph, and declining influence of one set of values in particular: those associated with the Western European Enlightenment. Of central concern to the strand of radical critique elaborated in critical theory, these values helped to reconfigure traditional ideas concerning the status of society in relation to human and nonhuman nature. They were of central concern because, as a guide to action, they helped to usher in a distinctive and enduring political order. This introductory discussion first uses the realist perspective to reconstruct the critical theory account of the dialectical genesis and triumph of Enlightenment values, paying attention to Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the transformation of Enlightenment's highest ideal: freedom.

Enlightenment values helped to foster those bourgeois revolutions—the English, American, and French—through which, for the first time in Western history, since antiquity at least, a significant bloc of individuals believed themselves justified in opposing transcendently justified moral authority.<sup>5</sup> Defined most famously by Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment prompts persons to autonomously evaluate their interests without direction from another. The “another” in question here is an earthly authority pretending to hold exclusive access to transcendent truth of what is ultimately the cosmological order of things. “Enlightened” individuals act freely, in accordance with their own innate capacities for reason. Secularizing the Judeo-Christian belief in the equality of human souls, Kant held that the human capacity for reason was the equal heritage of all. For Kant, as for John Locke, enlightened individuals base their moral choices not on some given conception of the eternal cosmological order, under advice from religious leaders or powerful elites, but on reasoned reflection, on subjective observation of and action upon the material world.<sup>6</sup> With Enlightenment, individuals can, and should, choose to act according to the dictates of reason. Authority, once conceived as transcendental in origin, manifests as a possibility immanent within each individual. The self-directing individual subject, using reason instrumentally as a guide to effective action, thus operationalizes Enlightenment's highest ideal: the genuine freedom of self-direction, of autonomy in relation to others and the world. As Geuss points out, however, such an ideal of freedom could perhaps only ever amount to a quasi metaphysics, what Williams calls into question as an ethically thin concept.<sup>7</sup>

As Horkheimer and Adorno argue, Enlightenment ideas undermined the highest value and most powerful source of authority in allegedly

unenlightened, traditional, or primitive societies.<sup>8</sup> In traditional societies, authority is justified in terms of harmony within the whole, naturally given cosmological order. This is the justification for authority that Horkheimer and Adorno famously describe in anthropological terms as *mimesis* or mimetic immersion within nature. In traditional societies, individuals seek to achieve a mimetic relationship of harmony within the cosmological order. Individuals do this by imitating, copying, replicating, and, importantly, *expressing* natural forces. Politically speaking, public assessment of the quality of the mimetic relationship provides the basis on which shaman, seers, priests, aristocrats, and the like justify elite authority. Elites express natural forces and so maintain the cosmological equilibrium. In Geuss's succinct paraphrase of Horkheimer and Adorno, prior to Enlightenment, "the universe had 'meaning' in itself, as an ontological feature (or perhaps behind it, in the form of Ideas)."<sup>9</sup> Without Enlightenment, there is no distinction between society and nature, outside and inside, only harmony within or disruption of the whole. With Enlightenment, however, the universe no longer appears to individuals as a moral continuum in which they are spatially, temporally, and spiritually immersed, and should feel themselves to be in tune. Individuals no longer experience fate through a value system in which normalcy is predefined. No longer destined by luck or good fortune, individuals apply their own unique yet universally held wills to the world in order to improve it. Effectively freed to master or *repress* nature, individuals are also freed to master the natural passions. Individuals achieve autonomy—and therefore meaning—by making the rational moral choice, and are judged not by their status within a given, eternal hierarchy but by their deeds; their efforts and labors amongst equals.<sup>10</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno's argument is that, with the spread of Enlightenment values, the traditional decentered source of meaning, and so authority, in society comes to be centered in the modern individual subject. Insofar as modern individuals assert their wills against the world and seek to change it, personhood is liberated from what Kant saw as minority or infancy. With Enlightenment, individuals are no longer justified in blindly conforming to what now appears to be the irrational authority of traditional elites. The holistic interest in maintaining harmony within the cosmological order gives way to a dualistic interest in the domination of nature by a society of "free" individuals. This dualistic distinction—with pure rationality on one transcendent side and individuals confronting choices to concur with it, so to speak, on the other—emerges as the refer-

ence point for meaning. What would come to be known as Hobbesian, Cartesian, Newtonian, Promethean, or nature-culture dualism thus grounds a new political and cultural sensibility, which Benjamin Constant defined in the wake of the French Revolution as that of the *moderns*. Politically, enlightened individuals collectively set themselves against the natural order of things to constitute a free society. This impact of Enlightenment values on normative justifications for authority was a consequence of the reduction of what had been hitherto conceived holistically. Experience and understanding of the cosmological order—as opposed to what Geuss recognizes as “the ancient forms of natural philosophy, [in which] the universe had ‘meaning’ in itself, as an ontological feature (or perhaps behind it, in the form of Ideas)” —was now reduced to a dualistic field of objectively discernible material forces.<sup>12</sup> Enlightenment entails the idea that authority is no longer justified in unreflectively expressing nature. Rather, modern authority is a product of the human capacity to reflect, or alternately to derive principles from, nature. Modern authority may justifiably, as Thomas Hobbes argued, reflect the laws of nature back upon nature to preserve civil peace. Or, in neoclassical terms, modern rational authority may justifiably derive social laws from natural ones, as Aristotle had argued, to promote human flourishing.<sup>11</sup> In both senses, Enlightenment serves authority by justifying the use of reason to subjugate and control nature to advance the human end of freedom.

Politically speaking, modern authority and the law it upholds come to be regarded as the artificial products of an individual-centered order, justice the artifice of collective human design, and freedom the ends shared by both. Yet, the establishment of modern artificial authority justified in terms of reason was the product of historical circumstance, and its establishment was contingent on the actions of identifiable individuals acting in groups, in a particular context. As with any abstract, thin ideal, some groups of individuals more than others can realize freedom and the members of such groups are more likely than others to see the order that upholds a favorable iteration of the ideal as just. One particular group most vigorously championed the notion that authority could instantiate Enlightenment reason. This was the educated stratum involved in the pan-European and subsequently Atlantic expansion of capitalistic markets for goods and services. Members of what Habermas labeled the “bourgeois public sphere” were the white, male, literate, land-owning, and mainly Protestant members of a public that conceived itself as the voice of reason against irrational superstition-based church dogma and

passion-fueled aristocratic whim.<sup>13</sup> Informed by factual truth ratified by reasoned observation, this bourgeoisie advocated a form of authority that, designed to concur with reason, would advance freedom. Grounding this secular authority were ontological presumptions concerning nature (the objective temporal and spatial realm of material bodies and forces open to domination through reason) and epistemological presumptions concerning human capacities (the moral freedom to choose a rational ethics over, for example, passions or emotions).<sup>14</sup>

Understood in these terms, the English, American, and French bourgeois revolutions are of central importance to the establishment of modern artificial authority. For Geuss, the revolutionaries' "demand for equality of all citizens before the law, which [stood] in opposition to the feudal regime of privilege . . ." required not only the development of novel political institutions but also capture of the state.<sup>15</sup> The revolutionaries' political demands for a republic (or constitutional monarchy) of free and equal individuals shifted the focus of political disputes over authority and justice. Justifications for authority—which had depended on the demonstration of monarchical power to maintain the deity's well-designed cosmos—came to be grounded in public *legitimation* of the rulers' capacity to respond to individuals' collective will. Rulers of the postrevolutionary state could maintain authority only by enacting laws that were justifiable insofar as they could be represented as mastering nature for the human end of freedom. This shift in the justification for authority meant that the revolutionaries "charged [rulers] with addressing themselves to the interests of the ruled." However, it also meant that, "to discharge the duty of serving the popular interest, rulers to some extent [had to] bear the people's passions."<sup>16</sup> After the revolutions, rulers found that they could legitimately bear the people's passions, and so hold power, only by rationalizing such passions.

Such justification for authority required what Michel Foucault, perhaps most famously, but importantly also Louis Dumont, Albert Hirschman, and Norberto Bobbio, analyzed in the 1970s as a kind of casuistry. The solution to the problem of modern political authority involved the dualistic institutionalization of the modern individual as at once a private person and a public citizen. The private person was liberated to pursue his (at the time) personal passions or choices, notably in relation to religious preference. At the same time, the public citizen bore responsibility to recognize that the capacity to freely make such

private choices depended on support for authority, rationally organized to defend private choices as expressions of the public interest in freedom.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the enlightened bourgeois citizen deemed the freedom to autonomously pursue private choices necessary. This is because only an autonomous citizenry could ensure that political authority would be exercised rationally. On the other hand, the same enlightened bourgeois citizen deemed rational authority to be in the collective interest. This is because only such a rational authority could guarantee the persistence of citizens' individual freedom of choice over time and amidst an anarchic system of competitive, imperialistic nation-states. That is, those holding modern political authority would need to aggregate the free choices that mattered to maintaining it, and did so by imposing the quasi-metaphysics of the utilitarian rational calculus.

No longer an extension of the cosmological order, naturally justified moral authority gives way to artificially justified political authority: *liberal* because limiting the jurisdiction of political authority to public matters; *democratic* insofar as rule must in some way be legitimated by the people; and *market-centered* because the economic realm of private choices is cut loose from the natural realm of cosmological necessity and refounded on rational authority's capacity to aggregate individuals' utilitarian preferences for pursuing happiness and avoiding pain.<sup>18</sup> Political power and the institutions it upholds are also therefore altered. No longer depending merely on the raw power of monarchical passion and courage, power must also rely on objective analysis and rational administration. Those holding political power must wield authority to settle what Williams casts in a Hobbesian lens as "the first political question" of modernity. Settling this question requires

the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation. It is "first" because solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others. It is not (unhappily) first in the sense that once solved, it never has to be solved again. This is particularly important because a solution to the first [political] question being required *all the time*, it is affected by historical circumstances; it is not a matter of arriving at a solution to the first question at the level of state-of-nature theory and then going on to the rest of the agenda.<sup>19</sup>

Modern artificial political authority is premised on the capacity of those holding power to manage citizenly expectations. Those who hold political power and exert authority must in the very least appear to be respondents seeking advice on how to administer the first political question. And, in the modernity of Western Europe around the time of the bourgeois revolutions, authority managed citizenly expectations by rationalizing citizenly demands upon it. Responding to this question implies that modern political authority need observe what Williams calls a “basic legitimation demand.” For Williams, to respond adequately, those holding power must concede something to all of those who do not, individually.<sup>20</sup> Highly important to the analytic schema developed here, however, is Geuss’s qualification of the ways that legitimation tends to work in modernity. In Geuss’s view, legitimation appears to depend on all citizens, but in fact only depends on those capable of making themselves politically significant and effective in the eyes of those holding authority.<sup>21</sup>

Not neutral in any complete sense, an abstract, formalized, and artificial constitutional system, managed by those controlling the state and so appointing its managers and agents, upholds political authority in modernity. In the language used by Horkheimer and Adorno, mimesis gives way to the state-sponsored rational mastery of nature. Authority is reoriented away from ensuring the natural order of things and to ensuring that the rational mastery of nature is organized in such a way that freedom is realized, albeit in the image of significant and effective blocs of citizens. Indeed, this modernization of traditional moral into modern political authority serves to rationalize freedom itself. For modern political authority to function as legitimate, freedom can no longer remain an abstract ideal. Rather, political authority must administer a peculiar kind of justice that promotes political freedom. Political freedom—the artificially sanctioned status of the public citizen as autonomous in relation to others and, finally, the state—is separated from yet dependent on primitive freedom—the autonomy of the private person to act as if unobstructed by some form of collectively imposed coercion.<sup>22</sup> In this light, modern politics centers on contestation over the constitution of political freedom as a limitation on private freedom, on an artificial distinction between the realm of observable, definable, and legislated social relations and the realm of natural, subjective, and experiential expressions of human being. This said, both political and primitive dimensions of freedom alike are premised on citizenly capacity to influence the state. As feminist scholarship shows, access to both dimensions of freedom



are facilitated or curtailed by those controlling political institutions. Such institutions may and have excluded some individuals from political freedom on grounds of gendered, ethnocultural, racial, religious, or class categories, for example.<sup>23</sup> As such, for better and worse, bound to observable demands for legitimacy made by significant and effective blocs of citizens, those exercising authority by controlling the state play the central role in defining what freedom there is to experience at a given moment in modernity.

Modern citizens are the subjects and only potentially the agents of politically rationalized freedom. Political freedom is established, maintained, withdrawn, or extended in response to confrontations over what should be the just order that political authority maintains. To be properly political in modernity is necessarily to challenge or support those controlling the state and so be able to reconstitute the boundaries of political freedom. Political challenges to a given constitution of political freedom therefore require the exercise of collective will on the part of those who see themselves as disadvantaged in some way. Analytically speaking, to reconstitute political freedom, such challenges must successfully modify what Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, modifying Hobbes's own formulation in view of radical Enlightenment goals, saw as a contingent arrangement amongst collectives representing interest-holding actors. Such public welfarism only appears in a methodologically individualistic lens as being oriented to upholding primitive freedom. In Hobbes' conception, fearing a nasty, brutish, and short life, individual citizens each gratefully but begrudgingly cede authority to an all-powerful sovereign in exchange for the peace that will allow them to freely pursue private goals. The artificial state provides individuals with relief from the state of nature. By evoking the specter of personal injury or loss rather than societal collapse, however, this individualist analytic promotes what Corey Robin calls the moralized politics of fear. Or, in Richard Tuck's view, the incorporation of egoistic utilitarian normative presumptions into the Hobbesian analytic underplays the role played by collective pressure in upholding civil peace and so, political freedom.<sup>24</sup>

In this analysis, some kind of social contract emerges. However, such a public welfare contract is established by sufficiently empowered political collectives—social movements, political parties, and other civic associations, such as professional guilds or labor unions, and commercial lobby groups—that bring to bear claims against political authority on the threat of disrupting the civil peace. While the contract between

individuals and political authority is indeed conditional on mutual advantages, it is only through collective power that the contract might be altered. Political freedom tends to work in the interests of effectively organized blocs of citizens. Agnostic in relation to the utilitarian calculating ego, such an analysis emphasizes a politically rationalized politics of fear. Political authority sustains begrudging détente amongst collectives whose agents, envisioning a worse outcome for their clients on observing some contingent resolution to the first political question, contest or accede to stalemate. As will become clear, I believe that, since the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, radical efforts to adapt the holistic critique of Enlightenment dualism to the American experience have tended to evaluate the pathologies of modernity on the basis of a deeply individuated moralized politics of fear. In this respect, the book is motivated by a normative concern to shift the perspective of critique from an analytic that prioritizes the achievement of primitive freedom to one that prioritizes the collective power to coerce political authority to define the contours of political freedom differently.

### The Critique of Rational Mastery, Left and Right

The revolutionaries' successful grounding of political freedom in the artificial authority of the state is what gave meaning to the ideologies of Left and Right. Although there exist many differences between the two, I focus upon the terms on which each relates to political freedom. The modern Left—born of Enlightenment universalism—is from the beginning confined by a paradoxical relationship to political freedom. One political philosopher to grapple with this paradoxical relationship was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Notably, Rousseau drew inspiration from the pantheistic understanding of nature developed by the thinker who perhaps did the most to radicalize the Enlightenment project, Baruch de Spinoza. For Rousseau, individuals could freely subject themselves to the political collective on the basis of a truly reasoned understanding of natural forces, which Spinoza had argued were always and everywhere material forces. A collective constituted by such reasonable individuals would in fact express the general will, the generalizable interest of all citizens in freedom. A society organized to express the general will would institute laws sufficient to rescue individuals from alienation and so deliver true freedom.<sup>25</sup>

In dialogue with Rousseau, Karl Marx later tied his conception of the emancipatory generalizable interest to the collective assertion of mastery over nature. In Marx's teleology, the bourgeois revolutions had fostered a false freedom. This is because bourgeois freedom is constrained by the nexus of political power with private property rights. The immediate class interests of the bourgeoisie had perverted the authority vested by the revolutionaries in the state, away from its historical potential to sustain the generalizable interest. Rather, the postrevolutionary state promoted a bourgeois goal: expanding a particular kind of rationalized political freedom through markets that, from the perspective of the generalizable interest, was grossly exploitative. The revolutions made it potentially possible for all to experience a meaningful life in terms unknown in traditional society—through autonomous, self-directed labor. However, the form of political authority that the revolutions had produced simultaneously made it impossible to actually experience a meaningful life in such terms, even for the bourgeoisie itself. For Marx, achieving the basic conditions for meaningful life required a collective political project to take control of the economy and so nature. The aim was to universalize conditions in which individuals could experience the essential freedom that, in Spinozist terms, nature intended, and which for Marx, history demanded. This was the genuine freedom of species being.<sup>26</sup> It is worth quoting Geuss's summation of Marx's view at length:

The basic modality of . . . collective control must be power over nature and mastery over our productive capacities and economic life, a control exercised through science, technology, and politics. Collective productive activities, Marx concludes, are the kernel of a meaningful life. Furthermore, in a properly constituted economic and political order, the very distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental action can be broken down. . . . In a society in which work and collective social life was sufficiently satisfying, one might think, the very question of the "meaning of life" would not arise. The very fact that this question *does* arise for a particular person in a particular society is a sign that that question for that person (in that society) has no answer. "The meaning of life" ought not to be reified. To know "the meaning of life" does not mean to know any possible discursive answer that can be given to questions about life. Questions ostensibly about

“the meaning of life” are *really* about whether the social processes are satisfactory or whether certain individuals have a certain capacity or skill, whether they “know *how*” to lead a life of a certain kind, and they exhibit this knowledge in the only way such knowledge *can* be exhibited: by actually leading such a life.<sup>27</sup>

Marx recognized that alienation from the satisfactory state of universal species being was a direct consequence of the fact that the agents of such species being—the organized working class—had not seized control of the state and so organized the economy to that end. Friedrich Engels later developed the teleological argument that once the workers had done so the state would in fact wither. In its place would emerge a global commune organized to measure, predict, order, and ultimately control nature so that all individuals experience noninstrumental species being.

Until the mid- to late twentieth century, the most politically effective iterations of modern leftism sought to wrest control of the state in some way or another to such an end. Indeed, state control was put into practice in various ways: as the complete economic control sought in the Stalinist and Maoist Eastern Bloc; the state-administered mixed market favored by center-left social democratic parties in Western Europe; or the state-managed capitalism practiced by center-left democratic and “labor” parties in the Anglosphere. The aim of controlling the state was to institute an economic order wherein the rational mastery of nature would facilitate the liberation of all individuals. The modern Left sought what Geuss calls a change in the “basic economic structure” that is to be “initiated by political action of a certain type that is directed at giving immediate producers more control over their own activity.” Geuss argues that it was Adorno who presciently experienced the looming specter of a “loss of meaning on the Left” in the second half of the twentieth century. For Geuss, the loss of meaning that Adorno experienced, and communicated in his work, gradually took hold amongst “people on the Left [as they found] increasingly that they have lost faith in the traditional diagnosis or in some part of the traditional recommended therapy” for challenging domination as unfreedom.<sup>28</sup> This loss of meaning was slowly undermining the political effectiveness of efforts to universalize freedom by working to build, maintain, and expand institutions of a particular kind, those associated with the state. The desired state institutions were to support the ideal of full autonomy for individuals as citizens, at once

legal persons and moral beings, but were not doing so. The vaunted progress towards an eventual poststate authority in which all could experience species being was not taking place.

Particularly at issue for Geuss is Adorno's realization that achievement of the ideal of freedom is in all likelihood not a possible or even a desirable goal to expect of the modern state. Nor, indeed, is that ideal amenable to any enduring expression of collective will as the generalizable interest in freedom. Organizing political power sufficient to universalize an abstraction requires the near infinite extension of rational mastery. Geuss draws two problems from Adorno's work: the problem of the crisis of confidence in the diagnosis, which I interpret as the ontological dimension of the loss of meaning; and the problem of the loss of faith in long-held beliefs about the efficacy of the therapy, which I interpret as a concomitant epistemological and ethical dimension of the loss. On this reading of Geuss's argument, the modern Left sought to collectively operationalize the ontological distinction between nature and culture, the human will and the material world—to exert power over nature—in order to universalize conditions through which individuals could experience a comprehensive freedom. In these attempts to universalize the ideal by collectively exploiting the dualistic distinction between society, as the subject of history, and nature, including human nature, as the object upon which that subject acts, the modern Left, paradoxically, sought to exploit an artificial construction, the state, in order to facilitate a condition understood to be natural, freedom.

In contrast with the modern Left, the Right reacts to left achievements by seeking to use the state and markets to delimit the benefits of modernity to a sample of humanity. The Right too confronts a version of the paradox of freedom, which stems from opposition to universalism. The problem confronted by the Right is that a political order that produces privilege through a market economy requires both an extremely permissive “liberal” attitude to individual autonomy and near-total panoptical authority. In contemporary terms, the disruptive entrepreneurialism essential to economic growth depends on maintenance of a strict political economic order. This market order depends on an authority sufficiently empowered to curtail and channel individual autonomy toward the desired end of economic growth. In defense of such an order, the conservative Right seeks to curtail or limit the achievements of modernization to particular individuals, based on one or some combination of allegedly innate qualities: moral fiber, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or

nationality, for example. The reactionary Right goes further, and seeks to go further. The reactionary Right rejects that dimension of modern authority, which sustains political freedom in favor of raw power and primitive freedom. For both, some hierarchical scale of entitlement selects the deserving from the undeserving. The audience for people on the right is thus always limited to those whose ostensibly deserved privileges are put at risk by an expansion of political freedom. The quintessential response of both the conservative and reactionary Right to left achievements has therefore been to defend those institutional arrangements that sustain the freedom of the happy few. Right thinkers and activists employ a utopian refusal—pragmatically, in the case of conservatives; principled, in the case of reactionaries—to accept a new contour in the artificial constitution of political freedom.

The Left's paradox and the Right's opposition to universal freedom greatly exercised the advocates of critical theory in the mid-twentieth century. What Horkheimer and Adorno recognized was that efforts to put into practice modern leftism were just as likely as European fascism and Christian democracy, and anglophone liberalism and patrician conservatism, to generate severe pathologies. Importantly, the critical theorists' experiences of exile in the United States led them to recognize that the murderousness associated with Cold War efforts to defend capitalism abroad, combined with propaganda representing techno-scientific achievements as unquestionable signs of progress, had metamorphosed the Enlightenment ideal of universal freedom into little more than "a justification for a pernicious form of equality: the conformist equality of atomized consumers." Adorno, Horkheimer, and, in different senses, Marcuse and Habermas, noticed that even efforts to escape this conformity and to celebrate noninstrumental lifestyles—to align human nature with "natural" nature—were politically deeply problematic. Early critical theory is in this sense the product of an effort to problematize the left commitment to dualism and the presumption that state-organized authority can employ reason to measure, order, predict, and control nature in order to universalize freedom. This problematization was achieved by radicalizing, by pushing to its limit, Enlightenment reason. What such radicalization helped the early critical theorists to reveal was that by the mid-twentieth century, the Enlightenment aspiration to universalize the quasi-metaphysics of freedom itself had in part generated pathological consequences.<sup>29</sup>

For Claus Offe, even though the modern Left had organized itself around the opposition, "social justice and economic security vs. private

property and economic power” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by the mid-twentieth century many had come to regard that same modern Left as having unjustifiably joined an “interventionist and redistributive state that would provide citizens not with liberties, but with rights to resources.”<sup>30</sup> The modern Left was contributing to production of the pathologies that Horkheimer and Adorno had earlier exposed. In the name of a circumscribed conception of the generalizable interest, the productivist modern Left was oppressing minorities and riding roughshod over nature. The modern Left had reshaped the contours of political freedom by coercing the state to grant a significant and effective bloc of citizens access to a proportion of the spoils produced by the collective, rationalized exercise of mastery over others and nature. Ignored, underplayed, or even subjected to ridicule were the interests of women, youth, nonwhite citizens, citizens of former colonies, Marx’s lumpenproletariat, bohemians, artists, homosexuals, and other outsiders, as was the general interest in protecting or nurturing “the environment.”<sup>31</sup>

Those historically privileged enough to exert political power sufficient to alter the constitution of political freedom had shaped the state’s response to the first political question. Yet, in moving close to the centers of power under rationalized authority, the demands of the modern Left had in fact been assimilated to power. The sample of the population sufficiently powerful to shape the state’s response to the first political question was no longer merely that relatively small clique identified by Habermas as constituting the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the mid-twentieth century, those in control of the centralized, administrative governmental bureaucracy and the heirs of the bourgeoisie, the owners and managers of multinational business corporations, had been forced to make concessions to the modern Left through the power of organized labor. Yet, the political project that had mobilized the modern Left was devalued in the process. Supporting the Cold War military-industrial, Keynesian welfare state, the modern Left had joined markets and the state in promoting the rational freedom of the utilitarian calculating egoist, of the citizen as industrial worker, soldier, housewife, and, importantly, consumer. The modern Left had either shed or in fact never worn the historical mantle of critic in the generalizable interest. Rather, the modern Left had emerged as vanguard of what Adorno and others described empirically as the authoritarian personality.<sup>32</sup>

Drawing on Max Weber’s sociology, Horkheimer and Adorno proposed that the ideal of progress towards universal freedom through

the rational mastery of nature had come to play the part of an alibi. It justified the exercise of power under modern artificial political authority. For them, the employment of reason by those wielding such authority had disenchanting the critical ideal of freedom by identifying it with systemic requirements. The “dream” of progress through rational mastery had assumed the qualities of a reenchanting myth. Freedom under the sway of this myth offered only the semblance of meaning in an otherwise bereft “administered world.” In Williams’s précis of the critical theorists’ realization, the fact that the modern Left could no longer be conceived as avatar of the generalizable interest had made clear that the Enlightenment “aspiration to social management as applied scientific truth and its fantasies of reconstructing human and social relations in a radically rationalistic spirit” were in fact “dangerous delusions.”<sup>33</sup> The alibi or myth of progress through rational mastery had truncated the truly liberatory potential of Enlightenment reason. The satisfaction of modern Left critique through the application of instrumental rationality—the assimilation or identification of hitherto radical demands, through the redistribution of a share in the spoils of nature’s exploitation to a sample of the working class—had transformed the ideal of a state geared to universalizing freedom into a justification for totalizing authority. This dialectical assimilation subsequently transformed the modern Left’s original critique into an unreflexive commitment to truth as essentially, the egoistic utilitarian calculus of costs versus benefits. In winning concessions from those in charge of the system, the modern Left had abandoned the truthfulness of critique mobilized by the experience of unfreedom. As will be shown, perhaps more importantly was that this process helped to recuperate irrationalist romantic, nonidentitarian challenges to rationalized authority. The dialectic of nonidentitarian critique, its assimilation to positive identity, and recuperation as false nonidentitarian reaction, is important. As Williams points out, while the critical, nonidentitarian commitment to truthfulness is speculative, negative, and therefore necessarily implies a “theory of error,”<sup>34</sup> commitments to positive identitarian and false nonidentitarian understandings of truth as essence both imply moral absolutism.

### Rationalized Authority and Adorno’s Modernism

Setting aside the Marxist heritage, Adorno also owed a particular debt to Friedrich Nietzsche’s emphasis on the relativity of values that emerges



under the Enlightenment's secular ideal of freedom as autonomous self-direction.<sup>35</sup> In Nietzsche's naturalistic philosophy, in the absence of some cosmologically ordained immutable truth, justifications for authority are relativized. However, recognizing this is not to advocate the sophomoric view that equates relativism with meaninglessness. Rather it is to recognize that justifications for authority come to depend on—are made relative to—different terms at different points in history and in different societies.<sup>36</sup> Following Williams, then, the political climate in the United States in the mid-twentieth century cannot clearly be understood as approximating some benign, pluralistic optimum equilibrium state. Nor can the situation be adequately understood in the faux-Nietzschean terms that a naive reading of Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis may suggest, as the complete annihilation of possibilities for true freedom in the chaos of Darwinian struggle. The situation is better understood as a tense and endless standoff between powerful factions, resulting in a particular constitution of political freedom that defined the public welfare in specific, if overall unsatisfactory, terms.

In the mid-twentieth century, "big government" demanded resources to fuel Cold War militarism, "big business" demanded profits and rents, and the modern Left demanded a high standard of living. In this view, the price of the modern Left's compromise with authority was fealty to an essential truth, that of the egoistic rational calculator motivated to act in terms circumscribed by the moralized politics of fear.

At issue is that the egoistic instrumentalism central to such utilitarianism is prepolitical. The utilitarian ideology of the egoistic rational calculator justifies what Williams calls theorizing on the model of "enactment moralizing":

The model is that political theory formulates principles, concepts, ideas, and values; and politics (insofar as it does what the theory wants) seeks to express these in political action through persuasion, the use of power and so forth.

The paradigm of theory that implies the enactment model is Utilitarianism. Unless it takes its discredited Invisible Hand form (under which there is nothing for politics to do except to get out of the way and get other people out of the way), this also presents a very clear version of something always implicit in the enactment model, the panoptical view [which means that] the perspective on society is that of surveying it to see how it may be made better.<sup>37</sup>

The theorist or ideologist of utilitarianism favors an apolitical, panoptic conception of authority's relationship to freedom. In terms of practical reasoning, freedom is defined as the happiness that always and everywhere accrues to the rational egoistic calculator of costs against benefits. The task of authority is to re-form individuals in the image of rational authority. Those holding such authority charge themselves with ensuring the greatest happiness of the greatest number. In this way, the ideologist posits that a society organized along rational lines will always and everywhere serve as the most efficient vehicle to ensure deserving individuals, and so ensure national triumph in nature's Darwinian struggle.

As Adorno saw, the problem for the modern Left is that rationalizing freedom as the choice to maximize pleasure and avoid pain assumed away possibilities that the authority charged with upholding freedom through such means may warrant critique from those disadvantaged in some manner. The utilitarian calculus that had once allowed authority to legitimately bear the people's passions no longer represented freedom for significant and politically effective sections of the citizenry. The class whose desires for freedom, mattered to authority was no longer merely the bourgeoisie, who expressed such desires through the pursuit of private property and economic power. The casuistry that had allowed postrevolutionary elites to respond to these demands of the ruled now allowed those holding power to respond to the modern Left's demands for social justice and economic security. As the economy had grown, full citizenship had been extended to wider segments of the population. Yet, with the incorporation of those formerly outside, the working class, the remit of political freedom was further rationalized. Support for freedom in its utilitarian form emerged as anti-political support for the essential truth of the egoistic calculus. As an ideological trope, enactment moralizing represents the interests of the privileged, the lucky few who benefit from the state's response to the first political question. That is, those who benefit from the displacement and marginalization of critique as the negative commitment to truthfulness by critique as the positive commitment to truth as essence.

In light of this account of enactment moralizing as ideology, another dimension of Adorno's debt to Nietzsche becomes important. After all, it was Nietzsche and not Marx who in the late nineteenth century had argued that Enlightenment sustained a kind of civilizational hubris in relation to the natural order. Nietzsche's response to Enlightenment was not to seek collective emancipation by championing such hubris, as did

Marx. Rather, Nietzsche confronts modernity with a newly dawning alternative, a more-than-modern “modernist” value system anchored by the autonomous individual. Uneasily synthesizing Marx with Nietzsche, Adorno seeks to couple the radicalization of Enlightenment as a collective project with a thorough modernism. Adorno draws Marx’s concept of the species being from which humanity has been alienated into engagement with Nietzsche’s view that modernity entails the relativizing, the transvaluation, of all values. In light of the pathologies that collective efforts to rationally master human and nonhuman nature are bound to generate, Adorno posits a modernism that privileges autonomous self-realization within the otherwise pathological condition that is modernity. As a more-than-modern permutation of Enlightenment, his left modernism renders politics secondary to philosophical insight. The upshot is that critique itself, as Adorno well understood, is removed from the realm of politics, the realm of opportunities to collectively influence authority’s response to the first political question in order to expand and enhance the remit of freedom.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast with his colleague and friend Horkheimer’s turn to a-religious theology, Adorno unflinchingly embraced the full implications of this Left modernism. His *Negative Dialectics*, *Minima Moralia*, and *Aesthetic Theory* can all be read as addressing directly the left modernist commitment to philosophical reflection on the pathologies of modernity. In these works, Adorno offers little or no means of support for a political project, be it state capture or abolition. As such, he restricts his modernism to the realm of aesthetic evaluation of the awe-inspiring qualities of “the sublime.” And, accordingly, he advocates a modernist idea of freedom as the product of truthfulness confronting the sublime. Adorno’s modernism seeks to confront the frightening pathologies *and* the liberating opportunities (together, the sublime) that “the system” produces. Central to Adorno’s modernism is his conviction that the totally administered world of the mid-twentieth century depends for its reproduction on the dangerously deluded commitment to instrumental rationality, to positive truth as essence.<sup>39</sup> Adorno most clearly recognized two things. First, the world simply did not conform to the dualistic Enlightenment ontology that structured the mid-twentieth century world that he inhabited. Most relevant in this respect is his infamously gnomic pronouncement that “The whole is the false” or alternately, the untrue (*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*). What I take Adorno to be implying is that humanity does, in fact, participate in nature, in the ecosphere, in a cosmological continuum

that extends backwards and forwards in time and across space, and must be understood as such. The dualistic ontology was a dangerous delusion. The aspiration to rational mastery of nature is a pathology-inducing myth. Yet, Adorno also recognizes that the philosophical realization of this fact itself can only take one so far: “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” or, there is no right life in the wrong one (*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*). Therefore, second, his Left modernism allows no grounds for analyzing or normatively promoting collective organization, “The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such.”<sup>40</sup> The negative commitment to truthfulness is all that philosophical reflection can sustain. He offers a formula for understanding and enduring modernity, not for acting to bring to life an alternative system. The freedom that accompanies the commitment to truthfulness and that allows the sensitive to confront the sublime is not transferable as a guide to collective engagement with political authority.

For Adorno, the loss of meaning that he associated with the radical Enlightenment project was not so much a consequence of the triumph of Enlightenment values over traditional mimesis. Rather, it was located in recognition that a full critique of injustice as unfreedom could only be grounded in a negative response to real world conditions. Insofar as he conceived mimesis as a normative orientation to the world, Adorno himself at times seems to have sought mimetic immersion within a benignly conceived cosmological order. His position within that order tended to be one of delivering a verdict on humanity from the perspective of a platonic view from nowhere. Although somewhat conflicted on this issue, Adorno seemed to rue the fact that the only possibility for collectively upholding freedom in modernity—action oriented to altering or expanding the remit of political freedom—fell beyond his negative dialectics.<sup>41</sup> At some point, the effort to universalize freedom necessarily involves engagement in the very un-philosophical, indeed unnatural and so artificial, realm of politics, of taking sides against those who would deny universalism, of building alliances to confront those exercising authority in favor of particularism, of contributing to the job of ensuring a just redistribution of the spoils of humanity’s exploitation of nature. As Offe and Brunkhorst suggest, something that Adorno, lifelong supporter of the West German Social Democratic Party, observer of the rule of law, redistributive economic policy, the granting of rights, and publicly funded