

## Article

# Can Democratic “We” Be Thought? The Politics of Negativity in Nihilistic Times

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**Abstract:** In this article I attempt to systematically reconstruct Theodor Adorno’s account of the relationship between the processes of authoritarian subject formation and the processes of political formation of the democratic common will. Undertaking a reading that brings Adorno into dialogue with contemporary philosophical perspectives, the paper asks the question of whether it is possible to think of a “democratic We” in nihilistic times. In order to achieve this aim, I will analyze in reverse the modifications that the concept of narcissism has undergone, from Adorno’s use of it to account for the symbolic obstacles to the formation of democratic subjectivities after the Holocaust, to the initial formulations of Freudian psychoanalysis. Finally, I will attempt to outline an affirmative answer to the initial question, formulating the potentials and merits of what I will call a politics of negativity.

**Keywords:** Theodor W. Adorno; democratic subjectivity; authoritarianism; negativity; nihilism; psychoanalysis; political philosophy; sociology



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## 1. Introduction

In her latest major essay on the contemporaneity of Max Weber’s political thought, Wendy Brown [1] describes our present with the Nietzschean figure of nihilism. Furthering her analysis of the way in which the question of the “devaluation of values” helps to characterize the enigmatic (or monstrous) configuration that contemporary neoliberalism has undertaken [2], Brown highlights how in today’s society *truth* and *reason* itself operate as points of reference for an evaluative practice that functions as a cynical instrument of an uninhibited use of the will to power.

This is demonstrated by the forms which politics and culture assume in capitalist societies. In the case of jurisprudence—not only American, one might say—nihilism becomes ostensible through the Supreme Courts’ extension of civil rights (e.g., freedom of speech and conscience) to economic and religious corporations, manipulating the political legacy of constitutionalism to the direct advantage of the ruling powers. But nihilism also becomes evident in the way speech is publicly employed in the new media. As can be witnessed in digital public spheres [3], the administration of fake news facilitates the immunization of beliefs in audiences reduced to commercial niches, whose “echo chambers” are indifferent to rational argumentation based on empirical evidence [4]. Of special relevance for Brown is the way in which the value of freedom works in nihilistic societies. In the nihilistic course of today’s neoliberalism, the motive of freedom operates as a safeguard for the most discretionary and cruel practices, without concern for their effects on others, be they human beings, animal species, or the planet itself.

But a diagnosis about the singularity of such a disoriented present could not disengage from a broad look capable of recognizing “the long historical forces that shape and intersect it—among them capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacism—” [1] (p. 4). In this long-standing concern for the forces that make it possible, it would be difficult to underestimate the way in which the event of the crisis has penetrated deep into our present. As a matter of fact, the 21st century has removed any hint of exceptionality to the experience of disaster. The series

of events that link this experience begins with the attack on the Twin Towers, continues with the financial collapse of 2008, followed by the breakdown of public health systems due to the COVID pandemic, and ends with the war in Ukraine and the escalation of military violence in Gaza. At the same time, the sequence cannot be separated from the persistence of a perception of the end of the world, associated with a string of environmental catastrophes.

In this succession of traumatic events, the horizon of the life-world of social actors and the strategies of the contending political forces is overshadowed. The drift of the Syriza government reveals to any democratic experience that the erosion of national sovereignty by new forms of international governance is a path not merely limited to the Greek tragedy, but a possible destiny for anyone. As Colin Crouch [5] has emphasized, the present is marked by a progressive ultra-capitalist replacement of national political communities by global markets of financial accreditors and international lending agencies. In this context, there seem to be signs of a generalized dissatisfaction with democracy, as seen in the growing indicators of electoral abstention and blank voting.

It is precisely this state of the world that has made it possible to weigh up with new interest Adorno's critical theory of authoritarianism. In the same way that Wendy Brown makes Weber a strategic abettor for her critique of current nihilism, many contemporary scholars have become interested in the legacy of critical theory for its exemplary manner of producing empirical evidence about the psycho-social and ideological preconditions of the processes of right-wing radicalization in the different countries of the world, both in the Global North and South, without neglecting the political commitments of theory to emancipatory praxis.

However, as Robin Celikates [6] has correctly pointed out, the social diagnosis of the most regressive tendencies of contemporary nihilism is often separated from the emphatic political commitment to which that diagnosis was associated in the same Adornian perspective. Whether because he has been identified with the "fatalism and apocalypse of a Bartleby" [1] (p. 8), with the metaphysical adoption of a messianic point of view in the light of which every earthly trace appeared as a reason for suspicion [7], or because of the well-known polemic with the new German left at the university environment in the 1960s [8], contemporary social theory and political philosophy unanimously rule on the "gaps" [9] in his reflections.

These "difficulties" [*Schwierigkeiten*], according to this argument, would have wounded Adorno's thought with the impossibility of thinking about the singularity of political action and the practical processes of the formation of the common will associated with it. In this article, I would like to tackle this lapidary dictum about the impossibilities of Adorno's thought. Starting from the idea of a politics of negativity, I will argue that this "wound" [*Wunde*] is an essential determination of the actuality of his thought. According to my reading, the politics of negativity fits what was said about Heine: "to have succeeded in turning one's own insufficiency, (...) into an expression of rupture" [10] (p. 95).

To develop this claim, I will proceed in five steps: in a first moment (parts 2 and 3), I will analyze the historical difficulties of a thinking about the democratic "We" by conceptually differentiating some of the recent transformations within the libidinal economy of subjectivity. Thus, (2) I will study in reverse the transformations that the concept of narcissism has undergone, from Adorno's use of it to account for the symbolic obstacles to the formation of democratic subjectivities after the Holocaust, to the initial formulations of Freudian psychoanalysis (3.1). This return aims to demonstrate that the Adornian concept of "collective narcissism" can be enlightened by reviewing in detail Freud's own theory (3.2).

Then, (4) I will outline an affirmative answer to the question I started with at the beginning, namely: whether, in times of judicialization of politics, fake news in the media, and hate speech in society, it is possible to think of a democratic "We". To this end, I will complement the Adornian idea of a "critical" political organization oriented towards the "principle of truth" with Walter Benjamin's reflections on a collective action that "struggles

for liberation". The paper ends with some concluding remarks (5) on the relevance of Adorno's political theory for our present.

## 2. A New Collective Narcissism

Because of the emergence of new phenomena of authoritarian politicization that accompanies the emergence of anti-democratic leaderships, it has become attractive, in a context in which the theory of fascism has returned to be a reference of our times [11–13], to understand current neoliberalism from a cultural approach on its "affective life" [14]. Thus, is the model of individualistic narcissism no longer useful to describe the structure of the subject to which neoliberalism appeals? Are we on the threshold of a *neoliberal communalization*?

The way in which Theodor Adorno proposed to interpret the transformations of the political formation of the common will in the times of European reconstruction may be enlightening [15,16]. After returning from exile, and fully committed to the attempt to recompose a democratic culture in post-fascist Germany, Adorno refused to adopt a simple and hasty position about the mere possibility of overcoming the contradictions unleashed by the dramas of the past. This was motivated not only because of the bureaucratic difficulties of the capitalist judicial apparatus in preventing the escape strategies of hundreds of military and civilian perpetrators of the National Socialist terror; not only because of the scandalous persistence of deep inequalities within the central economies, and between them and the societies of the capitalist periphery, but also—and above all—because of the drastically ideological way in which political decisions and social phenomena were interpreted in the public sphere.

Both in the political discourses that interpreted the trials of the perpetrators as representing a punishment proportional to the crimes committed, and in the capitalist discourses about the economic success of Keynesian policies of full employment, in the framework of which it was possible to celebrate the "miracles" of capitalist Germany, there appeared for Adorno a progressive ideology that encouraged the perception of historical time as a homogeneous continuum, in which the atrocities of the recent past could be left behind by a present self-perceived as cumulative and self-fulfilling. This teleological matrix of the idea of progress, condensed in the figure of a "coming to terms with the past" [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*] prevented the deepening of the reflections of a collective memory about that which, as the persistent remains of a catastrophe, continued to grind at the level of the social totality the democratic processes of the formation of the common will:

"That fascism lives on, that the oft-invoked working through of the past has to this day been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, an empty and cold forgetting, is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist. Fascism essentially cannot be derived from subjective dispositions. The economic order, and to a great extent also the economic organization modeled upon it, now as then renders the majority of people dependent upon conditions beyond their control and thus maintains them in a state of political immaturity. If they want to live, then no other avenue remains but to adapt submit themselves to the given conditions; they must negate precisely that autonomous subjectivity to which the idea of democracy appeals; they can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self. (...) The necessity of such adaptation, of identification with the given, the status quo, with power as such, creates the potential for totalitarianism. This potential is reinforced by the dissatisfaction and the rage that very constraint to adapt produces and reproduces" [17] (p. 98–99).

In this context, Adorno suggested the category of "collective narcissism" to interpret the meaning of the new manifestations of group identification on the part of those for whom "the callous world promises less and less satisfaction" [17] (p. 96). While paradoxically the narcissistic impulses of the subjects are strengthened by the imposition of renunciation and the reiteration of disappointment, integration into social groups allows them to compensate for something of what capitalist objectivity deprives them of this condition:

"(...) impose such privations on individuals, so constantly disappoint their individual narcissism, in reality damn them to such helplessness, that they are condemned to collective

narcissism. As a compensation, collective narcissism then restores to them as individuals some of the self-esteem the same collective strips from them and that they hope to fully recover through their delusive identification with it" [18] (p. 118).

The examples that Adorno refers to when he speaks of this communitarian configuration of capitalist narcissism are fundamentally those that manifest themselves in the forms of a blinded nationalism, for which identification with the group is the condition of possibility of self-affirmation at the expense of respect and tolerance of those who are different. It must be said that the historical framework for these reflections was that of the fierce competition between capitalist economies, the ever-increasing conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the economic boom that the implementation of social welfare policies had meant for the "developed" West.

None of these conjunctural determinations are part of our context, neither in geopolitical nor in economic-social terms. For more than a decade, subjects have been confronted with a scenario of endemic crisis that affects all levels of social and individual life. And yet, something of the internally contradictory, paradoxical formulation of a "collective narcissism" allows us to grasp the mutations of neoliberal subjectivity and the emergence of new forms of community identification motivated by reactive affectivities of aggression and authoritarian violence.

A review of the Freudian theory of narcissism will allow me to clarify my main argument. Indeed, by accounting for the complexities already recognized by psychoanalysis in the phenomenon of narcissism, I will be able to better identify the reconfigurations that neoliberal subjectivity has taken on in our present. As will be seen throughout the next section, far from acting according to a staggered and linear logic of simple oppositions in which one model of subject is replaced by another that takes its place, neoliberal subjectivity seems to recalibrate itself, shifting, *within* the model of narcissism, emphases and layers that settle one on top of the other, allowing to recognize dimensions of narcissism, albeit shifted from themselves and articulated with others coming from structures traditionally conceived as opposed to its psychic life.

### 3. Historical Declines of the Name of the Father

#### 3.1. Freudian Theory of Narcissism

Although the problem of narcissism had been approached laterally by Freud in several early texts, such as *Three Essays on Sexual Theory*, "An Infantile Memory of Leonardo Da Vinci", "Psychoanalytic remarks on a case of paranoia (*Dementia paranoides*) described autobiographically", or even *Totem and Taboo*, it is in his important work "Introduction to Narcissism" that the question assumes a conceptual status of weight for psychoanalysis [19]. The study moves from an initial recognition of the problem as a phenomenon limited to specific clinical cases, where individuals take their own body as a sexual object, completely exhausting their sexual life in this orientation; then on to other phenomena in which an alteration in the distribution of the libido is observed as a consequence of a disturbance in the Ego, phenomena in which at first sight no direct associations with the narcissistic behavior of the self—such as illness or sleep—seem to be apparent; to finally discover the narcissistic aspects in the clinical analysis of neurosis, which allows us to recognize in this phenomenon a constitutive dimension of the genesis of adult subjectivity. Thus, for Freud, narcissism traces the arc that begins with its identification as a perversion to appear as a libidinal complement of the egoic drive or self-preservation (against the operation of biology, which reduces the drive to the physiological scheme of the reflex, psychoanalysis approaches the drive as a "representant" [*Repräsentant*]). That is why "the most precise knowledge of the sources of drives is by no means indispensable for the purposes of psychoanalytic research". See [20] (p. 125)).

Even in all the heterogeneity manifested by each of these phenomena described in the clinical history, it is possible to identify in all of them an analogous libidinal movement that allows them to be subsumed under the same concept: unlike transference neurosis, where the greater weight is occupied by the libido identified with objects, in these phenomena we

observe a movement of the drives that is exclusively directed towards the Ego. And yet, as the Freudian letter will show, the conceptual subsumption will not allow us to exhaust the semantic complexity that psychoanalysis assigns to narcissism.

In the genealogy traced by Freud, this characteristic movement of narcissism must be traced back to a primary moment of the formation of the Ego, marked by the indistinction between autoerotic sexual satisfactions and the principle of realization of vital functions aimed at self-preservation. This early stage is manifested in the identification by the child of her first sexual objects in the persons in charge of her nutrition, care, and protection. Hence, at this stage, the erotic aspect in the object selection cannot be differentiated from the narcissistic satisfaction of the egoic drives. It is possible to trace back to this early moment that which later in the history of the subject's development will present itself as dissociated; on the one hand, the *object or sexual drive*, whose emblem for Freud is the phenomenon of full love or falling in love, and in which the Ego is libidinally impoverished by a transference of this original narcissism towards the sexual object identified according to the model of the mother. On the other hand, there is the *egoic drive*, oriented towards seeking itself as the object of love in a modality of the choice of the sexual object that Freud will identify with the phenomenon of secondary narcissism.

Overcoming this early narcissism, colored by delusions of grandeur and character traits associated with feelings of self-sufficiency and omnipotence, relies on the subject forging an ideal that functions as a parameter for measuring her current self, conditioning the repression of impulses and experiences that are intolerable for the dominant cultural and ethical representations of her time. This ideal self thus appears as a depository instance of primary narcissism. And just as the motto "Her majesty the baby" condensed all the perfections and exaltations attributable to the love of her parents, so now the ideal self condenses all the determinations of an exemplary figure, making possible the satisfaction of the libido, although in a way displaced from its original destiny. Just as the awakening of moral judgment in the subject depends on the prohibitions of culture, inhibiting the Ego from satisfying its egoic drives, so too the adult subject will be able to regain this possibility through obedient compliance with the prescriptions of the ideal self. Thereby the satisfaction of the egoic drives is given in a substitute, "sublimated" form, presenting itself as an escape route that allows one to avoid repression in obedience to the demands of this Ego, magnified by idealization.

However, the self-referential excess in which the narcissist is recognized does not allow the economic circle that characterizes successful socialization to be closed so simply. The subject who repeats the primary scene of an exclusionary linking of her sexual drives to her own Ego, re-adopts those character traits of the child in her primary stage. For the narcissist, "Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on her own will, shall not touch her; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in her favor; she shall once more really be the center and core of creation" [19] (p. 91). The subject who conceives all external libidinal investment as an impoverishment of herself could not accept without protest the cultural demands for the renunciation of her impulses.

Freud calls this late form of narcissism "secondary" and characterizes it in terms of an inability to love, inhibiting erotic satisfaction in the service of the subject's own enhancement. It is precisely this late form of narcissism, conceived as a detachment of the individual from a social world represented by institutions, legal norms, and moral prescriptions, that we have become accustomed to associating in our representations of neoliberal subjectivity. Recall Margaret Thatcher's dictum against the category of society: "There are individual men and women". Do not the ideological imperatives of entrepreneurship with which contemporary capitalism addresses economic subjects reinforce this image?

### 3.2. Recent Transformations within the Libidinal Economy of the Subject

Indeed, each of the conceptual determinations of this secondary narcissism evokes on the subject's side what the capitalist demands of the present expect of the self. However, Freud's own text also enables a different reading of narcissism, in which the extreme



incarnated by illness allows for the revelation of a constitutive dimension of “majority” [*Mündigkeit*], i.e., of an emancipated subjectivity. This is the relationship to institutional imperatives that narcissists who are trapped by forms of paranoia and delusions of observation engage in. In these pathological forms of narcissism, the subject imagines that there is a power that observes all her intentions, controls them, and criticizes them. If for Freud it was possible to recognize a moment of truth in narcissism, it consisted in the strength of an Ego with sufficient capacity to distance herself from the demands of her social world. In the disidentification with social demands Freud found a form of freedom that the sufferings of his patients seemed to indicate indirectly. Thereby Freud found an affinity between narcissism and philosophical introspection, in which the possibility of resistance to despotic authorities depended on the possibility for the subject to assume a reflective perspective on herself.

However, the price of this “healthy” introspection would end up being too costly. In the narcissistic subject, the object libido is suppressed by an egoic libido that becomes despotic, blocking the possibility of weaving bonds of love with others. It is precisely this impossibility that makes the neoliberal imperatives of entrepreneurship perverse mechanisms of subjection: the narcissistic obturation of the object libido prevents reflection on a collective and shared dimension of responsibility for individual destinies, strengthening the processes of individual responsibility for economic performance in a world of work governed by the precariousness of forms of contracting, the reduction in employment, and the loss of the purchasing power of wages [21] (p. 56).

As such, far from widening the subject’s margin of consciousness, the narcissism promoted by the current ideology of entrepreneurship would lead to a regression of the self in which any conceptual operation of mediation between the position of the individual subject and the structural transformations occurring in the socioeconomic world would be blocked. Here, then, the distance from social constraints that characterizes narcissism does not lead to any “majority” on the part of the individual but to a further deepening of her subjection, developing new causes of anguish and anxiety. For when faced with the call to be one’s own boss and to manage one’s own destiny independently of any social infrastructure, suffering manifests itself as a feeling of guilt at the failure to fulfill the mandate to successfully sustain one’s own life. Indeed, in this scenario, as Butler [22] (p. 16) argues, madness does not seem to be a very distant fate.

This drift of contemporary narcissism, however, enables *another route* by which the disconnection of the Ego from the moral and juridical imperatives of human coexistence can unfold. It is a subordination without the remainder of the Ego by the demands of what from 1923 onwards Freud [23] called the “Id”, that is, the reservoir of psychic energy from which emanate those impulses that culture demands to be inhibited, such as aggressiveness, the mere strategic orientation towards survival, and the desire for sexual satisfaction. In this new drift of narcissism, the act of satisfying socially “forbidden” impulses is experienced by the subject as a means of achieving one’s own individual authenticity. The rebellion against this censoring instance of the Superego, embodied externally by the social world, is due to the fact that the individual wants to free herself from the interference and influence of all authority, whether in the form of moral conscience, or in the form of social institutions, or in the form of juridical-normative regulations.

This “expressivist” drift of the narcissistic self is also signed by an imaginary association of the social imperatives of solidarity and respect for the freedoms of others with illegitimate forms of social control that are externally imposed on the subject. However, far from strengthening the instance of the self and enabling autonomous forms of life, these imaginary associations inhibit any reflection on the consequences of one’s own actions, detaching the subject from any notion of responsibility towards the community of which she is a part.

The narcissist enjoys the free expression of her drives, regardless of the effects of his acts of satisfaction on others, on the survival of the world, and even on herself. *This* drift of narcissism can be associated with a predominance of destructive drives, oriented

towards a dissolution of all differences, and in which the subject seeks to regress to an oceanic moment that even ends up devouring herself [24]. Freud found in this behavior a masochistic pleasure in “transgression”, i.e., in the subject’s own placement in the position of fault before the moral mandate, a pleasure which on the other hand was extremely problematic in view of the ways in which social regulations could contain the violence and destructive practices of human beings [25].

Behind these two possibilities, identification with the sadism of the Superego in the radicalization of self-condemnatory guilt as in identification with the expressivity of the Id in aggression towards the world, what is revealed is a paradoxical coupling of narcissism with self-destructive tendencies. In a way that is paradoxically reminiscent of the thesis of an association between masochism and bourgeois individuality in the first generation of the Frankfurt School [26], here the weakening of the reflexive capacity of the self presupposes the structural “decline of the name of the Father” that neoliberalism operates upon, and which recent sociology has studied under the categories of systemic disintegration and social entropy. These are phenomena of the destruction of the symbolic authority embodied by the institutional framework of norms and prescriptions that served to stabilize capitalist social relations [27].

#### 4. To Win the Energies of Intoxication for the Revolution

Adorno [28] himself was able to recognize these dilemmas when thinking about the affective dynamics on which were sustained the ideological force of the speeches and rhetorical strategies of the fascist agitators. In one of his writings immediately after the publication of the study on the authoritarian personality, Adorno comes to grips with Freud’s classic text on “Mass Psychology and Analysis of the Ego”, not only to pick out its anticipatory character—the text was published in 1921—but also to rescue in it conceptual elements for a materialist theory of the “democratic We”.

What interests him most in Freud’s perspective on the question of the “mass” is precisely *that* which differentiates it from the traditional reactionary, classist, and racist contestation of the forms of political subject formation of the lower social strata, such as those observed in the figures of Le Bon, Taine, Charcot, or Lombroso. Adorno says: “Instead of inferring from the usual descriptive findings that the masses are inferior per se and are likely to remain so, Freud asks, imbued with the spirit of true enlightenment: what makes the masses into masses?” [28] (p. 121). Which means: what identification processes are involved in the emergence of a mass as a political subject?

Yet, according to Adorno, the problem of Freudian group psychology was its struggle to produce a differentiated concept of collective identity, which would make it possible to understand the structural differences between the mechanisms of subject formation and association that characterize the fascist masses, and those libidinal mechanisms and processes of political composition in which progressive, i.e., emancipatory, collective subjectivities are structured.

For Adorno, the condition for finding this positive concept of transformative political action was the very transformation of the normative foundations of theory: “Only an explicit theory of society, which goes far beyond the range of psychology, can fully answer the question posed here” [28] (p. 134). Now, what does an explicit theory of society mean here? Is it only a problem of scientific explanation? I would like to argue that Adorno is not only suggesting that we should replace psychology with sociology—which, in fact, is something he does. I understand this notion in the sense of “complete”, “fully developed”, or “unfolded”.

An explicit theory of society connects a concept of social totality with a notion of political praxis. For, according to Horkheimer’s classic formulation [29], critical theory consists precisely in the conceptual conjunction of a series of explanatory arguments about current social problems, and a series of normative arguments about the ferments of intramundane transcendence within those problems. According to Horkheimer, critical theory not only has to explain the inscription of the forms of individual and collective

subjectivity through a clarification of the capitalist nexus of individual and society, but must also illuminate the transformative tendencies and forces already operating in society, oriented to its overcoming.

This critical theory of social totality, which for Adorno [30] is grounded in Marx's theory of value, is what allows us to understand why authoritarian subjectivity, far from being a problem of the psychology of individuals, is, on the contrary, a structural determination of the impossibility on which today's society is based. I am speaking of the irreconcilability between capitalism and democracy. Since the theory of the antagonistic social totality demonstrates that the processes of economic crisis, and the social dispossession that derive from them, are not contingent effects of a punctual historical cycle, but necessary conditions of the very reproduction of the current social order. In this regard, as Herman Heller [31] already recognized in 1933, the liberal conception of politics, understood as the theory of a political action that requests the reinsurance of the capitalist social order, cannot but foster the emergence of theories and practices that are not only aliberal but even contrary to the very principles of liberalism. Menke's comment is instructive: "bourgeois law results in social coercion by realizing the equality of freedom" [32] (p. 202).

"The fact that liberalism turns into its opposite, indeed, produces this opposite itself (as we now see again everywhere), is neither a coincidence nor a sign of merely insufficient realization of its—allegedly good—basic idea, but the very law of its operation: the dialectic of liberalism" [33] (p. 225).

Therefore, as was the relationship of mutual dependence between the conditions of poverty and the emergence of the rabble [*Pöbel*] in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and as would be for Marx the relationship of mutual implication between the exploitation of labor and the emergence of the proletariat as a political subject [34], the social division on which the property regime is sustained can only become compatible with social practices and ideological representations that process the social division in authoritarian terms.

The first step of a politics of negativity is already taken when theory demonstrates why in the capitalist social order it is not possible, with the political terms and vocabularies of capitalism, to think of a "democratic We". But critical theory goes a step further. It not only explains with a concept of social totality why the democratic we is voided in capitalism. It also aims to indicate what would have to be the subjective conditions of an eventual emancipatory collective practice.

Precisely because the "logic of double latency" (Ruda) that goes along with the examples of dispossession embodied in the particular cases of poverty and the working class makes it possible to recognize in anyone the possibility of becoming "poor" and "worker", the "primacy of equality" that enables this perception lets us understand more precisely what is relevant in the formation of political subject that is opposed to the authoritarian one: it is the formulation of a transformative claim, enabled by the same idea of justice embodied by the political institutions that accompany the capitalist mode of production, although irreducible to the reality that liberal law embodies in the social totality. The incompatibility of this demand is explained by the fact that: (1) the capitalist social division needs dispossession as a condition for the reproduction of the separation between work and capital, and (2) since the liberal political order acts as a guarantor of the stability of that division.

The demand for equality on which democratic subject formation is built is, therefore, transformative since it calls for a transformation both of the social totality sustained by property inequality and of the (liberal) theory that seeks to think it [35]. Conversely, the demand on which authoritarian subject formation is sustained is apologetic, since it calls, both in its theoretical doctrines and in its spontaneous ideologies, for a preservation of the relations of inequality on which the class division is sustained. Its demand is that of a "repressive egalitarianism" [28] (p. 131) in which the sacrifice of one's own pleasure is justified by the gratification brought about by the repression of the pleasure of others. Hence, the political subject formation of authoritarianism is sustained by a "negative



cathexis" towards certain social categories, expelled under the rubric of "others" and transformed into a motive of unlimited hatred.

The condition that in capitalism anyone can fall under the rubric of "poor" and "worker" is coupled with the experience of an equality of anyone with anyone, of me and you, of us and them. In this sense the "democratic We" attempts to develop a savage universalism, beyond the genuinely liberal identification of the subject with the narcissistic self-owner: "Such is the interest of all, only realizable through a solidarity that is transparent to itself and to all living things" [36] (p. 3266).

But for Adorno, the "We" that produces the tacit recognition of the logic of double latency and its active affirmation in the negation of the status quo has to begin already in its very forms of organization [*Einrichtung*] and in its own ways of internal assembly. For Adorno, the difference between the authoritarian subject formation and the democratic togetherness is not merely one of content. The question does not lie only in a contraposition between different aims or objectives. Rather, what distinguishes the anti-democratic mass from the political subject of emancipation is the specific process of mediation between theory and praxis, public and private, and human and civil rights, that put into action each of these forms of collective subjectivity. This process, open and without predetermined end, is depicted by Adorno by reference to the bond of trust or solidarity between the instances of the political collective.

As Alberto Toscano has recently underlined [13] (pp. 28–44), Adorno conceives this differential notion of a bond of comradeship by recovering the Benjaminian distinction between the "compact" mass that characterizes the petty bourgeoisie won by fascism, and the mass that "takes up its struggle for liberation" [37] (p. 50) (it is worth recalling here how ends the oft-cited letter to Benjamin of 18 March 1936, in which Adorno declares that "I find your few sentences concerning the disintegration of the proletariat into 'masses' through the revolution, to be amongst the most profound and most powerful statements of political theory I have encountered since I read *State and Revolution*" [38] (p. 132–133)). While the revolutionary political aggregation is capable of abolishing the "dead opposition" between individual and collectivity through solidarity, the petty-bourgeois mass is characterized by the need to externalize an instance of authority that tyrannizes it. In the first case, the mass is born of the constitution of an "intoxicated" leadership, in the second, the mass is the retroactive effect of the presupposition of a "dictatorial" power (I borrow the distinction between the "intoxicated" side and the constructive or "dictatorial" side of emancipatory politics from Benjamin's essay "Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" [39]).

The "intoxicated" or loosened relation between mass and individual is characterized by its plasticity and mutability. In the solidarity of the proletarian struggle "the great achievement [of the revolutionary leader] lies not in drawing the masses after her, but in letting herself over and over again to be involved into the masses, in order to be always one among hundreds of thousands" [37] (*Ibid.*). On the contrary, the dictatorial relationship is "compact" because it is fixed to an established form that eternalizes itself like a second nature. Its principle of aggregation is "reactive"; it reacts to the affection of fear: "Demonstrations by the compact mass thus always have a panicked quality-whether they give vent to war fever, hatred of Jews, or the instinct for self-preservation" [37] (*Ibid.*).

It is important to underline that the revolutionary organization of the political subject is not opposed to the "we" of the fascist mass because it dissolves the passivity of the affections, but because, instead of repressing them, it recognizes them as an inescapable condition of all "collective *ratio*": "an ecstatic component lives in every revolutionary act" [39] (p. 55). But while the revolutionary mass does not pretend to conjure up the passive disposition of the subject, neither does it "romanticize" it. Passivity is not a new principle on which to ground political practice.

"But to place the accent exclusively on it would be to subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance. Added to this is an inadequate, undialectical concep-

tion of the nature of intoxication. The aesthetic of the painter, the poet, *en état de surprise*, of art as the reaction of one surprised, is enmeshed in a number of pernicious romantic prejudices" [39] (Ibid.).

By "loosening up" [*auflockern*] the mass, this process of mediation facilitates a form of political composition in which passion ceases to be a cause for panic and instead becomes an inalienable condition for liberating action. Thus, the revolutionary political aggregation requires its members to act in accordance with two mutually contradictory demands: requires each person to act autonomously, that is to say, for herself, determining herself on the basis of the principle of subjective will; at the same time, it requires each person to act "heteronomously", that is to say, against herself, freeing herself from the constraint that binds her to be merely an "I" acting according to her individual will. This duplicitous or internally contradictory demand is expressed in the virtue of the revolutionary leader, who must "let herself be involved": she who lets herself be involved, decides for herself to dissolve as an authority in a "collective *ratio*" that transcends her. But by making this self-dissolution an act of her own, she confirms her sovereignty in the act of voluntary affirmation of her structural arbitrariness [40] (p. 224).

This contradictory form in which the "democratic we" separates itself from the fascist mass is "processual" because it does not stop in a determined finality the movement of institution–destitution–restitution of itself, but it reiterates it "over and over again". The processuality that characterizes the struggle for liberation is for Adorno what gives political organization its "critical" status [41] (p. 18161), in the sense that it works in a reflexive way with those internal distinctions in which it is structured, without stopping them in fixed counter-positions. By looking squarely and fearlessly at the differences between individual and mass, leadership and base, master and ignorant, intelligence and sensibility, the liberating form of political aggregation works against itself, "over and over again", revealing itself as being historically produced, made by convention, and mediated by contingent wills. In other words, it is decisively *political*.

For Adorno, therefore, the emancipatory organization of the collective subject makes the "principle of truth" [42] (p. 18018) the essential reason for its existence. Not in the sense that it presupposes an instance transcendent to representation from which the legitimacy of power emanates, but in the sense that it does not conceal but exhibits its radically historical structure. In this "we", the leadership is constituted as democratic as long as it works with decentered [*aufgelockert*] forms of aggregation, that is, where internal differences favor a "lively contact" [*in lebendigem Kontakt*] [41] (p. 18182) between the extremes of its dialectic. Here, the leader enables "spontaneous forces" [*spontane Kräfte*] [41] (Ibid.) that contradict her, facilitating the democratization of participation within the collective.

While fascism despises its social bases, setting up an immobile hierarchy between subordinate positions, emancipatory political practice is nourished by a bond of love and reciprocal respect that presupposes as its condition the acceptance of the constitutive character of one's own lack and, therefore, of the need of its others.

## 5. Concluding Remarks: Towards a Politics of Negativity

In this article, I offered arguments that make it difficult to think of a "democratic We". On the one hand, current diagnoses about the nihilism of our time show a drying up of the normative roots that nourished the modern values of what is true and what is good. In a time marked by fake news and hate speech in the public sphere, by a judicialization of politics that jeopardizes the very notion of popular sovereignty, and by a social resurgence of racist, anti-Semitic, classist, misogynist, and homophobic prejudices, there seems to be no room left, in the literal sense of the word, for thinking about democracy, whether in the North or in the Global South.

In turn, I have analyzed with Theodor Adorno's theory of authoritarian subjectivity the affective and libidinal conditions that operate behind the emergence of new forms of anti-democratic subject formation. By analyzing his concept of "collective narcissism", in direct discussion with Freudian theory, I was able to differentiate psycho-social aspects

at work in the current ways in which contemporary neoliberal capitalism hinders the possibility of a “democratic We”. And yet, delving into Adorno’s own philosophical perspective, I have suggested arguments that, while not contradicting this diagnosis—in the manner of a Hegelian *aufheben*—do help to make it more complex. Complexifying the analysis opens up the possibility of a third response, which does not conform to the binarism of logical contradiction.

These arguments converge in outlining a politics of negativity. This “politics” begins to operate already in its critique of liberal political theories, which construct ideal normative principles independent of material contexts and social realities. Critical theory, since it is concerned with developing explanatory arguments about social phenomena of crisis, deploys a materialist diagnosis of society that provides elements to situate philosophical questions about what is possible in concrete contexts. In that sense, no strong notion of a “Genuine Liberal” could be helpful to think beyond the limits of the existing.

After all, the rejection of liberalism suggested by critical theory is more profound. Its contestation does not only depend on a given momentary conjuncture. The “politics” of a critical theory of capitalist society consists of demonstrating the structural imbrication between valorization and domination, between the economic regime and political oppression, and between the private self-owner and the authoritarian subjectivity. A politics of negativity consists in philosophically demonstrating the irreconcilability between capitalism and democracy.

But, as I was able to analyze in the last section, this perspective also consists in indicating the interval opened by negation. The politics of negativity understands this space (and time) in the virtual affirmation of a radical universalism, which emerges in the shared experience of an equality that appears in the dispossession of the different social categories which the capitalist social order must exploit, subjugate, and exclude as a condition of its normal and accurate reproduction.

Taken seriously, this suggestion of Adorno’s involves far-reaching consequences. The internally differentiated concept of the democratic we compels a revision of the normative presuppositions of critical studies on contemporary authoritarianism. This overhaul also involves a rethinking of the link between criticism and its object. If critique is neither an external, transcendent, or alien instance to the social field, then we must free ourselves from the hierarchical figures of expert knowledge with which theory has often been tempted to identify itself: I am referring specifically to the paternalistic, authoritarian, and pathologizing connotations associated with the metaphor of the psychiatrist, where the differences between critique and clinic end up blurring in the most fatal way.

As in the case of the decentered revolutionary leader proposed by Benjamin, the politics of negativity invites us to rethink the very modality of language use that represents the practice of criticism, the logical structure of its judgments, and the attitude of listening that it puts into practice in each of the conversations it engages in in its social interventions. In nihilistic times, Adorno allows us to rethink, in a new way this time, in what sense critical theory can contribute to a practice of resistance in the face of the threats to democracy.

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