



DESDE LA VIDA DAÑADA. LA TEORÍA CRÍTICA DE THEODOR W. ADORNO [FROM DAMAGED LIFE. THEODOR W. ADORNO'S CRITICAL THEORY]

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Jordi Maiso's book *From Damaged Life*, is not merely a presentation of Theodor Adorno's thinking. From the outset, its stated goal is to update and even to vindicate the legacy of the German thinker: to defend the current relevance of his thought by critically unpacking the dynamics of the current stage of capitalism (despite the fact that the original context of Adorno's work was the society marked by fascism and State-capitalism immediately following World War II); and to dispute, moreover, the deeply-held opinion that Adorno's thinking leads to resignation or, as Lukács determines, to conformism by professing inconformity. It is unclear whether Maiso's book succeeds in liberating Adorno from this prejudice, which leads us to suggest that the book achieves its objectives unevenly. However, the ignorance, or even the trivialization of Adorno's thought, as well as its current relevance, more than justifies Jordi Maiso's endeavor.

The author's valuable trajectory qualifies him as deeply knowledgeable of Adorno's work, both in its breadth and in its depth. From this knowledge, to offer a complete exposition of Adorno's thinking would be not only an enormous task, but also a vain effort, bearing in mind that Adorno's text, like those of his contemporaries, does not lend itself easily to the integrating and totalizing idea of a "work." Which, then, is the perspective of the endeavor that Maiso undertakes? Social theory and the critique of advanced capitalism. This ties in with the stated goal of vindication. For, while the social perspective is fundamental and extensive throughout all of Adorno's thought, it has often been ignored or displaced by perspectives focused on philosophy, art, or cultural criticism, all of which are important aspects but that, for Adorno, never appear as separate from the critique of political economy and of socialization. In the same way, the centrality of the event of Auschwitz can make us forget, as Maiso says, that it should never be treated as "an *unicum*, but rather [as] a powerful tendency of society as a whole" (p. 38), which affects, therefore, the present and the future of societies that purport to be free of the memory and the dangers of fascist violence.

This social focus allows the concept of "damaged life" to be situated at the forefront. This is important because it responds to a materialist

orientation that in Adorno is never reduced to a question of philosophical speculation, nor to one of political praxis, but rather, I would argue, one of ethical demand — the consideration of a life that not only emerges between blood and feces, but also, for as much we deny it, never manages to rise above somatic pulsations, and that, from there, asks to be protected from “inevitable suffering.” Starting from damaged life is not only important for the immediately evident, namely: that history can be qualified, following Marx, as “prehistory,” or, following Benjamin, as a continuing “catastrophe,” due to the amount of damage and suffering accumulated (and not only until today, but rather until further notice, since tomorrow is in large part already determined); and that capitalism’s methods of socialization, including in their apparently more privileged and “progressive” forms, are the source of discomfort and abandonment at many levels. The idea is also important, as Maiso points out, because Adorno does not reflect “*on* damaged life, rather *from* damaged life” (p. 14). This aspect, however, would have required more depth to avoid confusion with an identification that, then, would easily cede to a reproach of hypocritical elitism. Because, although “damaged life” is not only the “object” but also the place *from which* he writes, Adorno refuses, despite this, any autobiography or exemplarity. How can one write from damaged life as something personal and intimate without speaking of oneself? To clarify this position or place of writing is key to understanding the Adornian “critical subject,” once, as Maiso explains, the role of the intellectual as well as that of the collective class subject have expired.

Finally, the centrality of “damaged life” in Maiso’s book is justified by that it is *in*, or *from*, this damage that Adorno attempts to discern a way out. If “subjective constitution is a crucial battleground to resolve whether critique’s potentials can gain ground” (p. 326), it is only in the suffering, needy, debilitated, divided subject, crushed by social power, where opportunities can be found for social transformation, or at least, a beginning of “solidarity with ‘torturable bodies’” (p. 330). Now, here we reach the most sensitive point of the resignation or abdication that are usually imputed to Adorno. For at this point the negativity of his thinking is supreme. It is not only that, citing Adorno himself, “only from within does one issue forth” (p. 327), but also that words cannot be wasted in describing the extreme darkness of this “within,” at the cost of obscuring the exit. Adorno’s text is so ruthless in diagnosing the effects of social oppression that Jordi Maiso finds himself compelled to repeat the warning that Adorno’s analyses need not be taken too literally. This is one of the

most genuine, and for some, most irritating aspects of Adorno's thinking. For this "not too literally" is more ambiguous and unstable than what it might seem. Certainly, Adorno's discourse wavers between description and exaggeration, between analysis and prediction, but it is not easy to outline both dimensions, and there is no formula by which to read Adorno with a *certain* amount of incredulity. For, although it is true that what Adorno expounds are "evolutionary tendencies legible in certain social transformations, not completed processes" (p. 322), the affirmation that brutality is not a threat, but rather has already occurred, and moreover, it persists, it is no less emphatic (p. 35). On the other hand, if, as Maiso repeats on various occasions, live subjects "are never totally identical to the social objectivity that comprises them" (p. 325), if there is an "excess of subjective participation" that the system cannot stop reproducing but that, at the same time, is maintained as an "antagonistic element" that limits the logic of the social system (p. 229), then neither the present is as fateful as Adorno paints it, nor will the future ever realize its most terrible prognoses. And even so, the affirmation of closing, of overwhelming integration, of fissure-less coercion, of totalization without an "outside", is something like a demand, a condition of possibility for critical thought. And not only, or not so much for pragmatic reasons (to respond to the idea that if the situation is not that extreme, then indignation will die down and subversion will be postponed), but rather, again, for ethical reasons. Here the question of damaged life becomes absolutely critical. Because there are lives so broken, so underappreciated, so completely sacrificed to self-preservation, that it becomes immoral to appeal to a "resistance," let alone an "emancipation." In this sense, Adorno's thought stems from this commitment shared with Benjamin, by which a critique must be elevated to the height of its time (with what this implies for generalization), but at the same time, the defeated and outraged must be responded to in their singularity. In the view of the individualities that have been trampled on by history, for whom emancipation is impossible or the hope of social transformation is an affront, the sentencing of a total occlusion of the horizon cannot be understood *only* as an exaggeration. In effect, many of Adorno's affirmations, today, continue to be an exaggeration, and at the same time, as Maiso takes it upon himself to demonstrate, they have an unsettling premonitory value. In other words: "we" are *still not* the recipients of the "message in a bottle" that is *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (and, by extension, so many of Adorno's texts); and however, it could be that tomorrow no one else is left to receive the message.

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Jordi Maiso's book is divided into two parts. The first part situates some of the key coordinates of Adorno's critical theory and also unpacks certain myths and corrects some misunderstandings. The first chapter deals with key questions about the context in which Adorno articulated his thought, such as the closure of Auschwitz, transformations of critical thought and of the "revolutionary subject" in postliberal capitalism, and the transcendent or messianic dimension of social criticism. The second chapter outlines certain intellectual features of Adorno, highlighting how they originate in a reflection on artistic and cultural products and their disruptive potential, a subject that he never abandoned. In this chapter, Maiso also deals with the relationship between theory and practice, and the tension that always accompanied Adorno between a blind "actionism" and an impotent theory. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has a special prominence in the third chapter. Maiso analyzes the particular position, content, and mission of this work, as often read as misunderstood, without concluding the debates that it has raised throughout time.

The second part of the book centers on the critical theory of capitalism, the fundamental element of the approach that Maiso proposes. Here, the effort is not only to specify the particular phase of capitalism that Adorno confronts, which requires an updating of the criticism of Marx's political economy, but also to attend to the systemic, integrating and totalizing dynamics that expand everywhere and that undermine traditional forms of socialization and the constitution of individuality. The first chapter (the fourth in the book) explains the centrality of the Marxist legacy, mediated by Lukács, regarding the logics of exchange and the resulting fetishism of the commodity. But it also explains how this legacy, in view of social transformations after World War II, needed a radicalization of its systemic perspective, which, at the same time as it acquires a growing autonomization, also proves itself to be more and more voracious concerning any aspect of internal or external life. There is an inclination to "total" domination or socialization, without forgetting its antagonistic nature, and therefore, not irremediably closed. The fifth chapter takes on the great Adornian commonplace of the cultural industry: the commodification of cultural products, the organization of creativity according to criteria of productivity, the formation of interests, desire and even the identity of individuals, and the resultant impoverishment of experience. The sixth chapter deals with the important question of the changes in the

forms of individuation following the decline of the bourgeoisie subject. Individuation is no longer something given, rather it is something historic and socially mediated, and there are reasons to sustain the idea that capitalism produces qualifiable changes like an “anthropological transformation.” The general, and paradoxical, tendency is that as subjects are more and more atomized, and at the same time, more exposed to the pressures and functional requirements of the whole, they are left more unprotected, debilitated, and lacking in autonomy. In this chapter, which is also interested in recovering little-known writing by Adorno, Maiso summarizes the principal characteristics of the “new human type,” and also deals briefly with the Adornian appropriation of psychoanalysis. Finally, the seventh chapter deals with the new figure of ideology, a pertinent question in a time when the concept of ideology, beyond media voices, seems to be a concept tainted by anachronism. In answer to the question whether ideology is still operative, and under what conditions, there is a very revealing Adornian gesture (in the wake of Benjamin) to displace the analysis of the *ideas* to that of the *idols*, disassociating ideology from the sphere of discourses and visions of the world and situating it in the phantasmagoric realm of commodities as “socially necessary appearance.” Anticipating something that Mark Fisher terms “capitalist realism,” ideology is no longer a “false” consciousness but rather “merely realistic.”

Maiso’s book concludes with a coda that, despite its insistence on the “limit of objectification” that individuals represent, in my opinion does not manage to convince us that there is reason for hope. Even more so when, as Maiso recognizes, some of the proposals upon which Adorno’s critique was founded, such as the inclusive capacity of capitalism, are clearly being eroded. Perhaps not all is lost. Maybe the global economy’s brutal dynamics of expulsion, along with the horizon of annihilation promoted, explicitly or with guilty complicity, by ecofascism, phenomena unknown to Adorno, can be revealed as new sites of subversion. I don’t know. Certainly, we must keep interrogating Adorno, hoping, and even demanding, that he deliver some keys to detain the sacrificial intelligence that governs us. But I don’t believe that the still incalculable value of his thinking depends on the emancipating *coaching* to which critical theorists today seems to feel obligated due to an apocalyptic guilty conscience. Jordi Maiso’s book, perhaps without aiming to, gives a good account of this.

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