

AFFECT AND CRITIQUE: Negative Dialectics and Massumi's Politics of Affect

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Thesis and Scope

How and why do subjects participate in their own repression? Even more, why do they desire it? This question has long plagued philosophers and cultural theorists. According to affect theorist Brian Massumi, dialectical critiques of ideology and poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity provide inadequate answers to this dilemma because they fail to account for the ontological autonomy of affect and its primary role in all human activity. Although Massumi's theorization of affect as an affirmative force of difference illuminates a profoundly important dimension of experience that has been largely neglected in cultural theory, I argue that it cannot fulfill its promise to open new political possibilities without the negativity of critique that Massumi pointedly rejects. The wholly affirmative 'yes' of affect is not enough to resist the duplicitous affective structures that coincide with neoliberal practices.

Adorno's concept of non-identity offers a way of distinguishing between affective tendencies that deceptively serve the reification of experience and those that resist what Adorno calls the "ontology of the wrong state of things".¹ In other words, Adorno's critical philosophy provides an understanding of the necessity of the negative. On the one hand, re-examining Adorno's thought in light of contemporary affect theory considers the role of negative affects, or embodied suffering, in what is traditionally interpreted as an epistemological form of critique. On the other hand, reading Massumi in the context of Adorno's concept of non-identity provides a critical edge that affect theory needs if it is to live up to its claim to be a revolutionary force.

To summarize, there is a radical difference between Adorno's critique of dialectics and Massumi's dismissal of it. While the latter maintains that the dialectical tradition is too negative, Adorno protests that it is not negative enough. This fundamental tension between the two

¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.

thinkers creates an opening to consider new political possibilities unencumbered by the privileging of one approach at the exclusion of the other.

Statement of the Problem

Overview of Critical Theory and Adorno's Negative Dialectics

The Frankfurt School was an interdisciplinary network of German intellectuals that formed in affiliation with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in the early 1920's. It is most commonly associated with the term 'Critical Theory'. It is difficult to summarize the views of the Frankfurt School without glossing the substantial (but often fruitful) disagreements that emerged from its broad spectrum of theoretical and political positions. Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions were critically mined for alternative ways of thinking and being that were not rooted in the assumptions of scientific positivism or the false desires generated by the mass media. Several members, including Adorno, were meticulously conscientious about the role of idealist thought in critical theory. Despite these differences, most Frankfurt School theorists shared a concern regarding the totalizing tendencies specific to twentieth century capitalist societies. The unprecedented assimilative powers of modern capitalist modes of production and consumption required a rethinking of the concept of critique that could resist unwitting collaboration with the forces it was meant to interrogate. Cultural critique would have to involve an unceasing critique of itself to ensure that it did not succumb to the reifying processes that had pervaded the economic, social and intellectual realms. Critical theory, according to Frankfurt member Max Horkheimer, must be inseparable from the metacritical work of becoming "self-aware".²

² Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory." In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell and others. New York: Continuum, 1968.

For Adorno, this form of reflexive critique necessitated the cultivation of a “consistent sense of non-identity”,³ which he termed ‘negative dialectics’. Although traditional dialectics is already based on the negative work of contradiction, Adorno denied any tautology in his nomenclature. Negative dialectics presented a necessary corrective to the unchallenged cultural injunction to affirm the given. According to Adorno, this compulsive positivity had penetrated all spheres of life, from seemingly non-controversial leisure time activities (gift giving, reading astrology columns in the newspaper, mounting the steps of a train) to scientific positivism and the philosophical works of Kant and Hegel. Because nothing in society is immune to the capitalist forces of conformism, Adorno claimed that negative dialectics would necessarily be nothing less than “the ruthless criticism of all that exists.”⁴ Negative dialectics must maintain a fidelity to the non-identity of concept and object.

Because Adorno believed that any critique of society must necessarily involve a critique of knowledge, much of his philosophical work was a response to the prevailing philosophy of German Idealism. Nowhere were the consequences of idealism more obvious for Adorno than in the alienation of the individual in modern society and the widespread conviction that the reified relations between individuals and society was a form of freedom. Adorno’s heterodox reading of the German Idealists was shaped by his rejection of any thought or practice that he interpreted as equating truth with the Whole, based on the identity of subject (concept) and object. He argued that philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger, prevented the emergence of critical consciousness because they prioritized identity over difference, and

³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

⁴ Adorno, *Lectures in Negative Dialectics*, 13.

neglected the transformative power of objects in their concrete particularity.⁵ Philosophies which were grounded in the primacy of the subject would always be guilty of this, Adorno argued, because of the domination inherent in any one-sided account of the subject/object relation.

Hegel was particularly problematic for Adorno. His interpretation of Hegel's proclamation that the real is the rational presented intolerable implications. The 'false positivity' achieved through the negation of negation robs dialectics of its critical potential. If the totality is rational to the core, and meaning is only possible through the identity of thought and reality, as Adorno interprets Hegel, then concepts and objects that fail to coincide with this seamless integration are dismissed as irrational and ridiculous - if they are even noticed. The particular is banished by the general, resulting in a conflation of fact and value that obscures the irreconcilable contradictions that actually constitute society. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the Enlightenment rationality which emerged from the need to critique the irrational and controlling nature of myth has lapsed into the very totalitarianism it set out to abolish. The archaic barbarism associated with myth has returned in the forms of anti-Semitism, the mass media/culture industry, and identitarian ideology. For instance, the enlightenment ideal of equality and freedom is falsely realized through the reduction of the heterogeneous individual to the abstract equivalency of exchange. Under these conditions, freedom is the ability to participate more fully in the dominating structures of exchange society.

⁵ Adorno departed from traditional Marxism as well. He rejected the proletariat as a collective revolutionary subject and posited the primacy of the exchange principle over forces of production as determinative of the social realm. His deep pessimism towards practice further distanced him from Marxist tradition(s), including Lukács to whom he was heavily indebted for his concept of reification and analysis of the antinomies of bourgeois thought. Adorno could not support Lukács' theory of the proletariat as the subject-object of history.

The possibility of critique that is negative dialectics emerges from these kinds of contradictions that display the untruth of identity.

Adorno is perhaps most famously known for his critique of the “culture industry”, a term coined by Adorno and Horkheimer in their collaborative work *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The culture industry refers to the mass production and consumption of cultural products that have been standardized by the exchange principle to meet manufactured needs. Amusement and pleasure are not offered as “flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.”⁶ The mass deception of pop culture reduces the critic’s discourse to likes and dislikes, masking the culture industry’s identitarian logic of assuring people that they know what they like and hiding the fact that they only like what they know. This fetishization of positivity causes social relations of production to appear as immutable laws of nature rather than products of material man-made conditions unique to contemporary capitalism. According to Adorno, this process of reification is specific to advanced forms of capitalism in which the abstract logic of exchange reduces qualitative differences to quantitative values. The pervasive structures of exchange only affirm what is useful to the reproduction of society. Any experience that easily conforms to existing social practices and signification is suspect because of its affirmative status in a society that only affirms what is ultimately fungible. “We have to ask *what* has to be or has not to be affirmed, instead of elevating the word ‘Yes’ to a value in itself, as was unfortunately done by Nietzsche with the entire pathos of saying yes to life.”⁷

⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 144.

⁷ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 18.

Overview of Massumi's Concept of Affect

Massumi's theory of affect was developed in response to the limitations of cultural theory in addressing contemporary forms of capitalism.⁸ Although there are differences between contemporary neoliberal capitalism and the post-World War II Keynesian form of capitalism that neoliberals claim to oppose, both Massumi and Adorno share a concern about the assimilating powers of advanced capitalism. While Adorno focused on the totalizing dynamics of mass media and the culture industry, Massumi analyzes the affective dimension of experience that he identifies as the primary target of neoliberal commodification. It is important to note that Massumi's understanding of neoliberalism is derived primarily from Foucault's analysis of American neoliberalism. In Foucault's account, a shift has occurred from the domination of exchange relations (which Adorno saw as the main cause of conformism) to the principle of competition. Under the latter, workers understand themselves as entrepreneurs rather than passive consumers, choosing to invest in themselves as human capital.⁹ The market becomes the ethos of human activity, blurring the line between citizen and entrepreneur; as a result, the boundary between state and economy is ambiguous and perpetually shifting. Under these conditions, freedom is ultimately redefined as entrepreneurial freedom.

The aspects of neoliberal governmentality that are significant for Massumi's theory of affect concern the active production of subjectivity through perpetual differentiation. The

⁸ Massumi has been criticized for neglecting the range of differences within poststructuralist theory and for exaggerating the shortcomings of poststructuralist discourse in order to bolster his own argument (equating signification/subjectivity with death and ontology of affect with life). These are valid criticisms. However, Massumi's theory of affect highlights a dimension of experience and culture that is particularly relevant to neoliberal subjectivity.

⁹ "...in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings." (Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 226).

entrepreneurial self that emerges through the logic of competition must, by definition, possess the self-management skills and capacity for innovation that are not typically associated with the subject that passively consumes and conforms. In a neoliberal context, the production of different identities and social relations promote the individual's economic interests and autonomy. In this sense, power is more intense than the standardization of the exchange principle because it saturates the social field in order to multiply differences and intensify interests, creating an ongoing supply of surplus value.

In theorizing affect, Massumi claims to counter neoliberal power on its own terrain. Affect is an open-ended field of differential potentialities from which reality as we know it actualizes. It is virtual in nature, a multiplicity of imperceptible tendencies always in movement and in the process of becoming. These traits are also what characterize neoliberal capitalist processes: the production of difference and the capacity for ongoing change, as evidenced by capitalism's ability to re-emerge continually from crises (of its own invention) in myriad forms that remain true to the capitalist relation. The difference between the productive potential of affect and the compulsion to produce in neoliberal society, is the difference in nature of affect as a virtual state and its actualization. This is not a difference of degree; the imperceptibility of affect does not become more real when it crosses the threshold to conscious perception. It becomes *useful*. The generative capacity that emerges from affect is not only activated in the service of capitalism, it actually fuels it. Affect is immanent to capitalism, so capitalism is "immanent to the field of life."¹⁰

According to Massumi, there are always potentialities in the zone of indetermination between the virtual and actual that escape capture and emerge as self-affirming movements

¹⁰ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 109.

(useless to capitalist processes). For instance, they could actualize as barely perceptible ephemeral phenomena or as major events such as the Occupy Movement which famously did not conform to traditional forms of activism. Theorizing resistance in terms of affect meets neoliberalism on its own terrain by “acting directly in the register of affect”,¹¹ not in the activity of ideology critique which relies solely on epistemological models which are inherently limited. In Massumi’s view, epistemological critiques analyze capitalism in terms of power structures instead of affective processes, and since ideology is an expression of power structures, it is twice removed from the true conditions of capitalism. As virtual potentiality, affect is affirmative by nature, so acting directly in the register of affect requires the identification and affirmation of the affective tendencies that escape signification. The negation of critique is unable to recognize this form of affirmation as anything other than a form of domination.

This marks a significant departure from Adorno’s negative dialectics. For Massumi, freedom is the experiential augmentation of the excess that remains after capitalist capture. As such, it must be enacted and performed, not critiqued. Adorno claims that freedom can only be described in negative terms by revealing the constitutive contradictions of society (the non-identity of concept and object). Under the current conditions of society, positive articulations of freedom will always coincide with identitarian thinking. The fetishization of the positive that is at the heart of Adorno’s critique is even more powerful in contemporary neoliberal society with its drive to create and produce human capital. Massumi’s response to this argument is that simply knowing how we are unfree is not the same as becoming free.

¹¹ Massumi, *Principles of Unrest*, 19.

Argument

This dissertation will explore new discussions stimulated by the fundamental disagreement between Adorno's concept of non-identity and Massumi's claims regarding the emancipatory potential of affect. I will argue that affect can only live up to this promise if it is grounded in the sense of dialectical non-identity that will prevent its affirmative tendency from perpetuating the very neoliberal relations that would domesticate it. I am arguing, in other words, against the autonomy of affect. Massumi's most significant contribution to cultural theory is the introduction of affect as a uniquely powerful force in the structuring of experience and its distinct correspondence with neoliberal processes. But while Massumi insists that the power of affect as a liberating force depends on its ontological autonomy from the signifying and subject-producing structures of neoliberalism, I aim to demonstrate how affect is powerful to the extent that it *is* a product of those material and social conditions, in much the same way that dialectical negativity is a product of the material and social conditions but has the potential to experience that relation reflexively. Affect is one form of this experience. The non-identity of subject and object can be known affectively, that is, through negative affects.

I will examine how Adorno relies on the workings of affect more than has been traditionally acknowledged. For Adorno, the negative affect of non-identity is more accessible in the aesthetic realm, where dissonance is experienced in a way that can invoke critical capacities that are mostly shut down in the social and political realms. In a society driven by identity, dissonance is painful because it reveals the untruth of the harmonious whole. Therefore, it is in the aesthetic realm that the value of affect as a potential critical force is most prominent. An artwork is 'true' if it provokes the sense of non-identity that is central to Adorno's negative dialectics. However, the negative affects that emerge from the experience of

dissonance are always mediated through the dialectical relation. Contrary to Massumi's theory of affect, there is no such thing as immediate experience, even in the aesthetic realm. Art has the potential to express the contradictions of antagonistic society while maintaining a *degree* of autonomy from the exchange principle, but as a social product of material conditions it is not invulnerable to reifying forces.

What I am proposing is something less than the robust ontology of autonomous affect that Massumi locates outside of social production, but more than the cognitive activity of negative critique. It is based on the *sense* of non-identity that emerges from the bodily suffering of dissonance in all its forms and its counterpart in dialectical interpretation. This involves a deep engagement with affect on the same micrological level that Adorno analyzes cultural phenomena. To this end, Massumi has laid invaluable groundwork, particularly in relation to the neoliberal interpellation of the subject as enterprise. The space between affect and critique that emerges from an encounter between Massumi and Adorno offers a potentially new terrain of resistance to the neoliberal landscape.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative strategy of reading concepts together from two traditions in Western continental philosophy: Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, specifically Theodore W. Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics, and Massumi's Affect Theory as it has developed through the Deleuzian tradition. My methodology also includes a reconstructive reading of Massumi's works by examining the revolutionary potential for affect in the context of negative dialectics. This work draws on the texts of other philosophers who were influential to Adorno and Massumi in developing their concepts such as Kant, Hegel, Deleuze and Bergson.

Contribution to the Field

This dissertation aims to contribute to the growing field of affect theory as it relates to cultural theory. It further develops the scholarship on Adorno that focuses on his relevance for the contemporary dilemmas of neoliberalism. Specifically, it explores the implications for Adorno's philosophy separately from the 'normative turn' taken in critical theory by second generation Frankfurt School members such as Habermas.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter one provides an introduction to the problems posed by affect theory and critical theory. A brief summary of the argument will follow. Reading Massumi through Adorno's dialectical concept of non-identity can provide a critical edge to affect that is missing in Massumi's theory. Reading Adorno through Massumi develops the role of affect in negative dialectics, particularly in Adorno's aesthetic theory. The chapter will include a brief description of each chapter and will identify the contribution to relevant fields.

Chapter Two: Adorno: Negative Dialectics

This chapter begins with an overview of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School as a form of critique that is self-aware. Adorno's version of this is negative dialectics, specifically the concept of dialectical non-identity and critique that resists all forms of reconciliation. To understand the significance of negative dialectics I will examine Adorno's critique of German Idealism and scientific positivism and how these theories informed much of his philosophical work. I will also discuss Adorno's critique of capitalism, identify his divergence from orthodox Marxism, and the strong influence that Lukács' theory of reified consciousness had on Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the 'culture industry'.

Adorno's account of experience as mediated and interpretive is explained through his restructuring of the relation between subject and object. The chapter ends with an extensive examination of Adorno's aesthetic theory and its implications for theory and praxis of the principle of non-identity.

Chapter Three: Overview of Affect Theory

Chapter three provides a genealogy of affect theory as it has developed in the Deleuze/Massumi tradition, starting with Spinoza's definition of affect as "the capacity to affect and be affected". A summary is provided of Hume's explanation of empiricism and how this supports his conclusion that only affect can influence affect. This is followed by Bergson's account of the relation between memory and perception and his definition of affect as the zone of indetermination between stimulus and response. Nietzsche's concept of active and reactive forces and Deleuze's reading of the Eternal Return is presented to highlight the significance of affirmation for affect theory. I will review the relevant aspects of Deleuze, from whom Massumi draws much of his work. This will include a brief explanation of concepts of the actual and virtual, as well as Deleuze and Guatarri's analysis of capitalism as process versus structure.

Since neoliberalism is the specific form of capitalism to which Massumi directs his attention, a brief overview is provided of Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism. I fill out this picture of neoliberalism with a few comments from David Harvey's book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, which explains neoliberalism in terms of a project for the restoration of class power.

The second half of chapter three discusses Massumi's theory of affect and closely examines his argument for its emancipatory potential. His groundbreaking article, "The Autonomy of Affect" is summarized, stressing the definitive aspects of affect as ontological,

non-intentional, and its crucial difference from emotion. I will comment on Massumi's current projects of putting his theory of affect into practice through the SenseLab, marking a significant difference from Adorno's distrust of praxis. The final section focuses on Massumi's theory of "affective politics" and considers some of the difficult questions posed by critics of affect theory.

Chapter Four: Main Argument

Chapter four explores the possibilities of resistance to neoliberalism that emerge from the encounter of Massumi and Adorno. It presents supporting arguments for the claim that reading Massumi through Adorno provides affect with the critical tools it needs to fulfill its emancipatory promise and that reading Adorno through Massumi reveals Adorno's implicit reliance on negative affect. This lays the foundation for the exploration of a third view between affect and critique and its implication for theory and praxis.

The first part of this chapter turns to a discussion of Adorno's restructuring of the subject-object relation through the concept of non-identity. Central to this discussion is the account of subjectivity grounded in the dialectical primacy of the object. This will include Adorno's critique of Kant and Hegel where he confronts the main problem of identitarian thinking. The dialectical primacy of the object is what needs to be worked into any theory of affect that makes claims of political emancipation.

The second part of this chapter focuses on Adorno's aesthetic theory of dissonance that is inseparable from negative dialectics and offers a more concrete realm in which to explore the implications of negative critique. Adorno's discussion of art invites an exploration of the role of affect in his philosophy that is often understated. I will draw out the implicit reliance on affect in Adorno's aesthetic theory and how this serves to strengthen his argument for the necessity of critique, including affective critique.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This final chapter provides a summary of the arguments presented throughout the dissertation. It identifies possible areas for further research in both critical theory and affect theory, and gives attention to critics' responses to both. Questions of theory and praxis are also explored from the possibility of a third view between affect and critique.

Bibliographic Method

My literature review was completed through accessing databases in J. Taylor and Penrose Library and reviewing bibliographies in relevant articles and books. My foreign language exam for German and comprehensive exams in Cultural Theory and Philosophy also aided in my preparation for this work.

Research on affect theory included following the activities, events, and writings on the SenseLab website (senselab.ca) created by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning. I have also googled YouTube videos of their dialogues at conferences and informal workshop settings.

Online resource and digital libraries included: Iliff/DU Library collections “Compass – Search All” tab, Philosopher’s Index, PhilPapers.org, WorldCat, Prospector, and Google Scholar. I found Academic Search Complete/Ebscohost and JSTOR (DU collection for both) particularly helpful. The ProQuest Central categories of ‘Conference Papers and Proceedings’ and ‘Dissertations & Theses’ was searched for dissertations/papers on topics related to this dissertation. In reading articles from scholarly journals and bibliographies in relevant books I was able to identify articles in German that have not been translated into English.

Combinations of keywords and subject titles in my database research included the names of philosophers and scholars referenced in this work. Search terms included the following: *critical theory, Frankfurt School, negative dialectics, dialectic, ontology, epistemology, non-identity (also ‘nonidentity’ in some databases), affect, affective turn, ontological turn, cultural theory, cultural criticism, aesthetic theory, dissonance, embodiment, experience, subjectivity, consciousness, virtual, actual, memory, perception, individuation.*

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