

Deborah Cook

ADORNO

on NATURE



ROUTLEDGE



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DEBORAH COOK

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2011 by Acumen

Published 2014 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN: 978-1-84465-255-6 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-84465-262-4 (paperback)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first four chapters of this book originated as pilot essays that were subsequently expanded and extensively revised. [Chapter 1](#) appeared under the title “Adorno’s Critical Materialism” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* **32**(6) (2006), 719–37. The pilot essay for [Chapter 2](#), “Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw”, was published in *Continental Philosophy Review* **40**(1) (March 2007), 49–72. A shorter version of [Chapter 3](#), “Thought Thinking Itself”, appeared in the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* **38**(3) (2007), 229–47. “Adorno’s Endgame”, on which [Chapter 4](#) is based, was published in *Philosophy Today* **52**(2) (2008), 173–87. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of these essays for their critical commentary.

Parts of *Adorno on Nature* were presented at York University in Toronto, the Academy of Sciences in Prague, Princeton University, Dartmouth College and the Rome campus of Loyola University. A year after reading a very early version of [Chapter 1](#) at the University of Liverpool in 2005, I delivered a revised version of this chapter at Warwick University. I learned much from participants at these two seminars and would like to thank Gerard Delanty and Ralf Rogowski for their kind invitations. I received equally insightful comments on earlier versions of the manuscript from Alison Stone (Lancaster University), John Abromeit (State University of New York at Buffalo), Michael Palamarek (York University), Eric Nelson (University of Massachusetts at Lowell), and Samir Gandesha (Simon Fraser University). I would like to extend my gratitude to Alison, John, Michael, Eric and Samir for their critical support.

My colleague Jeffrey Noonan read versions of most of the chapters and obliged me to think more critically about Adorno’s views on political praxis. I continue to defend these views but, by opposing them, Jeffrey prompted me to find better arguments in their defence. Two of my students, Jeffrey Renaud and Michael Walschots, deserve special mention for their comments on the manuscript at various stages of its development. In the face of the setbacks, extensive revisions and surprising metamorphoses that accompanied the writing of this book, Jeffrey and Michael’s unwavering enthusiasm was a constant source of encouragement.

A Humanities Research Group Fellowship at the University of Windsor allowed me to work uninterrupted on the last chapter of this book during the winter semester of 2009. Affording me the irreplaceable luxury of time for reflection, the fellowship also gave me the opportunity to present to students, professors and the wider public a distillation of some of the central ideas in this book. The lively discussion that followed my presentation only confirmed my view that Adorno remains relevant for understanding our current predicament. Finally, a sabbatical leave made it possible for me to bring *Adorno on Nature* to completion.

I dedicate this book to my former thesis supervisor, the Adorno scholar and editor at 10/18, Olivier Revault d’Allonnes. An unrepentant *soixante-huitard*, he spoke out courageously against oppression and exploitation, while actively supporting those who work for social change. May his example survive him in the environmental movement and beyond.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AT* *Aesthetic Theory* (1997).
- DE* *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (tr. Cummings, 1972)/*Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (tr. Jephcott, 2002).
- HF* *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965* (2006).
- KCPR* Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" (2001).
- MCP* *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (2001).
- MM* *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1974).
- MTP* "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" (1998).
- ND* *Negative Dialectics* (1973).
- P* "Progress" (1998).
- PMP* *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (2000).
- PT2* *Philosophische Terminologie zur Einleitung* [Introduction to philosophical terminology], vol. 2 (1974).
- RCT* "Reflections on Class Theory" (2003).
- SO* "On Subject and Object" (1998).

[I]t would be up to thought to see all nature, and whatever would install itself as such, as history, and all history as nature.

Theodor W. Adorno (*ND* 359)

Decades before the environmental movement emerged in the 1960s, Theodor W. Adorno criticized our destructive and self-destructive relation to nature with the ultimate aim of reshaping that relationship in more mutually beneficial ways. His criticisms originally appeared in a 1932 essay, “The Idea of Natural-History”, where he advanced the project of showing that human history is always also natural history and that non-human nature is entwined with history. This project informs all Adorno’s work, including *Negative Dialectics* and the unfinished, posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*.¹ The idea of natural history provides the template for interpretive practice in philosophy: philosophic interpretation “means reading nature from history and history from nature” (*HF* 134). Philosophy is tasked with demonstrating that human history is linked inextricably to both our own internal, instinctual, nature and non-human nature. But philosophy also shows that nature is historical, not just because nature evolves and constantly changes, but because it has been profoundly – often negatively – affected by human history. Adorno’s idea of natural history reveals the dynamic, and potentially catastrophic, interaction between nature and history.

When philosophy reads nature from history, the idea of natural history becomes “the canon of interpretation for philosophers of history” (*ND* 359; see also *HF* 125).² Adorno also made this point in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where he and his co-author, Max Horkheimer, denied that the history of our species could be traced in the development of concepts like freedom and justice. Instead, a serious history of the human race would reveal that all our “ideas, prohibitions, religions, and political creeds” are tied to conditions that serve either to increase or decrease “the natural survival prospects of the human species on the earth or within the universe” (*DE* C:222–3, J:184–5).³ For millennia, we have sought to dominate nature – to predict, control, manipulate and exploit it – in order to improve these prospects. Our history can be interpreted as natural history because its trajectory can be traced in the vicissitudes of our instinctually driven domination of nature. Human history “remains under the spell of blind nature” in the form of the unbridled instinct for self-preservation (*HF* 124).

Conversely, when history is read from nature, nature “appears as a sign for history” (2006b: 264). Nature’s historical character is evident in the growth, maturation and decline of natural things, but history also leaves its mark on nature when we treat natural things instrumentally and reduce them to their exchange value in the capitalist marketplace. Exchange relations damage human beings as well by expunging differences between them in order to make “nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical” (*ND* 146). This damage has only been exacerbated by the forced renunciation of our internal nature in the form of needs and drives. On this point, Adorno largely agrees with Sigmund Freud: our history can be read in the increasingly aggressive behaviour

to which civilization gives rise when it demands that we constantly “exercise rational control over ourselves and over external nature”. More critical than Freud, however, Adorno goes on to observe that “the balance sheet which forms the foundation of this entire calculus of the renunciation of instinct and the domination of nature can never be presented because if it were presented, the irrational aspect of that rationality would become inescapably visible” (*PMP* 139).

A thoroughly “critical concept” (*HF* 116), the idea of natural history makes visible the damage that has been inflicted on both human and nonhuman nature by our compulsive attempts to dominate nature to satisfy survival imperatives. To shed greater light on this concept, [Chapter 1](#) opens with a discussion of Adorno’s thesis concerning the preponderance of the object. This thesis postulates the primacy of both internal and external nature in human life, while emphasizing at the same time the preponderance of society, in the guise of exchange value, over individuals. In fact, the idea of natural history complements Adorno’s thesis about the “weightiness” of the objective world because it affirms the preponderance of “first” and “second” nature over individuals as it explores their unending entwinement (*ND* 358).

The preponderant objective world is not a mere reflection of mind or spirit. Instead, nature and history are resoundingly real; they are powerful material forces. [Chapter 1](#) also describes the central features of Adorno’s materialism, taking its point of departure from Brian O’Connor who compares John Searle’s account of the non-dualistic and non-reductive relation between the brain and consciousness to Adorno’s account of the relation between subject and object. However, I also take issue with O’Connor when I argue that Adorno grounds this epistemological relation in his idea of natural history. Adopting Karl Marx’s ideas about the metabolism between our species and nonhuman nature, Adorno speculates that human consciousness first emerged in the struggle for survival. His account of the emergence of consciousness helps to explain why the affinity between nature and history authorizes neither the reduction of nature to history nor the reduction of human history to nature. In fact, [Chapter 1](#) ends with the claim – developed in subsequent chapters – that Adorno’s non-reductive and non-dualistic idea of natural history may help to solve Kant’s antinomy of causality and freedom.

[Chapter 2](#) explores some of the implications of the preponderance of the objective world for our knowledge of nature. On the one hand, we can apprehend natural things only because we have an affinity with them as thingly creatures ourselves. Even the concepts we use to understand nature derive their meaning from our material encounters with it. On the other hand, Adorno agrees with Kant that there is an obstacle or block to knowledge. Nature cannot be known as it is in itself; it can never be grasped fully in concepts. Yet [Chapter 2](#) will argue that our knowledge of nature is problematic, not simply because it involves conceptual mediation, but because we have taken an adversarial stance towards nature as a fearsome Other that threatens our prospects for survival. This antagonistic relation to nature manifests itself in our subordination of natural things under abstract concepts and exchange relations. Since we have masked nature’s diversity and thwarted its internal development, I also ask what “nature” might signify when I assess two attempts to make sense of this concept.

If preponderant external nature always lies beyond our conceptual grasp, preponderant internal nature eludes our attempts to repress it. Today, the renunciation of instinct issues in blind aggression towards everything deemed merely natural. By no means an orthodox Freudian, Adorno nonetheless endorses Freud’s theory of instincts, agreeing that instincts have both somatic and psychological components. In keeping with his idea of natural history, however, Adorno adds that instincts are thoroughly historical because they are invariably shaped by prevailing socioeconomic conditions.

Discussing Adorno's appropriation of Freud's instinct theory in the second section of [Chapter 2](#), I also review Joel Whitebook's claim that Adorno follows Freud's injunction to displace the ego with respect to the id to promote greater autonomy. Where Whitebook thinks that Adorno needs (and surreptitiously uses) a concept of sublimation to achieve this goal, Adorno contends that individuals should become more fully conscious of themselves as embodied and instinctual creatures. Critical self-reflection – reflection on nature in the self – is the hallmark of a more enlightened form of reason and the harbinger of freedom.

According to Adorno, the entire programme of Western philosophy has consisted in thinking about thought. [Chapter 3](#) explains how Adorno tries to advance this programme with his critique of the prevailing form of thought: identity thinking. Shaped by socioeconomic conditions and driven by survival instincts, identity thinking reinforces domination in conceptual form when it compulsively identifies particular things with universal concepts. [Chapter 3](#) begins with a brief account of the historical trajectory of Western reason as an organ of adaptation to the natural world, placing special emphasis on the development of its subsumptive, identitarian employment of concepts. Since modern science wields concepts and mathematical formulae in a similar fashion, [Chapter 3](#) includes a discussion of Adorno's critique of science and the concept of causality, rehearsing his objections to the reduction of reason to quantification and calculation.

Following this account of Western reason and modern science, [Chapter 3](#) explores Adorno's alternative cognitive paradigm: non-identity thinking. Here I examine J. M. Bernstein's important gloss on this paradigm while offering a more dialectical reading of it. In contrast to identity thinking which ignores the particularity of natural things when it substitutes unity for diversity, identity for difference, non-identity thinking deploys concepts to break through concepts with the aim of apprehending non-conceptual particulars, even as it acknowledges the lack of identity between universal and particular. Bernstein is certainly right to say that non-identity thinking tries to circumvent the abstract universality of concepts by turning back to the material particulars that spawn concepts. However, non-identity thinking also has a speculative, proleptic dimension that is reached by means of determinate negation. Adorno calls determinate negation a methodological principle (2008: 28),⁴ which, by negating the damage we inflict on nature, offers an indirect glimpse of undamaged life. Deployed in a constellation of concepts, the emphatic ideas derived from determinate negation point to less instrumental and exploitative relationships with nature in a freer and more rational society.

[Chapter 4](#) focuses on the preponderance of society over individuals. It begins by remarking on the isomorphism between identity thinking and exchange relations. Just as identity thinking treats natural things (including human beings) as mere instances of more general kinds with a view to manipulating and controlling them, exchange relations serve survival imperatives when they turn individual people and things into commensurable units of value. Both identity thinking and exchange relate "all phenomena, everything we encounter, to a unified reference point" when they subsume individuals, people and things "under a self-identical, rigid unity, and thereby remove them from their dynamic context" (*KCP* 114, trans. mod.). Indeed, Adorno claims that identity thinking and exchange relations are isomorphic because thought mirrors the prevailing mode of exchange in a given society.

[Chapter 4](#) also examines Adorno's critique of the process of individuation under the monopolistic conditions that characterize late capitalism. On Adorno's admittedly bleak view, since late capitalist society obliges us to focus exclusively on our own individual survival, it arrests individuation and places nature as a whole in jeopardy. Like Samuel Beckett in *Endgame*, Adorno foresaw the catastrophic annihilation of all life on this planet when he warned that society's "principle of

particular private interest” might well lead to “the death of all” (*ND* 298). At the same time, Adorno explored the prospects for transforming socioeconomic conditions with the aim of avoiding that fate. Highly critical of existing forms of collective action, he claimed that those individuals who have developed their capacity for self-reflection can play an important role in initiating the transformation needed to avert catastrophe because they are able to look critically at the conditions that shape their own thought and behaviour. Critics of our current predicament have the task of analysing the obstacles to social solidarity and the emergence of a global subject, using determinate negation to generate new ideas about solidarity, exchange relations, self-preservation and freedom.

In contrast to the first four chapters, which outline Adorno’s philosophy of nature, the fifth chapter compares and contrasts his ideas with those of three prominent representatives of radical ecology: Arne Naess, Murray Bookchin, and Carolyn Merchant. Like Adorno, these ecologists stress the urgent need to alter our interaction with nature in ways that will benefit both non-human nature and ourselves. Insisting that we become conscious of nature in ourselves, they also echo Adorno when they denounce the current emphasis under capitalism on economic growth for its own sake while advocating substantive changes in society and championing new forms of ecological sustainability that give due weight to both the flourishing of the natural world and the satisfaction of human needs.

Adorno also speaks to issues in environmental philosophy such as anthropomorphism, the intrinsic value of nature, speciesism, the origin of our domination of nature, the idea of “good” nature, the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women, and the emancipatory potential of technology. However, one of the more important points to emerge from this comparison between Adorno and radical ecology concerns the efficacy of collective action today. If radical ecology is to improve our prospects for survival on this planet, the tendencies and trends that often make environmental activism ineffective must be better understood. To bring about the changes that radical ecologists rightly insist are needed, we must first acquire a better understanding of the natural and historical forces that now undermine all types of activism. Since Adorno devoted a great deal of his theoretical and empirical work to studying the impediments to effective praxis under monopoly conditions, [Chapter 5](#) argues that he has much to contribute to the environmental movement.

Another, related, point emerges from this comparative study: radical ecologists are grappling with the perennial philosophical problem of unity in diversity. This problem should concern environmental activists to the extent that activism itself presupposes the unity – in the form of solidarity – of diverse individuals, but it affects our relation to non-human nature as well. Among the pressing questions that Adorno raises are: how can solidarity be achieved such that individuals with divergent viewpoints and concerns can work together effectively to bring about the changes necessary to ensure our survival? And, how might we relate to non-human nature so that it can thrive in all its remarkable diversity? I do not pretend that Adorno definitively answered these questions, but I do claim that they are among the more vexing and important issues he addressed. Radical ecology, and the environmental movement generally, can learn from Adorno’s concerted attempts to find new ways to articulate the relationship between unity and diversity, the One and the Many.

CRITICAL MATERIALISM

Adorno's work has been variously described as Nietzschean, Weberian, Hegelian, idealist, Marxist, and materialist.¹ With equal frequency, commentators have excluded Adorno from one or the other of these camps. So, for example, Stephen Bronner argues that Adorno's work has nothing to do with materialism "unless that concept is configured in the most abstract terms" (1996: 186–7). Some Italian Marxists were even more critical than Bronner, excoriating Adorno as a romantic idealist. This is certainly true of Lucio Colletti, who, as Perry Anderson observes, soundly denounced Adorno (and others as well) for his allegedly Hegelian rejection of materialism (1976: 70). This charge reappears in a different form in Sebastiano Timpanaro's influential *On Materialism* (1975). Among other things, Timpanaro objects that the Frankfurt School as a whole has an "antimaterialist, anti-Enlightenment, anti-jacobin orientation". All the school's theorists are pessimistic thinkers who "end up in, or at least tend towards, more or less explicitly religious positions" (*ibid.*: 19).

These barbed criticisms contradict Adorno's own description of his work as materialist in orientation. Although he would reject Timpanaro's claim that a materialist would never reduce experience to a "reciprocal implication of subject and object", Adorno advances a version of materialism that agrees in part with Timpanaro's view that materialism involves "above all an acknowledgement of the priority of nature over 'mind'" (*ibid.*: 34). Furthermore, both Timpanaro and Adorno acknowledge their debts to Marx. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno cites the same passage from the preface to *Capital* that Timpanaro endorses in his discussion of materialism. On Timpanaro's interpretation, this passage shows that the later Marx was a materialist because he gave priority to physical and biological nature. The passage reads:

My standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history [*als ein naturgeschichtlichen Prozeß*]², can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.

(Marx 1976a: 92; cited in part in Timpanaro 1975: 41)

Yet Adorno's gloss on this passage differs significantly from that of Timpanaro, who neglects to cite the second part of the sentence ("can less than any other ..."). Adorno not only cites the entire sentence, but also (albeit elliptically) the five sentences that precede it, and interprets Marx's reference to natural history as a reference to second – rather than to "first", or physical and biological – nature. To bolster this interpretation, Adorno cites a later passage from *Capital* where Marx declares that "the law of capitalist accumulation ... has been mystified into a law of nature" (*ND* 354).³ In fact, Adorno agrees with Marx: capitalism now appears in the guise of second nature because it seems to be governed by natural, immutable laws. Owing to this mystification, anything that might be deemed first nature has been masked or concealed. For bourgeois consciousness, "nothing appears to exist outside any more; in a certain sense there actually is nothing outside any more, nothing

unaffected by mediation, which is total". As a result, the distance between human history and nature only continues to grow (ND 357–8).

Adopting Marx's critique of capitalism as second nature, Adorno also shares his interest in exploring the role of first nature in human history. Here, too, his reading of Marx differs significantly from Timpanaro's. For Adorno would contest Timpanaro's claim that "Marxism, especially in its first phase (up to and including *The German Ideology*), is not materialism proper" because the early Marx believed that first nature constitutes "more a prehistorical antecedent to human history than a reality which still limits and conditions human beings" (Timpanaro 1975: 40–41, trans. mod.). Citing a passage from *The German Ideology*, Adorno declares that the early Marx emphasized the unending entwinement of nature and history "with an extremist vigor bound to irritate dogmatic materialists" (ND 358). According to Marx:

We know only a single science, the science of history. History can be conceived from two sides, divided into the history of nature and the history of humankind. Yet there is no separating the two sides; as long as human beings exist, natural and human history will qualify each other.

(Marx & Engels 1976: 28)

Adorno follows this quotation with the assertion that the traditional antithesis between nature and history is true in one respect and false in another. The antithesis is "true insofar as it expresses what happened to the natural element" – namely that first nature has been occluded to such a degree that what now appears to be natural is actually social in character. However, the antithesis is false to the extent that "it apologetically repeats the concealment of history's natural growth by history itself" (ND 358).

Since history has masked its own entwinement with nature, our understanding of ourselves is seriously flawed. Adorno wants to correct this flawed self-understanding by employing negative dialectics "to break through the fallacy [*Trug*] of constitutive subjectivity" (ND xx), or the illusory view (which takes different forms) that mind, or spirit, constitutes nature. In setting himself this task Adorno again follows Marx. For once Marx drew "the line between historical materialism and the popular metaphysical kind", historical materialism became "the critique of idealism in its entirety and of the reality for which idealism opts by distorting it" (ND 197). A critique of the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity would show that the mind is not primary. Indeed, on Adorno's reading, Hegel himself derived self-conscious mind from matter. Hypostatizing the mind, Hegel was nonetheless barely able to conceal the origin of the "I" in the "Not-I". Even for Hegel, mind (*Geist*) ultimately originates "in the real life process, in the law of the survival of the species, of providing it with nutrients" (ND 198). Moreover, these survival imperatives, which shape our relationships with organic and inorganic nature, are in turn embedded in, and shaped by, the capitalist mode of production with its instrumental and exploitative relation to nature.

These ideas will be explored here. [Chapter 1](#) begins by exploring Adorno's thesis about the primacy (*Vorrang*), or preponderance, of the object. This discussion of the preponderance of nature and society, of first and second nature, over individuals will provide the philosophical framework for understanding Adorno's idea of natural history. If, as Marx insists in *The German Ideology*, it is not possible to separate nature from history or history from nature, the following section of this chapter will show that the idea of natural history supplements Adorno's thesis about the preponderance of first and second nature over human life by emphasizing their dynamic interaction. After examining

Adorno's account of the imbrication of nature and history, the chapter will end by exploring the salient features of Adorno's materialism. Among other things, I shall argue that Adorno's unique version of materialism can accommodate his unwavering commitment to emancipation and freedom.

PASSAGE TO MATERIALISM

In a section of *Negative Dialectics* called "Passage to Materialism", Adorno asserts: "It is by passing to the object's preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic" (*ND* 192). Borrowing a phrase from Peter Strawson, Ståle Finke believes that Adorno's thesis about the preponderance of the object refers to "the weighty sense of an object of experience – and its extra-conceptual status" (2004: 12 n.17).⁴ Finke's interpretation is correct as far as it goes, but Adorno's thesis does not simply mean that objects are extra-conceptual. Specifically, objects are weighty owing to their materiality; the preponderance of the object implies that matter (*Stoff, Materie*) preponderates over mind. The preponderance can be grasped subjectively by reflecting on our experience (*ND* 185), but Adorno also complains that, when a thing becomes an object of cognition, "its physical side is spiritualized [*vergeistigt*] from the outset by translation into epistemology" (*ND* 192). Rejecting such spiritualization, Adorno wants to do justice to things by disclosing those aspects of them that are non-identical with concepts. These non-identical aspects "show up as matter, or as inseparably fused with material things" (*ND* 193).

Frustratingly, perhaps, Adorno never provides a full-blown account of matter. In his own defence, however, he contends that it is not possible to provide such an account because matter is always already mediated by mind, material objects by concepts. As he explains in his lectures on metaphysics, the "peculiarity of the concept of *ὕλη*, or matter, is that we are here using a concept ... which, by its meaning, refers to something which is not a concept or a principle". Warning against hypostatizing the concepts that refer to matter, Adorno concedes that we invariably find ourselves captive "in the prison of language". Yet he also insists that we can at least "recognize it as a prison" (2001b: 67–8 *passim*). His thesis about the preponderance of the object elucidates this prison metaphor because it entails that material objects are distinct from, and not fully accessible to, the concepts (and practical activities) we use to apprehend them.

Adorno makes a related point when he criticizes Kant's concepts of form and content. The mediation of form by content and of content by form must be differently weighted because the form (concepts and categories) of thought are "essentially mediated by contents and cannot be conceived all in their absence", whereas the content always contains "a reference to something that is not fully coextensive with form and cannot be fully reduced to it" (*KCPR* 233).⁵ Accordingly, the object's preponderance further entails that concepts themselves are "infiltrated" with a material, or natural, element. Concepts not only refer to non-conceptual, material particulars (*ND* 11), but also emerge from historically situated and conditioned encounters with them. Concepts are "entwined with the nonconceptual whole" because what survives in them by dint of their meaning (*Bedeutung*) is the non-conceptual conveyance or transmission (*Vermitteltsein*) under specific historical conditions.⁶ In turn, this historically generated meaning "establishes the conceptuality of concepts", including the concept of nature. But, while concepts always require "nonconceptual, deictic elements", they often pass themselves off as constitutive of things. To counter the mistaken idea that concepts constitute objects, Adorno urges us to recognize "the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept". This recognition would have the salutary effect of stemming "the compulsive identification which the concept effects unless halted by such reflection" (*ND* 12).

On this point, however, it is important to avoid misunderstanding. For Adorno does recognize that nature will always be socially constructed (to use a contentious phrase, the corrective to which lies in Ian Hacking's [1999] question: the social construction of *what?*). Indeed, Adorno does not seek to forego mediation, as some critics, including Jürgen Habermas (1984: 382ff.), have mistakenly charged. What concerns Adorno is not the mere fact that nature is socially mediated, but rather the ways in which nature has historically been mediated. In his critique of the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity, Adorno objects to the prevailing form of conceptual mediation – the blind and compulsive subsumption of particular objects under universal concepts – because this identitarian use of concepts indicates only what nature “falls under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what accordingly, it is not itself” (ND 149).

The preponderance of the object also implies that the cognizing subject is itself a material object. It is not necessarily “part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject”, but it is part of the meaning of subjectivity to be an object. Concept formation presupposes material particulars, and there is a decidedly material, objective dimension to the subjects who wield concepts as well (ND 183). Experience involves the encounter of a corporeal subject with equally material, physical things. Indeed, experience would not be possible if the subject did not belong “*a priori* to the same sphere as the given thing” (ND 196). The cognizing subject can experience things only because it is not radically other than them. Another reason why Adorno rejects the “supremacy of thinking over its otherness” or the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity – is because mind is always “otherness already, within itself” (ND 201). As Adorno argues in “On Subject and Object”, “No matter how the subject is defined, the existent being [*Seiendes*] cannot be conjured away from it”. Objects are not “so thoroughly dependent upon subject as subject is dependent upon objectivity” (SO 249–50).⁷

By emphasizing the materiality of the subject and the material ground of its concepts, Adorno underscores the resemblance between subject and object. He elaborates on this idea of their fundamental resemblance or likeness between subject and object *qua* material, physical, when he remarks, in his discussion of the concept of causality, on the affinity (*Affinität*) between them (ND 270). Here he asserts that causality is “nothing but the natural growth [*Naturwüchsigkeit*] of individuals, which they continue as control of nature” (ND 269). Our use of this concept to apprehend the natural world makes manifest our own natural growth because it has been driven by instinct.⁸ A related point was made earlier: when we impose the concept of causality upon a material content, we are driven by a compulsion to identify objects with our causal conceptions of them. As [Chapter 3](#) will explain in more detail, our use of concepts such as causality reveals our own affinity with nature because it has been driven by survival imperatives (ND 234).

Bernstein contends that Adorno's idea of affinity “represents the indeterminate idea of our immersion in and being parts of nature”. He also notes that Adorno employs the word as though our affinity were at one and the same time already established and yet to be achieved. Adorno expresses himself in this way in order to “halt an identitarian employment of our relation to nature”, or to suggest that our affinity with nature has not yet been fully instantiated (2001: 291). Despite our *de facto* affinity with nature, we are largely unaware of this affinity because we have historically regarded ourselves as radically distinct from nature. We neither fully experience nor understand ourselves as natural – material, physical – because, among other things, we have not yet taken the full measure of the extent to which our behaviour and activity – both practical and theoretical – have been and continue to be, instinctually driven. We therefore fail to respect the heterogeneous character of nature, including our own.

It may appear contradictory to refer to the heterogeneous character of nature in the context

discussing our affinity with the natural world. But to acknowledge our affinity with nature by means implies that we are fully identical with it. “To be a mind at all”, Adorno argues, the thinking subject “must know that what it touches upon does not exhaust it, that the finiteness that is its limit does not exhaust it” (*ND* 392). Concepts too are heterogeneous with respect to objects. Emerging from our material encounters with non-conceptual things, concepts are subjective constructs rather than objective entities; abstract determinations, not concrete properties; universal, not particular. Abstract universality, which allows concepts to designate a class or category of non-conceptual particulars, is obviously a distinctive feature of concepts.

Although a particular thing is not “definable without the universal that identifies it”, it cannot be subsumed without remainder under the universal. Adorno stresses this point when he remarks that the concept of particularity itself “cuts short what the particular is and what nonetheless cannot be directly named” (*ND* 173 *passim*). Owing to its universal character, this concept has “no power over the particular which [it] means in abstracting” (*ND* 174). In fact, the non-identity of concept and object could be described as the motor of Adorno’s entire philosophical enterprise: “dialectics says more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy” (*ND* 5).

Consequently, the affinity between subject and object, mind and nature, should not be posited as positive, that is, as though it authorized a foundational conception of nature, matter or the objective world (*ND* 270). Human beings are not wholly material, physical, because the human mind partially extricated itself from the material world in its attempts to dominate it: the mind’s partial disengagement from matter means that mind is no more reducible to matter than matter is reducible to mind. However, if consciousness has succeeded, to a limited extent, in dissociating itself from the material world, it nonetheless remains “a ramification of the energy of drives; it is part impulse itself and also a moment of that in which it intervenes” (*ND* 265). In the final section of this chapter, I shall take up these ideas about the emergence of consciousness again when I examine Adorno’s non-reductive and non-dualistic account of subject and object, mind and matter.

While nature continues to preponderate, we persist in thinking of ourselves as completely other than, and separate from, nature. This misconception has an ideological dimension. Through it, the subject “announces its claim to domination”, while “forgetting how much it is object itself” (*SO* 246). By contesting this ideologically freighted view of ourselves, Adorno’s thesis about the object’s preponderance is meant to serve as a stark reminder of the subject’s own embeddedness in nature. At the same time, however, the preponderance of the object entails more than the claim that nature preponderates over individuals because the objectivity that weighs upon individuals is not just natural but social and historical. Insisting on the preponderance of the material, natural world, Adorno also emphasizes the preponderance or weightiness of society – the “real objectivity of exchange” (*ND* 19) – over individuals.⁹

Adorno maintains that this twofold understanding of material objectivity has characterized materialism throughout its history. At the start of a lengthy discussion of the history of materialism he states that there are two types of materialism: a social type, which focuses on society and its preponderance over individuals, and a scientific one, which focuses on the preponderance of nature. These two versions of materialism converge in their opposition to the lie perpetrated by the mind when it repudiates its own natural growth (*PT2* 171–2). They effectively target the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity by locating “the origin of mind – even its most extreme sublimations – in material scarcity [*Lebensnot*]” (*PT2* 173). In fact, Adorno tries to accommodate both types of materialism in his work, adding that individuals generally ignore the ways in which these aspects

the objective world preponderate over their thought and behaviour.

Adorno thought that society's influence on our thought and behaviour had become so far-reaching that it could plausibly be described as totalitarian. Referring to society as the "universal", he stressed its virtually irresistible power over individuals. But other philosophers have acknowledged society's preponderance as well, albeit often implicitly. For example, Hegel called this totalitarian objectivity "world spirit", and even Kant recognized the preponderance of society with his idea of the transcendental subject. According to Adorno, the transcendental subject "faithfully discloses the precedence of the abstract, rational relations that are abstracted from individuals and their conditions and for which exchange is the model" (SO 248).¹⁰ Here again, Adorno followed Marx: society preponderates in the "law of value that comes into force without people being aware of it". Informing social institutions, agencies, relations and practices, the law of value is the "real objectivity" to which individuals must submit (ND 300301). Today, "the standard structure of society is the exchange form". The rationality that underlies exchange "constitutes people: what they are for themselves, what they think they are, is secondary" (SO 248).

In his account of the preponderance of exchange relations over individuals, Adorno maintains that the "real total movement of society" – in the form of economic forces and tendencies – has become independent of the individuals who created it and continue to sustain it. These forces and tendencies now operate over their "heads and through their heads", and are thus "antagonistic from the outside" (ND 304). Observing in his 1942 essay "Reflections on Class Theory" that Marx had predicted the emergence of monopoly capital, Adorno also remarks that the concentration of capital has "reached such a size, acquired such a critical mass" that capital now appears to be "an institution, an expression of society as a whole".¹¹ Today, the fetish character of commodities, which makes relations between people appear as relations between things, ends in the socially totalitarian appearance of capital (RC 99).

Late capitalist societies reduce individuals to "mere executors, mere partners in social wealth and social struggle" (ND 304). As so many instances of exchange value, individuals today "are not just character masks, agents of exchange in a supposedly separate economic sphere". For commodification and reification have become so widespread, affecting so many aspects of human life that, even when individuals "think they have escaped the primacy of economics – all the way into their psychology, the *maison tolérée* of uncomprehended individuality – they react under the compulsion of the universal" (ND 311). Earlier, in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno remarked that life can reproduce itself under existing relations of production only when "the metamorphosis of labour-power into a commodity has permeated individuals through and through and objectified each of their impulses as formal, commensurable variations of the exchange relationship" (MM 229).¹²

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno asserts (with no little irony) that exchange relations have become the measure of all things (AT 310). The fetish character of commodities casts such a powerful spell over individuals that exchange relations now appear to be both immutable and necessary (ND 346). On Adorno's view, Hegel endorsed a similarly mystifying idea of society in the *Philosophy of Right* when he proposed that a state's constitution be depicted, not as the product of human history, but as something "divine and enduring and above the sphere of that which is produced". By making the historical appear to be natural, Hegel "absolutized domination and projected it on to Being itself, which is said to be spirit". As a result, history "acquires the quality of the unhistoric" (ND 356–7). It is to this idea of human history as second nature that I shall now turn in order to contrast it with Adorno's idea of natural history.

The objective world is both social and natural. Today, however, it is the social world – governed by exchange relations under the monopoly conditions characteristic of late capitalism – that appears to be natural. To return to Adorno’s interpretation of the preface to the first volume of *Capital*, the so-called law of nature in Marx is the law that governs capitalist society (ND 354). Adopting Marx’s idea that society’s law of motion now appears as second nature, Adorno also observes that this second nature “is the negation of any nature that might be conceived as the first” (ND 357). In an illuminating gloss on this observation, Alison Stone states that the natural appearance of social relations “suggests individuals ... that ‘first’ nature, the material environment, gives rise to social relations (‘second nature’), and that first nature must prefigure second in character” (2006: 238). Since social relations appear to be natural, individuals experience nature “as intrinsically prefiguring, and so referring to particular social institutions and processes” (*ibid.*: 239).¹³

On the one hand, then, the social world seems to have evolved naturally. As a result, social relations appear to be inalterable. But, of course, this semblance of static immutability is illusory, false. Like Marx, Adorno believes that the ostensibly natural laws of capitalism are ultimately revocable; for it is “only in a sardonic sense that the natural growth of exchange society is a law of nature” (ND 190). That the laws governing capitalism are not immutable is “confirmed by the strongest motive behind all Marxist theory: that those laws can be abolished” (ND 355). Yet Adorno goes further than simply invoking the possibility of abolishing these laws when he denies that materialism implies an entirely affirmative view of the preponderance of matter and the material conditions of human life over individuals. Rather than straightforwardly condoning this preponderance, Adorno seeks to mitigate it.

Adorno also contends that Marx wanted to attenuate the preponderance of the object. On his reading of Marx:

the telos, the idea behind Marxist materialism is the abolition of materialism, which means bringing about a situation in which the blind compulsion of material conditions over human beings is broken, and the question of freedom will at last be truly meaningful.

(PT2 198)¹⁴

This idea reappears in a more nuanced form in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno argues that the “perspective vanishing point of historical materialism would be its self-sublimation, the spirit’s liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfillment” (ND 207). The preponderance of the material world will diminish only when society satisfies the material needs of all the living, thereby enabling individuals to engage in activities that are not devoted primarily to ensuring their survival.

On the other hand, organic and inorganic nature are negated under capitalism. Nature has been negated precisely because society now assumes the mystified form of something natural, while the natural world is idealistically conceived as a mere prefiguration of social relations, institutions and practices. Owing to our distorted ideas of both external and internal nature, our experience of nature has been immeasurably impoverished, diminished. In our ceaseless attempts to dominate nature, we have turned nature into something to be controlled and manipulated exclusively for our own benefit by reducing nature to our concepts of it on the theoretical level and by equating nature with its exchange value in the capitalist marketplace. Our largely instrumental relation to nature does not allow nature to flourish independently of human ends. In fact, Adorno remarks that nature has a purposiveness that

“other than that posited by humanity”: a purposiveness that “was undermined by the rise of natural science” (*AT* 288).¹⁵ As Stone also argues, our domination of natural things prevents them “from developing or behaving as they spontaneously would” (2006: 236). Failing to accommodate nature to its own ends, we invariably violate it.

We now inhabit an inverted world where nature has been socialized and the sociohistorical world has been naturalized, turned into second nature. Nevertheless, there is a far less illusory sense in which human history is natural, and nature historical. The separation of history from nature is deceptive because, throughout our history, we have engaged with the natural world in productive and reproductive activities for the purpose of self-preservation. Conversely, nature is historical because it constantly develops and changes, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically. Moreover, nature is always also bound up with the historically and socially conditioned concepts and practices that we use to grasp and manipulate it. This idea already appeared in Marx’s critique of Ludwig Feuerbach: of productive activity – “this unceasing labour and creation” – is “the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists”. A nature that lies outside the ambit of human history no longer exists anywhere (Marx & Engels 1970: 63).

Bernstein claims that, with his idea of natural history, Adorno endorses Hegel’s famous speculative proposition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “Everything that is subject must be shown to be as much (historical) substance, and what is regarded as substance must be shown to be also subject” (Bernstein 2004: 20).¹⁶ However, Adorno categorically rejects Hegel’s claim that nature and history are ultimately one or identical, even as he agrees with Marx that nature and history are “not two separate things” (Marx & Engels 1932: 58).¹⁷ Citing “The Idea of Natural-History” more than three decades after he delivered it as a lecture to the Kant Society in Frankfurt, Adorno declares that the task of thought is “to grasp historic being in its utmost definition, in the place where it is most historic, or to grasp nature, in the place where it seems most deeply, inertly natural, as historic being” (*ND* 359).

Nature and history are unendingly entwined, not because they are one and the same, but because they converge. Adorno takes this idea about the convergence of nature and history from his colleague Walter Benjamin, who maintains that nature and history intersect in the moment of transience (*Vergängnis*) (*ND* 359). In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin noted with approval that the poets of the baroque age conceived of nature as eternal transience. At the same time, these poets wrote the word “history” “on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience” (1977: 177; cited in *HF* 125). Commenting on Benjamin’s claims about the convergence of nature and history, Adorno observes that nature and history are present in each other: nature is “present as transience”, and history is present in nature “as something that has evolved and is transient” (*HF* 135).

Susan Buck-Morss points out that Adorno tried to sublimate the traditional antithesis of nature and history in this “moment of transitoriness, this ‘one-time-ness’ (*Einmaligkeit*)” (1977: 57).¹⁸ But Adorno also stressed the critical import of the idea of natural history when he stated that, for “radical natural-historical thought, everything that exists transforms itself into ruins and fragments” (2006: 265, trans. mod.).¹⁹ The idea of natural history discloses the damage inflicted on natural things and processes owing to their entwinement with history, their subordination to ends extrinsic to them. Later, in his lectures on history and freedom, Adorno again describes natural history as a critical concept. This concept not only casts light on the damage we have done to nature, but makes visible the unfreedom of individuals whenever they are led blindly and compulsively by instinct. If everything natural must be seen as historical, it is also the case that “everything historical has to be regarded

nature because, thanks to its own violent origins, it remains under the spell of blind nature” (*HF* 124).

Both external nature and our own internal nature have been pulled into the orbit of history. For in part, however, human history is natural history because it can be traced in the displacement, distortion and repression of our instincts and passions (*DE C*:231, *J*:192). Adorno adopts a Freudian perspective on this dimension of history, agreeing with Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* that “it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, however much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression, or some other means) of powerful instincts” (Freud 1975a: 34). Like Freud, Adorno sees human history as the history of the renunciation (*DE C*:55, *J*:43). Throughout our history, we have renounced and repressed our instincts “for the sake of mastery over nonhuman nature and over other human beings” (*DE C*:54, *J*:42). This renunciation was necessary to preserve society as a whole, human beings rarely benefited from it since “there is no real equivalence between renunciation of instincts in the present and compensation in the future”. Society has been organized irrationally because “the equivalent reward it always promises never arrives” (*PMP* 139).

Although human history consists, in part, in the renunciation of instinct, one instinct has been allowed to “run wild” (*ND* 289). From its earliest beginnings (as even Plato implicitly acknowledged when he observed that society originated to satisfy needs), society has been impelled by the “principle of unreflected self-preservation” (*ND* 283). In fact, Adorno complains that the persistent degradation of human beings to a mere means of their *sese conservare* is the “law of doom [*Verhängnis*] thus followed by history” (*ND* 167). Commenting on this aspect of Adorno’s idea of natural history, Espen Hammer observes that reason and language have been fundamentally “shaped by the overall purpose of securing the individual’s survival”. Even scientific attempts to understand and explain the natural world fulfil survival imperatives because they are geared to “identifying, controlling, and organizing a hostile and potentially dangerous environment” (Hammer 2006: 45). As a result, science too remains bound to nature.

Late capitalist society is also bound to nature. Under capitalism, virtually all objects and activities have been commodified. The secret of the commodity form, which Marx described in the first chapter of *Capital*, is equivalence: the equivalence of one object or activity with a heterogeneous other. Equating unequal or non-identical things, exchange is the social model for what Adorno called identity thinking: a form of concept fetishism in which objects are summarily identified with concepts. Moreover, the emergence of identitarian exchange relations has its own natural history because it too was impelled by survival instincts (*ND* 146). Indeed, the exchange of equivalents is said to be beneficial to society because it ensures society’s continued survival. As political economists such as Adam Smith have argued, when commodity producers, who are oriented towards private success in the form of profit-making, exchange their products on the market, they unintentionally promote the material reproduction of society as a whole. Exchange is therefore considered to be (and has historically been justified in this way) the most effective means of preserving both society and its individual members.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno insist that a truly “philosophical” interpretation of world history would have to show how, despite all the detours and resistances, the systematic domination over nature has been asserted more and more decisively, and has integrated all internal human characteristics”. More controversially, they claim that this interpretation of history, which sees it as driven by survival instincts that continue to pit us antagonistically against the surrounding natural world, provides an explanatory framework for “[e]conomic, political, and cultural forms” (*DE C*:223, *J*:185). Of course, this claim is controversial because it seems to be complete

reductive; it turns instinct into a “base” on which the societal superstructure is built. But if *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appears at times to equate human history with the vicissitudes of our instinctual life, Adorno’s independent account of natural history neither reduces one to the other nor posits them as completely distinct realms of being. Just as he refuses to reduce objects to concepts when he criticizes the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity, Adorno will not reduce mind to matter, human history to instinct.

History cannot be reduced to the vicissitudes of our instinctual life because our instincts are themselves shaped and conditioned by history. Despite their ostensibly reductive claims, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno briefly suggest some of the ways in which instinct is bound up with history when they outline the historical trajectory of self-preservation. In the early stages of nomadic life, “members of the tribe ... took an individual part in the process of influencing the course of nature”. To ensure their survival, they employed magical practices that, while submitting to nature, also determined the form that submission should take (when, for example, they draped themselves in the hides of their quarry while stalking it). However, this period in history, when all tribal members were deemed capable of using magic to capture their prey, was followed by one where “intercourse with spirits and subjection were assigned to different classes: power is on the one side, and obedience on the other” (*DE C:21, J:15*). At this historical juncture, a division of labour was introduced. As Marx observed in *The German Ideology*, this division occurred when mental labour became the dominant force within a given social order (Marx & Engels 1970: 51–2).²⁰

Thus, as James Schmidt also notes, the transition from magic to myth involves both the “centralization of power and the development of a division between mental and manual labour” (1998: 830). Echoing Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno contend that this nascent division of labour, “through which power manifests itself socially”, was meant to serve as the primary means for preserving society (*DE C:22, J:16*). But Schmidt comments on the psychological dimension of this transition as well when he adds that myth, in its concerted attempts to identify origins, already required the separation of ideas from reality, which was first achieved “by the reality adjusted ego”. According to Schmidt, then, ego formation, which gave rise to the process of individuation, originates “on this side of the line between magic and mythology” (1998: 829–30).²¹

Exchanging “the invocations of the magician and the tribe” for “the carefully graduated sacrifice and the labor of enslaved men mediated by command”, myths also replaced local spirits and demons with “heaven and hierarchy”. Over time, the gods of myth were “separated from material elements such as the sky, the sun, the weather and so on. On the basis of this separation, in which the gods were thought to control elements of nature rather than being directly identified with them, a singular distinction developed between the *logos* and “the mass of all things and creatures” outside it. In turn, this distinction would lead to a further distinction between human beings and the rest of the natural world which eventually made the world “subject to human beings” (*DE C:8, J:5*). However, the dissociation of the *logos* from nature was double-edged: for even as nature was turned into an object, human beings themselves began to be treated as objects of manipulation and control. As “the illusion of magic vanishes”, repetition, “in the guise of regularity”, imprisons human beings “in the cycle of objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their own security as free subjects” (*DE C:12, J:8*).

Although Greek myth depicted Zeus as ruling over all living beings, the Judaeo-Christian tradition claimed that its god accorded dominion over living creatures to human beings. Later still, with the advent of enlightenment, which advanced the general trend of demythologization in the West (*KCF* 65), the distinction between the divine and the human faded. As human beings superseded God, my

turned “into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity” (*DE C*:9, J:5–6). Still, enlightenment carried forwards the legacy that it inherited from myth when it supplanted the “manifold affinity between existing things ... by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer” (*DE C*:10–11, J:7). Ostensibly rejecting the mythic concept of fate, enlightenment’s primary instrument – abstraction – nonetheless liquidates its objects as thoroughly as myth did by subsuming all natural entities under laws. Abstracting from the singularity of objects, it brought “nature” to heel in order to satisfy survival imperatives.

Here too, Adorno agrees with Freud: civilization primarily consists in the attempts of human beings to make “the earth serviceable to them”, and to protect them “against the violence of the forces of nature” (Freud 1975a: 27). A nation is deemed civilized when it effectively ensures both the “exploitation of the earth” and “protection against the forces of nature” (*ibid.*: 28). Unlike Freud however, Adorno tends to stress the compulsive character of self-preservation, arguing that, in our stubborn attempts to “break the compulsion of nature by breaking nature”, we simply succumb more deeply to that compulsion (*DE C*:13, J:9). As a result, he rejects Freud’s claim that some of the activities that have contributed to the preservation of our species – particularly scientific endeavours – markedly “distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors” (Freud 1975a: 26). Where Freud praised science as a mature attempt to master the narcissistic belief in the omnipotence of thought (Whitebook 1995: 94–5),²² Adorno underscores its instinctual character. Science exhibits the concept fetishism that characterizes the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity when it persists in the delusion that thought is omnipotent by subordinating objects under abstract mathematical and conceptual schemes. On Adorno’s view, then, the distinction between human beings and other animals is far less clear-cut than Freud thought.

It is not just the instinct for self-preservation that manifests itself in different ways in human history; all human instincts are historically conditioned to the point where they may even be radically transformed by history (*HF* 236). Bernstein makes this point as well when he remarks that Adorno refused to reduce internal and external nature to an “atemporal system of lawful regularities”. Instead he thought that even our “biologically given attributes are continually being formed, determined, and elaborated through cultural practice” (2001: 189). Consequently, there is “no pristine inner nature awaiting release from repression”. We cannot make good on what we have lost in the course of history by ceasing to repress inner nature and ending our domination of external nature because “who we are and how we understand and comport ourselves in the world are formed through this process of renunciation and domination” (*ibid.*: 200). Neither inner nor outer nature subsists in a latent form untouched by history, which may one day be recuperated in its original, prelapsarian state.

Adorno did not describe the historical trajectory of other instincts, but he did stress their historical character in his 1942 essay on needs, “Thesen über Bedürfnis”. This essay begins with the strong claim that need is a social category. Although nature, in the form of instinct (*Trieb*), is contained within need, it is not possible “to separate the social dimension of need, as something secondary, from the natural aspect of need as something primary”. Instincts are so socially mediated that whatever might be deemed natural in them only appears as “something produced by society” (1972d: 392). Later in the essay, Adorno admitted that the impossibility of distinguishing between good and bad, genuine and artificial, true and false needs, makes it difficult to develop a theory of needs. On the one hand, a theory of needs that acknowledges their social character must regard the satisfaction of all needs as legitimate.²³ On the other hand, theory must recognize that, since “existing needs are themselves the product of class society”, there are no needs in which a clear distinction can be made between

“humanity and the consequences of repression” (*ibid.*: 393).

Just as instincts are shaped by history, organic and inorganic nature constantly change. To return to Bernstein’s reading of Adorno, air “*becomes* polluted; animal species *become* extinct (on their own and through our intervention); mineral resources *become* depleted; new natural kinds are intentionally developed” (Bernstein 2001: 189). Changes in external nature can be traced to the impact of other natural forces (such as the climate changes that led to the Ice Age, and tectonic shifts). But (Chapter 4 will show in greater detail), many such changes are linked to human intervention, whether intentional or not. In fact, Adorno complains that our current idea of progress has been “deformed by utilitarianism”, and does “violence to the surface of the earth” (*AT* 64). Justice will be done to nature only when we recognize and redress the damage that we have inflicted on it by treating it instrumentally, as something that exists solely for our own benefit.

With his critical concept of natural history, Adorno tries to capture the important senses in which nature is always also historical and history always also natural. But this concept can easily be misunderstood. As Lambert Zuidervaart argues, it is important to recognize that Adorno’s emphasis on natural history does not mean that he adopts Marx’s early goal “of ‘naturalizing’ human beings and ‘humanizing’ nature”. Rather, Adorno thinks that “human beings already are natural, all too natural and nature is unavoidably human, all too human”. Human beings are all too natural because they “carry out domination as if they were beasts of prey”, while remaining largely oblivious of the fact that their behaviour is largely impulsive and instinctive. Conversely, nature has been thoroughly humanized; it has been subsumed without remainder under concepts, and transformed into “a mere object of human control” (1991: 165).²⁴

To be sure, Adorno wants us to acknowledge both that we are parts of nature and that nature is always also caught up in human history. But it can equally well be said that he aims to dehumanize nature and denaturalize humanity. Stressing humanity’s own natural history and criticizing its “humanization” of nature, Adorno’s goal is to encourage the partial transcendence of nature by human beings, and of human beings by nature. Even as we come to terms with our affinity with nature, that affinity should not blind us to the non-identity of nature and human history. In the final analysis, the Adorno hopes to foster a more dialectical relationship between human beings and the environment in the natural world.

To say that nature is always also historical, or that nature has been marked, not just by the impact of other forces and phenomena, but by our interaction with it, does not authorize the reduction of nature to history because nature cannot be identified entirely with its mediated forms (just as objects cannot be identified with concepts, or matter with mind). Conversely, history cannot be reduced to nature. Our history has been influenced by natural forces both within and without, but it is not reducible to nature because, among other things, our cognitive development enables us to distinguish ourselves from nature through reflection and self-reflection – if only, as yet, to a limited degree. In fact, Adorno’s former student, Alfred Schmidt, believes that Marx had a similar conception of the relationship between nature and history. Although Schmidt seems to ignore Marx’s early claim that the society’s goal is “the true resurrection of nature – the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfillment” (1964: 137), he accurately captures Adorno’s view of this relationship when he remarks that “[n]atural and human history together constitute ... a differentiated history. Since they form an internally differentiated unity, ‘human history is not merged in pure natural history; natural history is not merged in human history’” (A. Schmidt 1971: 45). In the next section of this chapter, I shall discuss some of the more important philosophical implications of this relationship between nature and history.

Adorno's materialism is distinctive: it aims to show that history and nature are indissolubly entwined. But while Adorno agrees with Marx on many key issues, the degree to which his version of materialism remains faithful to Marx is moot. For it is certainly the case that many Marxists reduce the material dimension of human existence to socioeconomic determinants. As a result, they frequently ignore the interaction between society and the natural world. Kate Soper argues that this means Timpanaro "is right to pose the question of the extent to which Marxism either inherently or in its contemporary 'distortions' supports a false reduction of natural to social determinants". Rejecting the idea of nature as "a mere backdrop to a *deus ex machina* of social relations which really has all the action", Soper also agrees with Timpanaro's view that Marx is partly to blame for this "false reduction". Unlike Timpanaro, however, she believes that Marx's lack of clarity about the relationships between the social and the natural worlds extends to his later work as well (Soper 1979: 72).

For his part, Adorno maintains that Marx never fully reconciled the two sides of materialism: the positivistic, social scientific version and the natural scientific version. In terms of his own self-understanding, Marx thought that he was in agreement with positive social science (*PT2* 172). For Adorno, however, this agreement is problematic to the extent that it risks positing a single origin or foundation to which everything is reduced. As Simon Jarvis explains, Adorno thought that each version of materialism, taken separately, simply offered "some unexamined and quite abstract category such as 'matter' or 'nature' or 'history' or 'society' as though it represented an immediate given, a point at which theoretical inquiry simply had to stop" (1998: 16). By contrast, Adorno's materialism refutes the idea of an unspoiled basic stratum (*ND* 368) because it stresses the constant interaction between nature and history, even as it acknowledges their heterogeneity.

In *Marx's Ecology*, however, John Foster rejects the claim that Marx failed to reconcile the two types of materialism. He believes that Marx devoted all his work to developing a dialectical account of the relationship between nature and history. "As a form of realism", Foster writes, Marx's approach constantly emphasized the "perpetual and close connection between natural science and social science between a conception of the material/natural world and the world of society" (2000: 7). Unfortunately, Foster bases his view of Marx's realism on Marx's comments about natural history in the preface to the first edition of *Capital* (*ibid.*: 258 n.18). Interestingly, he misinterprets Marx in the same way that Timpanaro did: he too fails to see that Marx was referring to capitalism as second nature. In the rest of the book, however, Foster finds better grounds for his claim about the centrality of the idea of natural history in Marx when he focuses on Marx's assertion that there is a "metabolic relation between human beings and nature". According to Foster, Marx later developed this idea in such a way that he was able to give "a more solid and scientific expression of this fundamental relationship, depicting the complex, dynamic interchange between human beings and nature resulting from human labor" (*ibid.* 158).

Ironically, perhaps, Foster's defence of Marx as a consistently dialectical thinker who devoted much of his work to examining the relationship between nature and history seems to ally Marx much more closely with Adorno than even Adorno thinks. For in his interpretation of Marx's idea of the metabolic relationship between human beings and nature – and especially in his insistence on Marx's non-reductionist, non-dualistic and non-mechanistic conception of this relationship – Foster describes important aspects in Adorno's ideas about this relationship as well. Adorno's thoroughly dialectical view of natural history puts paid to Foster's contentious and largely unsupported claim that Western Marxists, including Adorno, "increasingly rejected realism and materialism, adopting the view that the social world was constructed in the entirety of its relations by human practice" (*ibid.*: 7). In fact,

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