

Eric Oberle, *Theses on the non-identical and negative identity*.

Theses on the utility and necessity of taking the identity concept seriously from the perspective of critical theory:

1. We live in an era where philosophical concepts are stillborn if they lack a subjective moment. Modern subjects begin to think in proportion to their ability to recognize the non-identity of the selves we are not.
2. The “subject of history” in the Lukácsian-Marxian sense as well as in the liberal-Kantian is utopian. It is, as such, as indispensable as it is untenable; collective subjectivity is thinkable only in determinate negation.
3. “Having an Identity” in the sense first posited by Erich Fromm in 1941 is an existentialist, psychoanalytical, and sociological fantasy. The idea of “owning oneself,” which arose with the displacements of the Renaissance, the growing of market forces, was itself already rooted in the dialectic of uprooting individuals into coercive labor while giving others the absolute freedom of self-possession. Since selfhood can indeed be taken away in neoliberal as well as authoritarian societies, the utopian goal of “having” an identity at (again) once indispensable and untenable.
4. Non-identity in Adorno’s sense is a logical property with a compound heritage. As surely as it is a term with a utopian/theological inspiration that points toward a reconciled “non-identical” state of humanity beyond coercion, it is also a phenomenologically-inspired term of art directed against the equation of truth with reductive identity. Interest in the non-identical speaks to the refusal to be reduced to an identity function, and thus the refusal to reduce forms of knowledge, modes of experience, universals and particulars to one another or render the one the mere object for the other.
5. Adorno’s concept of the subject/object is based upon the concept of the ego as a form of woundedness: the mutual articulation of subject and object is rooted in the “primal scene” of subjective autonomy denied, the threat of the self being rendered an object. If one understands this mixture of Schopenhaurian, Freudian, Hegelian and Marxian ideas about the formation of the subject through its objective entanglements, one can see Adorno’s late work as using a method of inversion: whenever the subject is asserted strenuously, subjectlessness is likely at work, and whenever the mute suffering of the object world is allowed to speak, new possibilities of describing the subject may emerge.
6. Adorno left open a path for theorizing all identities as having a negative foundation. Thinking about identity negatively means thinking about how identity can be exploited not just by the subject but by forces hostile to the subject. Nationalism provides the template. In the analysis of marginal and coerced identity in particular, one can most readily study how negativity is shaped in the shadows of power. Rather than fetishizing this as a primal scene, the locus of negative identity should be treated as a metaphysical and ideological space charged with illusion as well as possibility. This double character pertains to the theorist’s work because it is against the backdrop of violence where the Schopenhauerian empathy with the suffering animal is most pronounced—individual life takes particular meaning against the backdrop of an evil and irrational existence; but it is also here that reactionary thought takes root.

Twenty-first Century Thoughts

1. One way to compare Fumi Okiji’s *Jazz as Critique* and my book, *Theodor Adorno and the Century of Negative Identity* is to think about how we both use the late Adorno—I am tempted to say the post-Holocaust Adorno—to flip the polarities of his earlier (and misshapen) engagement with the ideas of black identity, blackness, and jazz dissonance. Okiji uses Adorno’s thought as a polarizing light to engage with both the ethnomusicological and structural listening traditions in

thinking about jazz. Jazz's openness to the category of wounded subjectivity points not just to past failures, but to how much Frankfurt critical theory might still learn from Harlem and the black radical tradition.

2. African-American musical expression, tied as it was to the experience of forced labor and, after the U.S. Civil War, foreclosed and incomplete emancipation, started a tradition of critical-aesthetic subjectivity by proclaiming the untruth of its universality in everyday life. The subject that expresses itself through denying the freedom of subjectivity or the harmony of social relations redefines art, expressivity, and the self.
3. Post-colonial subjectivity partakes of an age of "identity," in which the objective, caste-based character of individual difference casts its shadow into the world of formal legal equality. The Holocaust was a watershed event in social theory in that its systematization of death required thinkers to look to how participation in past horrors was driven by notions of selfhood and otherness. In this light, the imposition of identity from without appears a prelude to exclusion, slavery and death. When Adorno was in America he had not yet understood this historically—had not appreciated Heine's description of Jewish post-emancipatory subjective expression as a kind of "dancing in chains," as a protest against the impossibility of particularity. Adorno's own subjective experience as an exile—his reluctant coming-to-terms with the fact that he could not choose to be not-Jewish—awakened an interest in the translational quality of subject and object both in philosophy and aesthetics.
4. Engagement with lives touched by this suffering—by expression in negativity—serves as a font of aesthetic expression and political protest in a post-liberal, post-universalist age. We live in an age of identity—of coerced identity, of identity as protest, of identity as a measure of the distance from the universal. The fact that we can only see the social in the gaps where the subject is powerless, where identity fails, implicates all subjectivities. For this reason, engagement with the universal is today most about engagement with subjectless subjects, the political unconscious, the self unfree to be a self among others.
5. It is a utopian dream that everyone might *choose* their identity, but it is far from a complete or sufficient theory of the utopia of a reconciled society. Our relations with the material world build their sense of identity out of property relations, of "having an identity," and we lack the resources to understand universality other than as the resolution of fugitivity and coercive identity. Adorno's insistence that every form of identity is connected applies to people as surely as it does to words, forms of knowledge, to social, aesthetic or material objects.
6. The image of suffering as truth is socially unstable. This is because the objective negativity of the oppressed must be subjectively mediated. Nietzsche's dicta concerning the "slave revolt in morality" are hairraising not only because they speak to how morality emerges from suffering and domination, but because (as Adorno emphasizes in his analysis of subjectless subjectivity) *all* identities are formed negatively—formed as a recoil from potential objectification and out of fear of self-dissolution. Domination can yield the subjectivity of internalized values or the projectivity of imposing negative identity on others.
7. The resurgence of a "white" identity politics (and its alliance with authoritarianism) must be read in terms of a history of universality and negative identity. A revised Hegelianism must have room for an analysis of objective negative identity (a history of genuine domination) and of projected negative identity and the formation of regressive hierarchies. Du Bois's analytic was the first to recognize this; feminist theory of the 1970s expanded it in every direction, but the reintegration with a critical Hegelianism or with a sociology of caste, stigma, and domination is an unmet goal of critical theory.