

## **The Adorno and Identity Seminars – March 26 – Adorno and the politics of non-identity Unveiling the ‘Individualistic Veil’: On Narcissistic Reactions to Capitalist Mutilations**

### Quotes:

“The individual does actually carry on a twofold existence: one to serve his own purposes and the other as a link in a chain, which he serves against his will, or at least involuntarily. The individual himself regards sexuality as one of his own ends; whereas from another point of view he is an appendage to his germplasm, at whose disposal he puts his energies in return for a bonus of pleasure. He is the mortal vehicle of a (possibly) immortal substance—like the inheritor of an entailed property, who is only the temporary holder of an estate which survives him.”

Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914)

“...non-satisfaction of hunger and thirst, the two most elementary instincts of self-preservation, never result in their reversal into anxiety, while the transformation of unsatisfied libido into fear is, as we have heard, one of the best known and most frequently observed phenomena.”

Sigmund Freud,

*A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, chap. XXVI: The Libido Theory and Narcism (1915)

“A candid look at the predominance of the universal does all but unbearable psychological harm to the narcissism of all individuals and to that of a democratically organized society. To see through selfhood as nonexistent, as an illusion, would easily turn all men’s objective despair into a subjective one. It would rob them of the faith implanted in them by individualistic society: that they, the individuals, are the substance. For the functionally determined individual interest to find any kind of satisfaction under existing forms, it must become primary in its own eyes; the individual must confuse that which to him is immediate with the πρώτη οὐσία. Such subjective illusions are objectively caused: it is only through the principle of individual self-preservation, for all its narrowmindedness, that the whole will function. It makes every individual look solely upon himself and impairs his insight into objectivity; objectively, therefore, it works only so much more evil. The nominalistic consciousness reflects a whole that continues by virtue of obdurate particularity. Literally it is ideology; socially, it is a necessary semblance.”

Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, ‘Individualistic Veil’, p. 312 (1966)

“Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* has a substance that was scarcely in the author’s mind: it is not only in the psyche of the socialized that aggressiveness accumulates into an openly destructive drive. Instead, total socialization objectively hatches its opposite, and there is no telling yet whether it will be a disaster or a liberation.”

Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, ‘The Spell’, p. 346

“The liberated ego, no longer locked up in its identity, would no longer be condemned to play roles either. The remnants of a division of labor which the radical curtailment of working hours might leave in society would lose the horror of shaping the individuals throughout. The thinglike rigor of the self and its availability, its readiness to be committed to the socially desired roles, are accomplices. If identity is ever to pass into its otherness, it must not be denied abstractly even in the moral field, but must be preserved in resistance. The present condition is destructive: a loss of identity for the sake of abstract identity, of naked self-preservation.”

Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, ‘Against Personalism’, p. 278-279

### Short summary:

- Freud opposes ego drives and sexual drives, the first ones aiming to self-preservation when the second ones direct their energy towards external objects. The use Adorno has of the concept of narcissism, inherited from Freud, brings it closer to sexual drives than to ego drives for two reasons: where the individual considers himself the most substantial, he is the least, and the reality of this contradiction generates suffering and despair to which it seems almost impossible to escape.

- Woven by the bourgeois ideology that raised from the feudal ruins, the individualistic veil is both a motor and a wound for the individual that sees the world and himself through it. Thinking of himself as totally independent when he is fully dependent harms himself as much as the society does when it uses him as a simple cog. But his survival depends on the illusion that he thinks he is pursuing his own self-interests.

- Nationalism and the glorification of the race that comes with it appear as stopgaps for the shortcomings of individualism. They represent the disaster of individuation. The liberation that could come out of it lies in the desire to let the difference be, the external one of the other as well as the internal one of the drives.