

A Streak of Antisocial Coldness: Adornian and Edelmanian Politics of Avoidance  
Nicole Yokum  
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It isn't very often that Adorno gets into bed with queer theory. Such an alliance may, in fact, seem quite unlikely – fortuitous at best – given Adorno's legacy on queerness: putting aside his lifelong fondness for and fascination with his possibly queer music teacher, Alban Berg, Adorno's theorization of homosexuality is memorable for all the wrong reasons: most notably, his pathologization of homosexuality and association of repressed homosexual desires with fascism and totality in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*. Even in a 1963 essay in which he openly condemns the retention of Paragraph 175 in postwar German law, Adorno seemingly can't help but to sneak in his sickeningly familiar earlier argument linking homosexuality to dominating intent, and to an "enthusiasm... for well-bred order." Randall Halle associates this "equation of fascism and homosexuality" with Adorno's uptake of orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis, which results, he claims, in a "static, essentializing construction of sexuality." It is psychoanalysis, however – again, the Freudian tradition, but in particular, a certain relationship to negativity – that is also at the root of the link that I shall attempt to uncover today between another aspect of Adorno's work – his theorization of coldness – and the antisocial or antirelational strand in contemporary queer theory, as represented by Lacanian Lee Edelman. Both Adorno and Edelman are committed to what I call a "politics of avoidance": a stance of political disengagement from a social order that has targeted them, and their kind – as Jews and queers – for death.

I'll begin with a few words on coldness. Remarks on coldness are scattered throughout Adorno's oeuvre – from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to *Minima Moralia* to *Negative Dialectics* to his radio addresses. They even show up in his personal correspondence – a matter to which I will return shortly. Evidently, at the time of his death in August of 1969, Adorno had plans to write an entire volume entitled *Kälte (Coldness)*, to follow *Aesthetic Theory*. Coldness, to be sure, is central to Adorno's scathing critique of modernity, and his diagnosis of life under bourgeois capitalism as exceedingly "damaged." It is evidence of the extent to which market principles have encroached upon private life, as it fundamentally entails relating to other people exclusively with a market-based, means-end mentality. Coldness, as Jay Bernstein puts it, is the "all-pervading mood of enlightened reason"; it's the "affective correlate" of the instrumental rationality of which Adorno and his early Frankfurt School peers are so famously critical. To the extent that modern subjectivity has been colonized by means-end rationality, and we have fallen prey to identity thinking, Adorno maintains, we have lost our attunement to and appreciation for what is distinctive and particular about others – the "non-identical." That is, we have become *cold*. Very few people nowadays – if any, Adorno bleakly notes – are "still able to indulge in anything resembling uncalculating love."

Taking all of this a step further, Adorno starkly proclaims in the last section of *Negative Dialectics*, "After Auschwitz," that without the "coldness, of the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, Auschwitz would not have been possible." It's because people are generally cold to one another, he wagers, that they entirely lack the impulse to stand up and fight against mass liquidation; thus, they simply stood by and did nothing while millions of their peers were sent to the gas chambers. They "would not have accepted" this, Adorno believes, if not for the fact that they are "*profoundly indifferent* toward whatever happens to everyone else except for a few to whom they are closely bound and, if possible, by tangible interests." Incidentally, this bourgeois coldness enabled the

behaviors associated with an even more extreme form of coldness: the specific kind of coldness exhibited by the Eichmanns, fitting Adorno's description of the "manipulative character" in *The Authoritarian Personality*. Beyond being generically indifferent and unable to fully and genuinely attach to most others, these manipulative types are unable to form a positive cathexis *at all* – meaning that they can't psychically and emotionally invest in other people, or identify with them. In lieu of human attachments, they find technological ones, and fixate on using these technological tools to relish in their preferred modes of relating to others, which involve stereotyping – slotting others into predesignated categories – and then manipulating them. This form of coldness finds its perhaps worst possible expression in "cleverly devis[ing] a train system that bring[s] the victims to Auschwitz as quickly and smoothly as possible," while "forget[ting] what happens to them there."

Because he thinks that coldness – which he goes so far as to say has become a "fundamental trait of anthropology" – was a veritable condition of possibility for the occurrence of atrocity, Adorno implores people to confront this aspect of their constitution – to direct their energies toward changing themselves so as to avert further disaster. In a 1967 radio address, "Education After Auschwitz," he further justifies this focus on the "subjective dimension" by remarking on the "extremely limited" "possibility of changing the objective... conditions" today. Indeed, Adorno believed that philosophy had missed the window of opportunity for its realization; the socialist revolution had failed in spite of the presence of the objective conditions for actualizing a world without hunger and domination. But if we can't have a socialist revolution, we can at least try to mitigate capitalism's worst effects on our personalities and relationships. We can become more critically aware of our deeply entrenched indifference towards one another, and perhaps even try to retrain ourselves to not be quite so numb to one another's uniqueness – in other words, learn to "tarry with the negative," dwell in what makes each of us non-identical, and thus distance ourselves from the mindset that moves to integrate everyone and everything into the mainstream, and that leads on a straight path to genocide. It may be that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly," but perhaps there's a little bit of rightness to be found in waking up and becoming sensitized to our fundamental wrongness.

This demand that coldness be confronted in the interest of subjective change stops short for Adorno, though, when it comes to himself. In the course of his correspondence with Herbert Marcuse over the year leading up to his death, the two theorists vehemently disagree over, first, whether they are both cold, and, second, how this bears on their political engagement in the present. Neither of them believes that the student protesters with whom they have both been in close contact are in a revolutionary, or even pre-revolutionary, situation – that much seems obvious. But for Adorno, the large-scale futility of their efforts is not the sole source of his belief that he is personally doing the right thing when, for example, he calls the police on students who are disrupting his lecture course. In an interesting twist (given what I've already said about coldness), Adorno sees himself as justified in not joining or supporting the movement because, as he writes to Marcuse: "We withstood in our time, you no less than me, a much more dreadful situation – that of the murder of the Jews, without proceeding to praxis; simply because it was blocked for us. I think that **clarity about the streak of coldness in one's self is a matter for self-contemplation.**"

Adorno *insists* that he, too – the critical theorist and survivor – is cold – but cold in a way that is importantly distinct from bourgeois coldness and the coldness of the manipulative character.

Adorno is cold because he was *made* cold by having survived. "... it may have been wrong to say that poetry could not be written after Auschwitz," he writes in *Negative Dialectics*. "What is not wrong however is the less cultural question of whether it is even permissible for someone who accidentally escaped and by all rights ought to have been murdered, to go on living after Auschwitz. Their continued existence already necessitates the coldness, of the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which Auschwitz would not have been possible: **the drastic guilt of the spared.**" Thus, Adorno *was forced* to become "indifferent to the fate of others" – the fate of the millions who were not quite so "lucky" as he was – because if he didn't, he would not have been able to live with the guilt. His coldness, then, is distinctive because it was adopted – perhaps consciously, all along – as a coping mechanism.

This defensive origin of Adorno's own version of coldness is the reason that it bears a special ethical significance, and it is at least part of the reason that, he claims, he is now effectively stuck in the position of being blocked from praxis. Indeed, Adorno stubbornly affirms the veracity of his "cold streak," and its politically avoidant implications, in the face of Marcuse's charge that he is deluding himself about all of this, and counter to Marcuse's own testament to personally having such a strong "biological, physiological reaction" to the present socio-political circumstances (that is, his testament to *not* being cold) that he must *do something*, because he can bear it no longer. For Adorno, the issue with participating in the '60s protest efforts is not just that he has judged all praxis to be indefinitely blocked; it's also that what he has endured gives him permission to keep inhabiting a stance of cold, removed critique relative to a society that tried to destroy him. He's not morally required to put his life on the line in solidarity with those trying to improve his social world – given that he is all too familiar, *on a visceral level*, with the fact that this same social world designated him for liquidation. If coldness is the scar left by this experience, he will use it as a shield of protection – a badge that admits him into the ranks of those who justifiably refuse to participate, refuse to invest in a different future.

It is this refusal that makes Adorno a strange bedfellow with contemporary queer theorist Lee Edelman. In his 2004 polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman stakes his claim to a similarly antisocial avoidant ethical and political stance that celebrates dwelling in negativity. He calls to queers to embrace the negative status or position to which they have been assigned in the dominant social order – to dwell in and wholeheartedly identify with the destructive energies that, on a Lacanian model of subjectivity and sociality, undergird the psychic and social lives of all of us, but with which queers in particular, as he sees it, have (historically) become symbolically affiliated. To be sure, Edelman's position is based on a Lacanian understanding of psychic development and the role of negativity in social life: centrally, the notion that there is a "hole" or gap in the symbolic order that leads to the domain of the Real, a dimension of psychic life that does not, in fact, refer to any "reality," but actually resists symbolization. It is through moments of "jouissance" that we can best and most directly access the real by loosening the hold that the symbolic order has over our minds and bodies – for example, during very intense experiences of sensation such as orgasm. And, for Edelman, it is queers' supposedly special proximity to jouissance that makes them special – not dissimilarly from the way that Adorno perhaps sees himself as having a special ability to recognize the need to "look negativity in the face," as a cold critical theorist and survivor.

Edelman's key idea is that in the present configuration of symbolic life – the particular web of symbolic meanings in which we are enmeshed today – the queer signifies the messy, destructive energies of the Real that are always pushing at the borders of social life (from within it), threatening to disrupt and destroy it. This can be explained by his reading of the social field as entirely saturated with and structured by the ideology of heteronormative reproductive futurity – the belief system that maintains that the future holds promise and is cause for hope (because it will be different!), and takes the image of the Child to be the epitome of this hope and promise. Because gay people are biologically non-reproductive with one another, and because they are thought to engage in sexual acts that are regressive, immature, and perverse, they are symbolically figured as not only being unable to participate in reproductive futurity, but also as a challenge to its stability and integrity as a system. Given the context of heteronormative reproductive futurity, queerness, then, is predominantly associated with destruction, death, disease, and deviance.

But rather than fight against this designation as abject, other, and unthinkable, Edelman wants queers to claim their negativity, even relish in it. He rejects the assimilationist, pragmatic LGBT agenda pushing for gay marriage rights that would attempt to turn queerness into something safe, friendly, and normal, daring queers, instead, to “accept” and “embrace” the “ascription of negativity” to their sexual identity. In this world so obsessed with reproductive futurity, “the queer,” Edelman says, “comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every structure or form.” And what's more is that this is an important job – so the ethical course of action for queers, Edelman thinks, is to stick with the role they have been ascribed rather than try to make it otherwise. Because *every* possible iteration of the social order will contain an internal limit to its own viability – a limit where the death drive pulses as “a pressure both alien and internal to the logic of the Symbolic, as the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within.” This is a basic, inescapable fact about how sociality is structured, for Edelman, and what it means to be a subject. If queers disavow this status, it will simply be pushed off onto someone else, because *someone* has to assume this figural position in the symbolic order.

Edelman's version of queer politics ends up being basically an extension of this claiming of negativity into a stance of sheer, vehement refusal. It casts critical light on politics by exposing its underside and negativity – from a position that is both outside of and within it – by dwelling in what its very terms have rendered “unthinkable,” rather than working within the narrow constraints of its predominant discourse to effect incremental assimilationist gains. Rather than launching a (futile) effort to alter the basic structure of the social order or to shift the position of queers within it – to work for inclusion, or struggle for hitherto-withheld recognition – Edelman recommends a queer politics that shows up the limits of politics as usual. Whereas, he says, “politics is always a politics of the signifier,” situated squarely and comfortably in the realm of the symbolic, Edelmanian queer politics “serves to shore up a reality always unmoored by signification and lacking any guarantee” – thus, decidedly *not* invested in the future. If queerness can figure “resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself,” Edelman suggests, it can shed light on the possibilities for disabusing ourselves of the ideological fantasies that (largely invisibly/unconsciously) shape our sense of reality, and detaching ourselves from them.

For both theorists, then, our “enlightened,” rationalistic, heteronormative society is one that consistently handles the “non-identical” violently and reductively. Certain members of society, because of their social position, are better acquainted than others with what it means to symbolically occupy the role of the non-identical – these marginalized groups are all too familiar with the experience of confronting negativity, whereas the general population might be better served in learning to tarry with the negative. Both Adorno and Edelman also believe, though, that the fundamental structure of the social order is not going to change, and in that way, praxis is blocked – it is not going to be possible to radically transform society on an objective level. Given this conviction, they call upon the most victimized to claim their social location outside of the margins. Whether as a Jew or a queer, to retain one’s critical distance from the dominant order – and refuse to engage in practical efforts towards reform that would only perpetuate the fantasy of being able to rewrite the social script – is to register one’s critique in a way that is both empowering and ethically laudable. Unlike Edelman, Adorno doesn’t quite go to the length of coming out and saying, “Fuck the social order” and “fuck the whole network of symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.” However, his appeal to Marcuse to embrace his cold streak, and stop deluding himself about the possibility of a better future, expresses a similar disenchantment and disillusionment about an old game that has been played and lost too many times before. For those assigned to a social position associated with death in a society that embraces the brutality of integration, an avoidant political stance – disengaged and aloof, critically cold and fully aware of what that entails – is not only justifiable and self-protective, but helpfully casts critical light on the intransigent objective social ills that are all but impervious, in the present context, to being dismantled.