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**BLOODY RATIONALITY: THE DIALECTIC OF MODERN
REASON AND SACRIFICE IN HEGEL, ADORNO, AND
HORKHEIMER**

BY

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B.A., Philosophy, Colorado College, 2012
M.A., Critical Theory and the Arts, School of Visual Arts, 2015

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmothers, Adele and Helene, whose ambition, support, tenacity, and zeal is only paralleled by one another. I wouldn't have chosen to pursue an academic career without their influence and encouragement. May their memories be a blessing.

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First, I'd like to thank my dissertation committee chair and advisor, Adrian Johnston. Adrian's scholarship, pedagogy, and guidance have challenged me to think more comprehensively and critically, especially with regards to German Idealism, Marxism and Psychoanalysis. Adrian's own work on these traditions expands the relevance and impact of academic philosophy beyond the ivory tower. Adrian has served as a professor, a mentor, and an incredibly generous interlocutor, and Adrian has been—and will continue to be—a model for the kind of scholar I aspire to be as I move through academia. I am lucky and very grateful to have had his constant support throughout my time at UNM.

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Abstract

In my dissertation, I argue that Hegel, Adorno and Horkheimer develop theories of modern sacrifice grounded in their critiques of modern reason—what Hegel calls “the Understanding” and Adorno and Horkheimer call “instrumental reason.” I contend that these thinkers recognize the process of rational cognition, which abstracts conceptual data from empirical reality and establishes the dominance of the universal over particular phenomena, as a sacrificial process—a view supported by their routine description of this process using the language of violence and death. However, this sacrificial conception of modern reason isn’t metaphorical: when read alongside their analyses of discursive cunning, an instrumental linguistic practice that detaches the speaker from their worlds, as well as their ideological analyses of the Reign of Terror and the Holocaust, it becomes clear that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer recognize the isolating and destructive movement of modern reason as materially expressed in the modern world via bloodshed.

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Introduction

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

- Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History”¹

During the expansion of the lower Manhattan region of New York City in 1991, the General Services Administration discovered between 15,000-20,000 human remains in a 6-acre area just north of Chambers Street in what is now known as the Financial District. Archeological and historical research revealed that the region was a graveyard in the 17th and 18th centuries: A 1755 map identifies the area as the “Negro Burial Ground,” a cemetery for enslaved and free Africans who were legally prohibited from burying their dead within the then-New York City limits. Against the popular conception of Northern urban centers as “good” “progressive” hubs in contrast to the “bad” barbaric Southern plantations, enslaved people comprised a quarter of the workforce in New York City in the 18th century: many were domestic workers, and others were laborers, artisans, and craftsmen. The prototypical modern city of the “new world,” New York City was organized around the sanctity of human ingenuity and a rational system of commercial trade as opposed to “backwards” religious hierarchy and disorder, which were ostensibly

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986) 257.

left back in Europe. (Famously, a synthetic monument to untouched nature – central park – occupies the heart of the city, rather than a cathedral). The founding fathers of this secular liberal haven, figures like John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, helped organize the New York Manumission Society which pushed for the abolition of slavery. However, the hypocrisy of New York’s self-image and its leaders is striking: these figures who pushed for abolition were slave owners themselves. Slaves—not “free” workers—constructed New York, and after they did, they weren’t even allowed to be buried in it. During the 1991 project, more than 400 graves were disinterred and studied by archaeologists, but the rest were left unmoved. In 1993, a memorial was built on part of the site identifying it as a National Historic Landmark, but thousands of graves remain underneath the streets of today’s bustling financial district. The nucleus of the most “advanced” global economic system is sitting on top of the bodies of the people who built it.

In addition to the obvious dimension of cruelty, the impact of this anecdote is heightened by the thematic juxtapositions it invokes, like those of rational progress and the irrational premodern slavery, the bustling commercial life of the metropolis, and the hidden deaths of those who built it. Of course, history shows that the terms in these polarized dichotomies are constantly in sync and mutually generative: why is it that we continue to be struck by their concomitance, when progress has never existed without regression? At this point, how can the phrase “never again”—a precept repeated as a frantic attempt to rationally intervene in the various catastrophes that plague our era—be uttered in good faith? This existential anthropological question is related to the critical theoretical question, that Adorno articulates as “why the world—which could be paradise

here and now—can become hell itself tomorrow.”² In my dissertation, I approach this question from a narrow philosophical standpoint, which has obvious methodological and practical limitations. I nonetheless contend that 19th and 20th century dialectical philosophers Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer help provide a partial answer. They recognize that modern Western “rationality”—from which we derive humanistic ideals like universal peace, freedom, justice, and equality—is intrinsically related to its opposite: irrationality and violence. They also recognize that the abstraction and isolation of conceptual categories that typifies modern thinking “shows up” in the modern world, through the moral and scientific objectification and subordination of empirical reality, the psychological alienation that characterizes intersubjective linguistic interaction, and political nation-building projects that involve mass destruction. Both traditions acknowledge that the rational philosophical paradigm, as inherited from the European Enlightenment, presupposes the bifurcation of reality into “real” and “ideal,” and that the modern rational subject fallaciously sees itself as isolated from the world it emerges from, enabling the rational subject to undermine and negate empirical particularity. A dialectical phenomenon, this way of thinking is both produced out of *and* enables modern society to justify a so-called “rational” lifeworld that is nonetheless sustained by practices of bold-faced violence and murder, which is to say, practices of “rational” modern sacrifice.

Over and above the concept of violence, which has been theorized heavily in Continental philosophy, the concept of modern sacrifice immediately conveys two

² T.W. Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy?,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York: Columbia University Press (2005). 14.

distinct qualities: first, the fact that the pre-modern, animistic or religious practice of sacrifice was never overcome, but endures in the secular, rational, modern era; and second, that the violence which manifests in the routine hecatomb of particular groups of people isn't spontaneous or pre-destined, but rather functions as the middle term in an instrumental syllogism, in which destruction is carried out for the sake of the sanctification or preservation of a higher cause. This fact has become undeniably apparent during the COVID19 pandemic: when "essential" workers accounted for the majority of preventable deaths, effectively rendering them "inessential" in the eyes of corporations and government officials; when vulnerable populations had to risk their lives meeting their basic needs, on account of upholding the elusive notions of "freedom" and the "economy;" when wealthy countries had a surplus of vaccines and poor countries had few or none. While the following study doesn't provide a causal account of the genesis of modern sacrifice, it acknowledges—through a philosophical analysis—the complicity of philosophy in the persistence of modern sacrifice. By bringing out the instrumental, abstract, and subjectivistic nature of the destructive instrumental syllogism that results in the mass destruction of life, my dissertation shows that modern reason is complicit in the reproduction and ubiquity of modern sacrifice.

Outline

I develop this theory of modern sacrifice by establishing a connection between modern reason and modern sacrifice in the work of Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer. However, attempting to establish an explicit link between modern reason and sacrifice in their work is complicated, as both traditions use the concept of sacrifice in different ways. Most prominently, they both use the concept of self-sacrifice (*Aufopferung*) to describe a

figurative, self-contained phenomenon constitutive of rational subjectivity. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,³ self-sacrifice shows up in the movement of self-consciousness from a form of consciousness that has alienated itself from the world to one in which self-consciousness is actualized through spiritual service—that is, in which it sacrifices its own will and material belongings to the universal divine will. Similarly, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer recognize self-sacrifice as a constant in the “primal history of subjectivity:” the establishment of modern subjectivity is predicated upon substituting one’s immediate “natural” desires with socially mediated ones. This theme of self-sacrifice has been taken up by a range of commentators, who underscore its centrality in Hegel’s conception of “Man” (Bataille), the inextricability of sacrifice and recognition in Hegel’s analysis of religious self-consciousness (Bubbio), and the significance of self-sacrifice as a transhistorical concept in Adorno and Horkheimer (Prusik). However, sacrifice proper (*Opfer*)—an act of destruction involving an agent, a victim, and an ideal aim—remains under-theorized. My dissertation corrects this underemphasis. It identifies a latent theory of modern sacrifice (*Opfer*) in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, arguing that these thinkers share the view that modern reason is materially expressed through the destruction of individuals in the historical world. First, over and above their analyses of individual self-sacrifice, I argue that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer establish similar critiques of modern reason—grounded in what Hegel refers to as “the Understanding” (*Verstand*) and Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as

³ Throughout my dissertation, I frequently refer to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the “*Phenomenology*”.

⁴ Throughout my dissertation, I frequently refer to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as “*DoE*.”

“instrumental reason”—as an intellectual paradigm that abstracts or divides reality into distinct and opposed components (particular and universal, subject and object, etc.) and establishes the domination of one term over the other.⁵ Second, I emphasize where they describe this process utilizing the language of violence and death. Reading their critiques of destructive modern reason alongside their respective analyses of Robespierre’s Terror and the Holocaust, I then argue that modern reason is, for Hegel and the Frankfurt School, expressed via real bloodshed. This reading encourages us to take the modern intellectual process of isolation and destruction—that is, the logic of sacrifice—literally: over and above its abstract function in the establishment of subjectivity, sacrifice (*Opfer*) is a constitutive feature of modernity. Moreover, by historically situating sacrificial logic in the concomitant development of modern rationality and the modern world, my dissertation gives modern sacrifice its proper place in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer’s critiques of their historical moments, offering a revitalized political reading of these traditions.

In the rest of this Introduction, I outline my dissertation chapters; define key terms in my project, including sacrifice, modernity, and modern sacrifice; and analyze relevant secondary literature on sacrifice and modern sacrifice in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer.

In Chapter 1, I develop the main argument of the dissertation. I contend that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer furnish latent theories of modern sacrifice grounded in their critiques of modern reason, what Hegel refers to as the Understanding or *Verstand*, and what Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as instrumental reason. I describe these

⁵ A lengthier analysis of the similarities and differences between the Understanding and instrumental rationality occurs in Chapter 1.

theories of modern sacrifice as “latent,” because on the one hand, while Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly use the concept of sacrifice in their critiques of modern philosophy, economics, and politics in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they never establish a causal argument linking modern reason to modern sacrifice. On the other hand, Hegel rarely utilizes the concept of sacrifice in his analyses of modern reason, though he routinely characterizes the Understanding as inherently abstract, instrumental, and destructive, especially in his analyses of Kantian theoretical and practical philosophy, as well as 19th century natural science. Nonetheless, in his early text *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, Hegel establishes a direct correlation between reason and sacrifice by analyzing the similarities between Judaic and Kantian reason, as epitomized in Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac. Therefore, through his analogical interpretation of Abrahamic sacrifice, Hegel recognizes the fundamental interrelation of modern reason (*Verstand*) and sacrificial destruction.

In Chapter 2, I anchor the ontological intersection of modern reason and modern sacrifice in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer’s analyses of modern intersubjective interaction via a phenomenon that I term “discursive cunning.” In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer present two paradigmatic archetypes of modern subjectivity via characters from literature—Diderot’s Rameau’s nephew in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Homer’s Odysseus in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—who exploit conceptual ambiguity and formalistic rules of language in ways that mimic the separating and dominating movement of the Understanding. I argue that discursive cunning enables the protagonists to establish themselves as free independent subjects, which alienates them from their empirical contexts and

interlocutors. Notably, these slippery discursive techniques are instrumental for romantic proto-fascist political ideologies, which establish the legitimacy of their political positions by appealing to an anachronistic conception of antiquity. Through their analyses of these protagonists, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer therefore show that modern subjects use cunning, wit, and calculation to embody opposing perspectives, establishing an emotional distance between themselves and their worlds that makes room for the intellectualization and justification of modern sacrifice.

In Chapter 3, I build on this foundation to analyze the authors' engagements with modern sacrifice on the plane of political history during Robespierre's Reign of Terror and Hitler's Holocaust of the Jews. I claim that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's analyses of modern sacrifice in these events identify them as intensified, material expressions of modern instrumental reason, rather than irrational exceptions to or deviations from the progressive trajectory of modern history. First, I analyze Hegel's critique of the Reign of Terror, which he sees as a product of the mutual exclusivity of the general will and the individual will: the revolutionaries set up an immediate identity between the will of all and the will of each, rendering individuality as such logically impossible. As a result, all individuals became objects of suspicion worthy of sacrifice by guillotine, for the sake of guaranteeing the triumph of the state based on reason. Next, I analyze Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the fascist sacrifice of the Jews using their political-economic and pathological theories of antisemitism. Adorno and Horkheimer see fascist antisemitism as a manifestation of the logic of substitution, operative in both liberal capitalist ideology—in which the Jews represent the forces of capital, obsolete pre-modern tradition, and statelessness—as well as fascist ideology—in which the Jews

represent the metaphysical forces of evil and “negativity as such.” Finally, I assert that the principal commonality between modern sacrifice in the Terror and the Holocaust is the fact that the victims were all reduced to exchangeable representatives of an abstract category, “specimens” rather than living human beings. In sum, these instances of political sacrifice ultimately maintain the rational paradigm of instrumental reason, and inaugurate new innovative automated techniques of sacrifice that, Adorno and Horkheimer feared, have the potential to compromise the reflective capacity of reason itself.

In my Conclusion, I highlight a few original contributions to scholarship on Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, including developing a theory of modern material sacrifice (*Opfer*) based in their critiques of modern reason, recognizing these critiques as forms of ideology critique, establishing modern sacrifice as a point of convergence between these thinkers and Marx, and affirming the philosophical value of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Finally, I note some ways in which my project resonates in the contemporary world.

Definitions

Before analyzing the ways that my project contributes to philosophical scholarship on modern reason and modern sacrifice in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, I will first clarify certain concepts that are central to the work of Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, as well as my own project.

Modern/Modernity

“Modernity’ stems from anthropocentric thought! Or is it instrumental reason? Belief in science? Rationality? The rise of nation-states? A shift from a static to dynamic ideal (‘make it new’) or reflective consciousness? All have singly or in combination been praised or blamed for Modernity which, everyone knows, started with Gutenberg, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Luther, Montaigne, Bruno, Galileo, Descartes, Rousseau, American or French revolutionaries, or Hegel; or is it Nietzsche? One author’s Modernity starts circa 1500 then also, again, with the French Revolution...

- E. Rothstein, “Broaching the Cultural Logic of Modernity”⁶

As evidenced in the above quote, the overuse of the “modern” and “modernity” in Western philosophy has effectively reduced these concepts to vague multipurpose signifiers used to gesture at “the problem” with whatever phenomenon is being critiqued. My heavy reliance on the concept “modern” in this dissertation is not immune from this tendency, especially because Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, as well as the intellectual traditions that surrounded them and followed in their wake, are at least partially to blame for the expansion of the concept of modernity almost to the point of meaninglessness. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this project, “modernity” does not indicate a window of time in European history, as this window is relative; and moreover, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer use the concept in vastly different contexts. Rather, “modern,” as in “modern sacrifice,” indicates certain metaphysical presuppositions about rational cognition, the external world, and society (presuppositions that are, of course, historically situated). Rather, “modern” is used to describe a paradigm that takes the human subject’s supremacy over nature to be its primary principle. This supremacy, referred to in various

⁶ E. Rothstein, “Broaching the Cultural Logic of Modernity,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61, 2 (2000), 363.

places as the “domination of nature,” involves an understanding of metaphysical, epistemological, scientific, and moral causality that explicitly or implicitly posits rational subjective agency to be the prime mover of the universe and the source of universal truth. Alternatively, the collection of concepts that constitute the “pre-modern”—mythological, animistic, theological, or primitive—all point to a paradigm that subordinates the human to a transcendent or non-human force, like God or Nature. As such, the principle of the non-or-pre-modern is self-preservation. However, there’s a critical caveat to this conception: that is, modernity has never been fully modern. In the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer establish that “myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology”.⁷ In other words, the deeper truth of the “modern” anthropocentric conception of the world is that the conceptual “other” of the modern, namely, the nature-centric pre-modern, is internal to the modern, and was never fully overcome. For my purposes, the important feature of the relationship between the modern and the pre-modern is that Enlightenment philosophy, natural science, politics, and economics fail to recognize the dialectic between them, and are therefore unable to recognize a phenomenon like modern sacrifice as genuinely sacrificial, insofar as after the “death of god,” the practice of sacrifice becomes nonsensical. The dichotomy of “modern” and “pre-modern” is closely related to the dichotomy of rational and irrational, as well as Enlightenment and myth, both of which are defined in Chapter 1.

⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002) xvi.

Sacrifice

In their 1898 anthropological study titled *Sacrifice*, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss outline the “nature and function” of sacrifice throughout history and across cultures.⁸ They first define sacrifice as “a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects which he is concerned.”⁹ In this definition, Hubert and Mauss draw out the main components involved in sacrifice: first, a “victim” or an offering, that which is sacrificed; second, an agent of sacrifice, the “moral person” who enacts or “accomplishes” the sacrifice; and third, a higher purpose or “consecration,” the desired outcome or aim of sacrifice. All three of these terms are united in the moment of slaughter: Mauss and Hubert identify an “act of destruction” as the “essential act of sacrifice.”¹⁰ At the end of their broad analysis of various and divergent iterations of sacrifice, they note:

But if sacrifice is so complex, whence comes its unity? It is because, fundamentally, beneath the diverse forms it takes, it always consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the

⁸ Though Adorno and Horkheimer don’t reference Hubert and Mauss’ *Sacrifice* in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they do draw upon their *General Theory of Magic* from 1902. This latter text formulated a theory of mimesis, the precondition of sacrifice—as such, it’s likely that Adorno and Horkheimer had Hubert and Mauss’ anthropological understanding of mimesis in mind when formulating their analyses of sacrifice (in addition to other source materials). Chapter 3 discusses the various anthropological and social scientific roots of Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of mimetic sacrifice in more depth.

⁹ Hubert, Henri, Marcel Mauss, and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard. *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. Translated by W. D. Halls. Midway reprint. Midway Reprint. Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. 13.

¹⁰ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, 35.

mediation of the victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed.¹¹

Regardless of the specific ends that any given sacrifice aims to achieve, sacrifice always involves presupposing 1. a strict division between “profane” and “sacred”—a division we can recognize in the opposed categories of finite and infinite, “here” and “beyond,” empirical and ideal—and 2. that the only way to bridge the divide between them, to bring the transcendent or universal to earth, is through the destruction of a particular. Sacrifice in general therefore abides by first, the law of non-contradiction—affirming the sacred requires the nullification of its logical opposite, the profane, finite, or non-sacred—and second, means-ends instrumental logic—the destruction of the object causes or brings forth the desired transcendent element. In what follows, I will identify this sacrificial logic (and its requisite element of destruction) in the work of Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer as it manifests in rational philosophical processes of abstracting and subjugating the conceptual from the concrete empirical, social processes of intersubjective linguistic interaction, and political processes of instrumental mass murder.¹²

Modern Sacrifice

If we isolate the main features of both prior concepts, a few defining features of “modern sacrifice” become clear (in no particular order):

¹¹ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, 97.

¹² Chapter 1 begins with a deeper analysis of the specific ways that the term sacrifice itself is used in the work of Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer.

1. First, the affirmation of human subjectivity: The sacred or higher aims of modern sacrifice don't require a transcendent beyond or explicitly divine authority—though one may still be posited or implied—as modern sacrifice occurs within the paradigm of human-centric rational agency. However, as sacrifice requires that the finite particular and infinite universal meet in destruction, the separation of the domains of the concrete and ideal is maintained, though the latter is replaced with ideas like truth, equality and/or autonomy. As such, the desired outcome is achieved or realized via “rational” sacrifice, as opposed to “magical” sacrifice. In this sense, modern sacrifice affirms the supremacy of the human subject—both of the “roles” of agent and universal aim of modern sacrifice are technically occupied by human subjectivity: the human subject sacrifices to the God of human reason.
2. Second, the logic of non-contradiction: modern sacrifice presupposes the principle of identity, which postulates the independence of a thing and its opposite, and the requisite nullification of one of the two “terms” in the dichotomy as logically impossible. The most important dichotomies that undergird modern sacrificial processes in Hegel and the Frankfurt School are the oppositions of the universal and particular, ideal and material, rational and irrational, Enlightenment and myth, and subject and object.¹³

¹³ All these conceptual pairs are distinct from one another and shouldn't be understood as essentially interchangeable. However, there are two things that complicate this claim. First, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's main target in their critiques of modern reason is the logical form of identity or non-contradiction. As a result, these three thinkers often invoke these dichotomies near one another, as the above pairs are paradigmatic examples of the kind of mutually exclusive oppositions that they take issue with. Second, these specific conceptual pairs are related to one another, and are often understood through one another. For instance, Hegel criticizes Kant's idealism for dividing the world into subjective

3. Third, rational instrumentality and modern instruments: the requisite destructive gesture of modern sacrifice doesn't necessarily or explicitly occur in the context of a spiritual ritual: rather, modern sacrificial destruction occurs via rational instrumental processes and techniques that have been devised by human beings, with calculability, efficiency and replicability in mind. The guillotine and the death camp, for instance, represent modern technological innovations that multiplied the destructive gesture of ritual sacrifice efficiently and on a mass-scale. In other words, modern sacrifice uses modern instruments and methods. Where pre-modern sacrifice enacted the ritual through sacred ceremony, modern sacrifice is systematized for the sake of repetition and productivity.
4. Fourth, abstraction or formalization: Unlike "premodern" sacrifice, the object or victim of modern sacrifice is a representative of an abstract category, like "monarchist," "Jew," or "worker." In turn, the modern sacrificial victim is substitutable or exchangeable with any other member of that category, rather than an irreducible or singular entity, tied to the transcendent through kinship in the *hinc et nunc*, the here and now."¹⁴ The exchangeability of the victim in modern sacrifice indicates that the individual victim has been "abstracted" or reduced to replicable conceptual form, and therefore represents a "particular" rather than an "individual."

phenomena and objective noumena but refusing to posit the existence of objects independent of rational subjectivity. In turn, Kant subsumes material, particular objects under subjective, ideal, universal categories. Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer typically conflate subjective reason with Enlightenment, and counterpose it with objectivity, irrationality, and myth. Therefore, though these pairs are distinct, they are also related to one another.

¹⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer characterize the uniqueness of the "pre-modern" sacrificial victim as "non-exchangeable in the [sacrificial] exchange." Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

To bring out the specificity of my conception of modern sacrifice regarding this final point about the erasure of the victim's personhood, it's helpful to distinguish my understanding of modern sacrifice from Giorgio Agamben's conception of "bare life" as that which can be killed but not sacrificed. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben explains that modern politics is distinguished by an internal dichotomy of exclusion and inclusion, the distinction between bare life and political existence, *zoē* and *bios*. Previously, bare life was external to the political domain, but in the 20th century, through "modern democracy's decadence and gradual convergence with totalitarian states in post-democratic spectacular societies,"¹⁵ the destruction and disciplining of human life in its most exposed form has become the norm. Under these circumstances, bare life, or *homo sacer*, has been relocated inside the boundaries of modern civilization, as that which can be killed but not sacrificed, indicating that the life of *homo sacer* has been completely stripped of meaning. Agamben's primary example of bare life in the modern world was the killing of Jews during the Holocaust, who were dehumanized to such an extent that their deaths could not be meaningfully construed as sacrifice, murder, or homicide. Agamben explains:

The truth – which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils – is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, "as lice," which is to say, as bare life.¹⁶

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).14.

¹⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 68.

Agamben's point here is well taken, that the deaths of "bare life" in modern sacrificial episodes like the Holocaust amount to, in Hegel's words, "death that is without meaning, the sheer terror of the negative that contains nothing positive."¹⁷ Agamben's account presents a legitimate challenge to my conception, and it brings out a fundamental tension in both Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the fascist sacrifice of the Jews and in Hegel's analysis of Robespierre's sacrifice of suspicious individuality as such: there is ambiguity surrounding their characterizations of these killings as sacrifices or as instances of meaningless destruction. On the one hand, the sheer number of bodies, the efficiency of the destructive methods, and the indifference of the executioner to the singular humanity of the victims, would indicate that, if sacrifice is a process that recognizes or establishes the victim as, in some sense, meaningful, these killings can't be considered sacrifices. However, in addition to the reduction of the victim to an object, another key feature of modern sacrifice as it's developed in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer is the instrumental function of these sacrifices as material expressions of modern practical reasoning, which situates destruction within a rational teleological syllogism of means and ends. If, as Agamben contends, the Nazis exterminated the Jews as "lice," we could also say that the realization of the healthy, pure Nazi state was contingent upon the "extermination" of this Jewish lice, or, to use Himmler's words, "bacillus," which—if left alone—would cause the Aryan nation to "get sick and die."¹⁸ In Himmler's 1943 speech to a group of SS officers in Posen, Poland, he emphasized that

¹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 363.

¹⁸ Heinrich Himmler, "Himmler's Posen Speech - 'Extermination' (1943)," *The Nizkor Project*, accessed August 20, 2023, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/himmler-s-posen-speech-quot-extermination-quot>.

the officers had a duty to carry out “this most difficult task for the love of our people.”¹⁹ Though the reduction of human beings to mere bodies in modern mass-killings, as in the Holocaust, is a factor that challenges the conception of these killings as sacrifices, the reduction of human beings to “things” still functions as a means to a sacred-secular end, whether that “end” is the Final Solution, capitalist economic prosperity, the state based on reason, and so on. To deny this element would remove these sorts of mass sacrifices from the larger Western historical trajectory, which involves the liberal pursuit of universal human freedom through the “necessary” means of murder, expropriation, and conquest.

Literature Review²⁰

As noted, the relationship between modern reason and modern sacrifice—conceived as a process of instrumental violence that helps constitute modern rational society—has been relatively under-theorized in secondary literature on Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, though sacrifice in a metaphorical self-contained sense or a religious, ritualistic sense have been theorized. Literature dedicated to the role of sacrifice in Hegel’s philosophy tend to focus on sacrifice as a synonym for death;²¹ sacrifice as

¹⁹ Himmler, “Himmler’s Posen Speech,” jewishvirtuallibrary.org

²⁰ Hegel on “literature review” in philosophy: “This concern with aim or results, with differentiating and passing judgement on various thinkers is therefore an easier task than it might seem. For instead of getting involved in the real issue, this kind of activity is always away beyond it; instead of tarrying with it, and losing itself in it, this kind of knowing is forever grasping at something new; it remains essentially preoccupied with itself instead of being preoccupied with the real issue and surrendering to it.” Hegel, Preface, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 3.

²¹ In “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice,” Bataille claims that sacrifice, for Hegel, is a “subterfuge that reveals nothing;” but that “experiences” of sacrifice—as in the fight to the death in the *Phenomenology*—nevertheless brings agents of sacrifice closer to an awareness of death via the affective states of gaiety and

constitutive of Hegel's metaphysics;²² religious sacrifice as the surrender of material goods or "kenotic" self-emptying sacrifice as in Christ's sacrifice;²³ and the role sacrifice in the establishment of rational subjectivity.²⁴ Literature on sacrifice in the work of

anguish. Bataille draws these conclusions from Kojève's idiosyncratic existentialist and quasi-Marxist reading of Hegel, rather than the work of Hegel himself, evidenced by the fact that Bataille positions Lordship and Bondage at the center of Hegel's philosophy and the fact that Bataille conflates death and sacrifice. See Georges Bataille and Jonathan Strauss, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," *Yale French Studies*, no. 78 (1990) 16-18.

²² Joseph Cohen's "Hegel and the Gift of Sacrifice" focuses on sacrifice as an overarching feature of Hegel's metaphysics: Cohen posits violence as a pre-requisite of Spirit and justifies this claim via discussions of sacrifice throughout the *Phenomenology's* moments, culminating in a discussion of sacrifice in "Natural Religion." While I generally agree that the Hegelian dialectic is structurally sacrificial, this broad understanding of sacrifice is far removed from the way in which I discuss sacrifice, as a modern material phenomenon, that amounts to the instrumental murder of particular groups of people. See Joseph Cohen, "Hegel and the Gift of Sacrifice," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 15, no. 1 (Fall 2015) 16-22.

²³ In "Sacrifice in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit," Paulo Diego Bubbio argues that Hegelian "recognition" is a development of Kant's reflexive self-consciousness, and that sacrifice is the process through which Spiritual or Religious recognition occurs. Bubbio explains that Hegel uses two words to designate sacrifice: *Opfer*, "bad" sacrifice, which refers to ritualistic sacrifice, sacrifice in the ordinary sense; and *Aufopferung*, "good" sacrifice, which refers to self-sacrifice or giving up, a kind of determinate negation as a conscious process of self-negation or limitation that expects nothing in return—Bubbio uses Christ's sacrifice as a model of *Aufopferung*. However, as Caecilie Varslev-Pederson points out, Bubbio fails to acknowledge a third kind of sacrifice, that is, the sacrifice of the particular by the universal in modernity. This oversight fails to acknowledge that the "bad" sacrifice isn't exclusively religious: there is a secular, rational form of sacrifice, that also relies on the logic of destruction and sanctification, albeit in a veiled "progressive" form. See Paulo Diego Bubbio, "Sacrifice in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2012) 789, 804; and Caecilie Varslev-Pederson, "Letting Go: Sacrifice and Reconciliation in the Critiques of Modernity of Schiller, Hegel, and Kierkegaard (PhD Dissertation)" (unpublished; The New School for Social Research, July 2021) 130.

²⁴ In "The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution," Robert Brandom argues that identification and sacrifice are fundamental to the constitution of human subjectivity: identification with an external determination or entity is only achieved if a subject is willing to risk or sacrifice themselves for it. For example, Brandom says, when a person "risks" or "sacrifices" their job due to a moral conviction, they identify more closely with that moral conviction. Brandom's conception of risk here recalls Hegel's analyses of the individual's self-sacrifice for and identification with the modern state in the *Philosophy of Right* and *Natural Law*, as well as the "life and death struggle" in the confrontation between Lord and Bondsman in the *Phenomenology*. While Brandom is correct that metaphorical self-sacrifice—as in Freudian sublimation or taking a stand against one's boss—assists in the development of rational subjectivity, the kinds of self-sacrifice that Hegel discusses *vis-à-vis* the modern state and the life and death struggle aren't metaphorical: the transformative dimension of these instances of self-sacrifice requires that the subject confront their own mortality. As Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology*: "Consequently, the true sacrifice of *being-for-self* is solely that in which it surrenders itself as completely as in death, yet in this renunciation no less preserves itself." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, A. V. Miller, and John N. Findlay, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Reprint., Oxford Paperbacks (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013) 308. In other words, the individual transcends their immediate, selfish existence but putting that very

Adorno and Horkheimer either discuss sacrifice in the in the context exegeses,²⁵ or understand sacrifice as a fundamentally aesthetic phenomenon.²⁶ The most significant difference between these dominant analyses of sacrifice in Hegel and the Frankfurt School and my own analysis is that these sources understand sacrifice as self-contained, and as such, doesn't result in material death or destruction. In this way, most discussions of "sacrifice" in Hegel and the Frankfurt School use the concept metaphorically. The value of reading Hegel through the work of Adorno and Horkheimer consists precisely in identifying how *literal* sacrifice persists in the modern world, and the ways in which these sacrifices are consciously or unconsciously upheld by the divisive and destructive machinations of modern reason. While the discussions of metaphorical sacrifice in Hegel

existence on the line. See Robert B. Brandom, "The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 1 (January 2007) 131.

²⁵ For example, Charles Prusik devotes an entire section to the concept of sacrifice in *Adorno and Neoliberalism The Critique of Exchange Society*, but merely describes sacrifice as it's presented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* rather than analyze the relationship between sacrifice and neoliberalism, as the title of his book promises. See Charles A. Prusik, *Adorno and Neoliberalism: The Critique of Exchange Society*, Critical Theory and the Critique of Society Series (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) 122-127. Notably, Robert Hullot-Kentor's essay "Back to Adorno" is an exception to most secondary literature on sacrifice in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as Hullot-Kentor singles out the centrality of sacrifice to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, contextualizes it in relation to Adorno's earlier work on Kierkegaard, and acknowledges the fundamental connection between mimesis and sacrifice. See Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 23-45.

²⁶ In David Pan's account, Adorno believes that modern sacrifice, as a mimetic practice dictated by identity, can be sublated by re-establishing a non-identical mimesis, a dialectical relation of nature and history not premised on domination. Adorno sees this non-identical mimesis in artworks, which express the rational manipulation of nature by and for a subject, while also expressing a non-conceptual "truth content" independent of the rational subject. For Adorno, artwork therefore functions like Hegel's conception of the Holy Trinity, inasmuch as they both model the sublation sacrificial reason via reconciliatory sacrifice. Pan contends that Adorno's position on the reconciliatory potential of art is both incorrect and unrealizable, as it is violent sacrifice proper (*Opfer*) that "aesthetically" establishes a community's ethical norms through their collective rational and emotional experience of the sublimity of sacrificial violence. Leaving aside Pan's own Kantian theory of ethical-aesthetic sacrifice, his reduction of Adorno's conception of sacrifice to an exclusively aesthetic one fails to acknowledge the philosophical, economic, and political role of modern sacrifice, as developed in *DoE*, which is related to mimesis, but can't be reduced to it, especially when modern sacrifice—as in technologized industrial capitalism—becomes self-perpetuating. See David Pan, *Sacrifice in the Modern World: On the Particularity and Generality of Nazi Myth* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

and in the Frankfurt School aren't *wrong*, they nevertheless fail to see the connection between the bivalent and exclusionary logic of the Understanding, instrumental reason, and the modern sacrifice of people in the modern world.

There are a few noteworthy exceptions to these primarily metaphorical discussions of sacrifice: namely, María del Rosario Acosta López on modern sacrifice and reason in Hegel, Charles H. Clavey on modern sacrifice and capitalism in Adorno and Horkheimer, and Wendy Brown on neoliberal "sacrificial citizenship."

In "The Gorgon's Head: Hegel on Law and Violence in the Frankfurt Fragments," María del Rosario Acosta López emphasizes that Hegel's critiques of law in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* function as arguments "against modern forms of sovereignty and their intrinsic conceptual relation to a sacrificial auto-immunitarian violence," that long precede similar arguments declared by thinkers like "Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Jean-Luc Nancy."²⁷ López continues that Hegel's critique of Judeo-Kantian law also functions as a critique of contemporary legal violence as an outgrowth of the "Western political tradition and the modern notion of state and right."²⁸ López explicitly connects Hegel's critique of sacrificial law in the Frankfurt fragments to Hegel's critique of Absolute Freedom and the Terror, which thereby acknowledges it as an instance of modern sacrifice, even though "sacrifice" is conspicuously absent from Hegel's analysis of the Terror in the *Phenomenology*.²⁹ Therefore, López explicitly

²⁷ María Del Rosario Acosta López, "The Gorgon's Head: Hegel on Law and Violence in the Frankfurt Fragments," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 2 (July 1, 2014): 31.

²⁸ López, "The Gorgon's Head," 31.

²⁹ López explains: "This is why Hegel describes the step from law's presupposition to its empowerment as leading ultimately to the final and most definitive (destructive) accomplishment of the

argues that Hegel's critique of Kantian law *and* his critique of Absolute Freedom and Terror are fundamentally critiques of their shared characteristic, sacrifice; and second, that Hegel's critiques of sacrificial law are also applicable to later post-19th century forms of law that enable sacrificial violence. The first claim is significant insofar as she seems to be the only other scholar drawing a direct link from Hegel's analogical critique of Abrahamic sacrifice to the Jacobin sacrifice. Regarding the second claim, López mentions both the unconscious uptake of Hegel's critique of sacrificial law by postmodern thinkers and the applicability of Hegel's critique to contemporary law and history, but she never revisits these two points. Though not squarely in the tradition of Derrida and Agamben, the most faithful inheritors of Hegel's critique of Kantian practical philosophy as both formally and materially sacrificial are Adorno and Horkheimer, who recognize the sacrificial dimension of modern liberal, fascist, and capitalist legal apparatuses. In this way, my project echoes López' reading of Hegel as formulating a theory of sacrificial modern reason, but it fills out her critique by applying it to the "sacrificial auto-immunitarian violence" legislated by Hitler and the architects of capital.

In "Myth, Sacrifice, and the Critique of Capitalism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," Charles Clavey offers two significant contributions to the theorization of sacrifice in Adorno and Horkheimer. First, Clavey analyzes the specific anthropological

sacrificial circle. When the Ideal in the law seeks to be actualized... this results in the merciless exercise of "the most revolting and harshest tyranny, and utterly extirpat[ing] all life; for it is only over death that unity hovers" (189; 280). Hence, Hegel delineates here what he will later expand in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2008) under the logic of absolute freedom and terror: the disastrous consequences of an abstract empowered universality (one could also say a "fanatic" version of modern rationality) that, blinded by the vacuity of its conviction, oversteps any reality opposed to the idea it seeks to actualize." López, "The Gorgon's Head," 38-9.

literature that Adorno and Horkheimer drew upon during their research for *DoE*, including Lowie, Hubert, Mauss, and Caillois, who were essential in the development of the concept of mimesis. Second, Clavey explicitly connects Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of “secular sacrifice” in *DoE* with two modern sacrificial features of capitalist social relations, as developed on Marx: namely, labor contracts and wage labor.³⁰ In the former, Clavey helps elucidate the notoriously murky idea of myth in *DoE*, and in the latter, Clavey provides a lucid and convincing analysis of sacrifice in *DoE* as part of a critique of capitalism. While Clavey’s article is, in my view, one of the most essential pieces of secondary literature on sacrifice in *DoE*, the two-part structure of Clavey’s article—first, anthropological; second, political-economic—overlooks the essential mediation of Enlightenment philosophy in the connection between the “premodern” and the “modern” in Adorno and Horkheimer’s idea of sacrifice. The alienation of the human subject from nature as developed in modern social and political philosophy (especially in Kant and Hegel) is what enables Adorno and Horkheimer to bring the anthropological concept of sacrifice to bear on economic phenomena in the first place. Clavey is correct to point out that by bringing together the anthropological concept of sacrifice and the sacrificial dimensions of capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer “shed new light on the theological dimension of capitalism.”³¹ Nonetheless, Adorno and Horkheimer *also* show that the irrational “essence” of modern sacrifice manifests via its “rational” appearances: for instance, the deception involved in the labor contract, which conceals exploitation in

³⁰ Charles H. Clavey, “Myth, Sacrifice, and the Critique of Capitalism in Dialectic of Enlightenment,” *History of European Ideas*, July 4, 2023, 1–18.

³¹ Clavey, “Myth, Sacrifice, and the Critique of Capitalism in Dialectic of Enlightenment,” 13.

the guise of equality, succeeds due to the assumption that both parties in the exchange are free, rational, autonomous agents. The success of this deception hinges upon the fact that both parties take freedom and equality to be “natural” features of modern subjectivity—liberal ideological tenets that originated in Enlightenment philosophy.

Finally, the thesis of my dissertation resembles Wendy Brown’s thesis in her article “Sacrificial Citizenship,” which has no direct connection to Hegel or the Frankfurt School. In her article, Brown explains that liberal democracies of the past upheld ideological and material reciprocity between individuals and the state, which states made good on by offering public goods and social security. Neoliberal states of the 21st century, on the other hand, which have been “economized,” have retained the notion of individual civil responsibility and individual freedom but have done away with legal protections and economic regulations. As a result, freedom in neoliberal society is transformed from a political concept that unites citizens to an economic concept that divides them and transforms the “responsibilized” citizens of the polity into atomized units of human capital—what Brown calls “sacrificial” citizens. In Brown’s words:

In place of the social contractarian promise, which is that the political aggregate will secure the individual against life-threatening danger from without and within, individuals may now be legitimately sacrificed to the whole where the whole may reference anything from the sustainability of a particular firm to that of a national or post-national economy.³²

³² Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics: Wendy Brown,” *Constellations* 23, no. 1 (March 2016). 10.

Rather than enjoying legal protections, and, in return, participating in both minor and major patriotic sacrifices for the sake of the collective, neoliberal citizens can now be “sacrificed to capital’s needs, vicissitudes and inequalities at their job, in their nation or post national constellation.”³³ Brown continues: “this citizen might be said to be oblatory vis-à-vis the project of economic growth; thus we have stumbled into the theological dimension of capitalism.”³⁴ Brown’s article thus presents a dialectical ideological, political, and economic critique of the neoliberal sacrificial citizen who is sacrificed on the altar of capital—a position that is articulated both more loosely and in more detail in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Moreover, Hegel’s analysis of individual military sacrifice vis-à-vis the modern state—addressed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation—also recognizes that such a sacrifice can only be understood as rationally and freely chosen if there is an identical relation between the individual and the state (a relationship that Hegel *doesn’t* recognize in the modern states of his era). Like Brown, my dissertation acknowledges that the sacrificial logic that undergirds capitalism was already at play in liberal and fascist political ideology. However, my project augments Brown’s insofar as it looks closely at the philosophical scaffolding that lent support to the sacrifice of the liberal citizen and state as it emerged in 18th and 19th century Enlightenment moral and theoretical philosophy, natural science, and political economy. In other words, the political ideological and material groundwork for neoliberal sacrificial citizenship was laid before the 20th and 21st century neoliberal era, though the idea of freedom as

³³ Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship”, 9.

³⁴ Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship,” 9.

fundamentally economic didn't play as central a role in the development of modern personhood. In other words, the liberal "social contractarian promise" that Brown references as that which was abandoned in the neoliberal age wasn't as effective as she implies, as, for Hegel at least, social contract theory helped establish the metaphysical ground for sacrificial citizenship.³⁵

A Note on Horseshoe Theory

Discussions of modern political sacrifice that compare the French Revolution and the National Socialist project run the risk of conflating the two and invoking horseshoe theory—a form of both-sides-ism that de-historicizes instances of politically-motivated violence and lumps them together under the banners of totalitarianism and/or extremism, regardless of the context, intention, strategy, or consequences of that violence. This conflation involves first, the intellectualization and dichotomization of the ideas of violence and non-violence as mutually exclusive, and second, the subordination of empirical instances of violence to the abstract ideal of non-violence, expressing the movement of modern reason which logically necessitates the sacrifice of empirical particularity to subjective ideal universality—exactly the kind of reasoning that I contend justifies and enables the modern sacrifice of human beings.

Leaving that aside, large-scale political sacrifice of "the enemy" is undoubtedly a cornerstone of modern revolutions and state-building projects across the political spectrum. The question of faithfully distinguishing between instances of political

³⁵ On Hegel's critique of social contract theory, see Lewis P Hinchman, *Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984) 114-115.

sacrifice requires careful historical and sociological analysis. As my dissertation research is philosophical, my response to proponents of horseshoe theory with regard to modern sacrifice is—for better or worse—also philosophical. Structurally, modern political sacrifice—as I conceive of it here—relies on, among other things, 1. an affirmation of the subject over the object, 2. the law of identity, where a “thing” and its “opposite,” like universality and particularity, are mutually exclusive, and 3. formalism, which allows individuals to be reduced to instantiations of abstract categories. These characteristics also define the Enlightenment logic expressed in the positions of Faith and Pure Insight, which Hegel posits as prerequisites for Absolute Freedom and Terror. Hegel indicates three features of these viewpoints: “...each [“term” of Faith and Pure Insight] is an *intrinsic being on its own account*, apart from all relationships; second, each stands in relationship with the *actual* world in an antithesis to pure consciousness; and third, each is related within pure consciousness to the other.”³⁶ These positions uphold an unconditioned identity or immediate conflation of the universal and the individual—a movement that effectively negates determinate particularity and individuality, and preserves the pure self-contained meta-subject of the universal (for our purposes, the state occupies this universal position). This exclusion or rejection of particularity also makes these perspectives hostile to historical or empirical content or contingency: they deal in ahistorical absolutes. These specific features—the affirmation of a pure unconditioned relationship between the individual and the state, and the meaningful exclusion or negation of particular considerations outside of this identity, like material or historical

³⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 324.

contingencies—are features that distinguish the kind of modern political sacrifice I analyze, as represented in the Terror and the Holocaust. Hegel pointed out, for instance, that the abstract undifferentiated unity of the people and the state was paradoxically championed by Jacobin leadership—by leaders of an individual faction, the existence of which contradicts the logic it espoused. Furthermore, while this faction originally paid lip service to the promotion of racial and gender equality and the material redistribution of property, which were the concrete and material demands of the Sans-culottes, the Jacobins swiftly shed these priorities when it became clear that their bourgeois supporters had no intention of giving anything away. As these aims were ultimately inessential to his nationalist project, Robespierre executed his former supporter and Sans-culotte leader, Hébert, with ease.³⁷ This revolutionary agenda, which posits the abstract identity of individual and state, and regards specific social and economic matters to be superfluous to the state-making project, is an ideological blueprint that can easily justify indiscriminate mass-scale human sacrifice, as this position fails to acknowledge meaningful ontological differences—whether those be racial, ethnic or economic. Further, this position advances an abstractly universalist agenda no matter what, without regard for changing historical circumstances or an objective state of affairs.³⁸ Therefore,

³⁷ H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder Vol. II: The Odyssey of Spirit* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1997). 397.

³⁸ Marx's conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, in which the working class seizes the means of production from the capitalist class to eventually abolish class itself (and enable the "withering away" of the state), is a revolutionary vision that likely entails the political sacrifice of capitalists, who won't surrender their property without a fight. Though this is an example of a position that could involve mass-scale modern political sacrifice, certain features of its ideological configuration could have different consequences for the logic and severity of sacrifice it employs. First, the historical materialist understanding of politics recognizes the state as metaphysically and historically mediated by particularity, including, but not limited to, class position—a commitment that sets it apart from viewpoints that only recognize the abstract conflation of individual citizen and universal state. In addition, for Marxists,

while there could theoretically be both right-wing and left-wing instances of modern sacrifice, some versions of sacrifice—as in the Holocaust and the Terror—are premised on the metaphysical exclusion of both particularity *and* history, which enable the ideological “blindness” to both difference and changing political circumstances that characterized the aforementioned episodes of mass-scale modern political sacrifice.

everything that exists emerged in space and time: theoretically, the “materialist” dimension of Marxism holds Marxists accountable to the empirical state of affairs, the “concrete facts,” rather than a fictional or ideal image of reality (as in the liberal fantasy of equality and freedom, as well as the fascist fantasy of racial purity).

Chapter 1: Reason as a Weapon

Scholarship on the topic of sacrifice in Hegelian philosophy is extensive, and rightly so: metaphorical and literal references to sacrifice show up all over Hegel's corpus. Sacrifice in its most common sense—as a ritual practice of bloodshed, involving more than one entity and requisite destruction, translated in German as *Opfer*—is discussed in Chapter 8 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on Religion, but much more frequently, Hegel utilizes the concept of sacrifice as a means to describe the development of human subjectivity—self-sacrifice, translated in German as *Aufopferung*.³⁹ On its most basic level, in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel uses the concept of sacrifice to describe the transition from the first “immediate” moment of actuality to the second moment of actuality: when contingency is posited, and it sheds its arbitrariness and status as merely possible—when its conditions “perish”—and become essential.⁴⁰ This process manifests in the movement of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* from “Skepticism” to “Unhappy Consciousness”: while the former shape of subjectivity remained holed up in stubborn rejection of and alienation from the world, the Christian Unhappy Consciousness sublates its navel-gazing position by sacrificing its material belongings and particular will to the universal will: by giving itself over to spiritual service, self-consciousness is actualized or carried out. In a literal sense, in the *Lectures on the*

³⁹ This interpretive distinction between sacrifice as *Opfer* and *Aufopferung* is taken from Paulo Diego Bubbio's masterful analysis of sacrifice in German Idealist and late modern philosophy in his text *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition*.

⁴⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Klaus Brinkmann, and Daniel O Dahlstrom, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I, Part I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), §146.

Philosophy of History, Hegel notes that the singular lives of world historical individuals are “sacrificed” on the historical stage for the development of world spirit,⁴¹ a phenomenon that exemplifies Hegel’s opinion that the individual can be sacrificed for the sake of upholding the integrity of the state, as, in its ideal form, a state is nothing other than the true expression of the individual, its “substantial basis and end.”⁴² A century after Hegel, Critical Theorists Adorno and Horkheimer also stressed the centrality of sacrifice for the establishment of selfhood. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they claim that sacrifice is a constant in the “primal history of subjectivity,”⁴³ and that “civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice.”⁴⁴ Like Freud, Adorno and Horkheimer understand the establishment of rational subjectivity as predicated upon suppressing or giving up one’s immediate “natural” drives and desires and replacing them with socially-mediated ones: this calculated self-sacrifice marks the transition from animal to human citizen. This kind of sacrifice involves, in scholar Paulo Diego Bubbio’s words, “giving something up, with an emphasis on reflexivity – sacrifice as self-sacrifice.”⁴⁵ These instances of self-sacrifice in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer can be described as

⁴¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Ruben Alvarado (WordBridge Publishing, 2011), 30.

⁴² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), §268.

⁴³ Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 38.

⁴⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002), 43.

⁴⁵ Paulo Diego Bubbio, “Sacrifice in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2012): 797–815, 800.

symbolic or abstract insofar as they only involve one entity—a subject—and don't require actual destruction or murder (with the exception of Hegel's self-sacrifice in service of the state), as the annihilation of the subject would bar them from reaping the benefits of their act of self-emptying, giving up, or sublimating.⁴⁶

Over and above their shared understanding of sacrifice as a necessary feature of rational selfhood, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer also share a philosophical critique of the tendency of modern consciousness to pursue truth and knowledge via an intellectual process of dividing up or “abstracting” reality into two distinct and opposed components—the infinite and the finite, the particular and the universal, the subject and the object, the human and the natural, etc.—and establishing the “domination” of one term by the other. Furthermore, in describing this abstracting process of modern reason,⁴⁷ all three thinkers regularly utilize the language of violence and death. For instance, Hegel describes the modern scientific pursuit of organizing and categorizing sensuous reality as “depriv[ing it] of life and Spirit, of being flayed and then seeing its skin wrapped around

⁴⁶ Even though Hegel does seem to endorse self-sacrifice in service of the state—as in, for instance, the death of a soldier—he does so only from the speculative metaphysical standpoint of identity between the individual subject and the collective state, *not* the standpoint of reflection, or our modern standpoint. To help elucidate this dynamic, I've added clearer language to this Hegelian statement: “Consequently, the true sacrifice of [selfish, individualistic, atomized] *being-for-self* is solely that in which it surrenders itself as completely as in death, yet in this renunciation no less preserves itself [as larger than its mere self-serving individuality].” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, A. V. Miller, and John N. Findlay, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Reprint., Oxford Paperbacks (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 308. I discuss self-sacrifice in relation to the state in more detail in Chapter 3.

⁴⁷ In what follows, I will use the phrase “modern reason” to represent a particular standpoint of reason exemplary of the Hegelian idea of the Understanding (*Verstand*) and Adorno and Horkheimer's idea of instrumental reason, both a faculty of abstraction and the modern paradigm of knowledge, typified by the division of universal and the particular and subject and object. Thus, “modern reason” in this essay shouldn't be confused with Hegel's use of the concept of Reason (*Vernunft*) as the speculative faculty that recognizes the true unity of the universal and the particular.

a lifeless knowledge and its conceit.”⁴⁸ Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer state that: “The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death.”⁴⁹ In other words, the modern rational attempt to control the irrational forces of nature and establish a less bloody means of existence—what they deem “mimesis” in the first instance, the impersonation of brutal nature—is itself a new kind of mimesis, also permeated with violence and destruction, albeit in a different form. If we combine Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer’s shared analyses of the isolating and dominating movement of modern reason with their invocation of violence and death in relation to it, the structure of sacrifice as *Opfer*—involving two separate entities and the requisite destruction of one of them—begins to take shape. Indeed, I contend that sacrifice as a destructive material expression of modern reason, what the former calls “the Understanding,” and the latter call “instrumental reason,” shows up in the work of Hegel *implicitly* and in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer *explicitly*. Though these thinkers don’t develop comprehensive theories of *modern sacrifice* as a bloody expression and outcome of Enlightenment, such a theory is nonetheless legible on the surface of their collective oeuvres.

First, I will outline Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer’s shared critiques of modern reason as premised on the division of universal and particular and the destruction of the latter by the former. Subsequently, I will augment Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of modern reason with an analysis of their theorization of sacrifice, and finally, in light of the connection between modern reason and sacrifice forged by Adorno and Horkheimer, I

⁴⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Reprint., Oxford Paperbacks, 31.

⁴⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 45.

will present Hegel's brief critique of modern reason and sacrifice in the *Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, and suggest that, viewed through the mediating lens of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of sacrifice, Hegel's critique of modern reason allows us to envision the sublation of sacrificial reason via speculative reason.

1.1 Hegel's Critique the Understanding: Isolation and Destruction

Hegel's critique of modern reason occurs via the concept of the Understanding (*Verstand*). Though Hegel employs the concept of the Understanding in different contexts,⁵⁰ there are certain general characteristics of the Understanding that are consistent between them and relevant to the phenomenon I term "modern sacrifice." Metaphysically, Hegel understands logic, nature, and human history to be fundamentally unified, as differentiated but interwoven moments of the unfolding of the Absolute. As such, a detailed analysis of the Hegelian concept of the Understanding requires scrutinizing the different ways it shows up logically, metaphysically, and historically, whilst keeping in mind that Hegel understands all of these domains to be—in an absolute or speculative sense—identical.⁵¹

Logically, Hegel uses the concept of the Understanding to refer to the first "moment" of a tripartite logical process that he refers to as the "Abstract

⁵⁰ The German *Verstand* is sometimes translated as "Intellect," and is frequently mentioned in the same breath as "reflection" and the "standpoint of reflection." Though Understanding and Intellect both stand in for *Verstand*, "Reflection" is sometimes associated with *Verstand* and sometimes with speculative Reason, or *Vernunft*. Nonetheless, I use the "standpoint of reflection" as the perspective of the Understanding.

⁵¹ Though the fundamental "necessity" and "universality" of logic and the "contingency" and "particularity" of historical time would seem to negate or confound a common application of the concept, Hegel understands the structure of reality to be itself contradictory, which forces us to rethink the incompatibility of these concepts.

Understanding.”⁵² The function of this first logical moment is to separate out the objective determinate qualities of phenomena, so that, in a basic sense, it can be cognized or reflected upon. Without the Understanding’s process of abstraction, experience would appear to us as an indistinguishable soup of information that couldn’t be thought about in any meaningful way—accordingly, this abstraction of the Understanding is an essential component of thinking in general.⁵³ In spite of the fundamentality of the Understanding’s process of abstraction for thought, Hegel explains that if the Understanding is taken as a logical moment on its own, *without* recognizing it within the larger more complex movement of thought, the Understanding’s function of separation and isolation isn’t “neutral” *vis-à-vis* the manifold particularity of non-ideal reality: the Understanding posits an opposition between the universal determination and the particular phenomenon that it was abstracted from. In turn, paradoxically, the Understanding’s action of “differentiation” is dictated by “identity,” insofar as the abstracted universal term is understood as fixated, static, and isolated. When considered in isolation from particular content, the purely formal universal is emptied of meaning, and as a result, must take on the arbitrary contingent content it’s (seemingly) isolated from. As Hegel notes, “[the abstract universal’s] opposition to the particular is so rigorously maintained, that it is at the same time also reduced to the character of a particular again.”⁵⁴ In other words, the

⁵² Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1*, §79-80.

⁵³ The Understanding’s essentiality consists in its ability to enable the development of reason: “The determinate and abstract concept is the *condition*, or rather than *essential moment*, of reason; it is form quickened by spirit in which the finite, thought the universality in which it refers to itself, is internally kindled, is posited as dialectical and thereby is the *beginning* of the appearance of reason.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni, 2015, 540.

⁵⁴ Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1*, §80.

position of “identical” and self-contained abstraction is revealed to be—and reverts into—particular difference, which propels thought into the second moment of the logical process.

The second “negatively rational” or “dialectical” moment can be understood as the other side of the coin of the Understanding’s endless abstraction from all else: the Understanding’s pursuit of identity and fixity requires constant movement and differentiation. For example, while the Understanding wants to partition and reify the universal “redness” from a red apple, negative reason recognizes that “redness” is only a meaningful universal if it is “filled” with content (redness as a determination or quality of the apple). In Hegel’s words, in the “second” logical moment, the Understanding’s “finite characterisations or formulae supersede themselves, and pass into their opposites.”⁵⁵ Hegel refers to this moment as one of “Reason,” indicating its logical sophistication over and above Understanding, as it posits a necessary connection between the universal and particular or individual. However, the “Negatively Rational” nonetheless appears as a pathological tendency to negate—which J.N. Findlay’s describes as “a destructive and contradictory process.”⁵⁶ Though the dialectical moment correctly acknowledges that a thing and its other—universal and particular, thought and world, life and death—are

⁵⁵ Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1*, §81. Hegel describes the kind of thought characteristic of the Understanding as “finite,” as opposed to speculative or “infinite” thought. In Hegel’s words: “To put it formally, that which comes to an end, that which [merely] *is*, is called finite, and it ceases where it is connected to its other and is thus limited by the latter. The finite therefore consists in its relation to its other which is its negation, and presents itself as its boundary. Thinking, however, is with itself, relates to itself, and has itself for its object. In having a thought as my object, I am with myself. I, the thinking, is accordingly infinite because in thinking it relates itself to an object that it is itself.” Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1*, §28.

⁵⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel et al., *Hegel’s Logic: Being Part One of “Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences” (1830)*, Reprinted (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/help/foreword.htm>

related, the kind of relation that Negative Reason posits is a relation of formal contradiction—a “logical” impossibility. Without the “third” logical moment, the “speculative” or “positively rational” logical moment that recognizes that the contradiction of identity and non-identity is ultimately a true and enduring feature of Absolute reality, thought “ends” at this negative dialectical stage, and either gets stuck in a mode of constant differentiation between selfsameness and difference, a ceaseless disassociation; or bottoms out in a premature cessation of thinking *a la* modern skepticism, a dogma of abstraction which Hegel sees as both a precursor and product of Kantian “critical philosophy.”⁵⁷

Intellectually, Hegel uses “Understanding” to denote particular modes of thinking characterized by the one fell swoop of abstraction and isolation. While Hegel does use “Understanding” in reference to pre-modern modes of thought, he establishes the paradigm of the Understanding as the *modus operandi* of Enlightenment thought. Specifically, the modern intellectual paradigm of the Understanding or the “standpoint of reflection”⁵⁸ shows up throughout in the modern theology; the so-called “subjective” philosophies of Kant, Jacobi, Locke and Fichte; modern empiricism and natural scientific thought; and formal mathematical thought.⁵⁹ In spite of the breadth of the concept’s application in Hegel’s work, we can nonetheless get a good idea of what Hegel’s idea of the Understanding is if we look at the ways that Hegel utilizes this concept in his

⁵⁷ Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1*, §81.

⁵⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. Walter Serf and H. S. Harris (State University of New York Press, 1988), 30.

⁵⁹ For the Understanding in mathematical Consciousness, see Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1*, §231.

critiques of Kantian philosophy specifically, not only because Hegel’s utilization of the concept of the “Understanding” is a reference to Kant’s use of the concept of the “Understanding,”⁶⁰ but also because Hegel’s critiques of Kant—which many scholars agree are often uncharitable and even incorrect—nonetheless function as an a vehicle for Hegel’s critique of modern Enlightenment writ large, and extends the notion of the Understanding as an intellectual tendency into the domain of modern Spirit.

In Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Understanding is our faculty for judging or thinking, a way to conceptually unify our representations of objects given to us via sensory intuition.⁶¹ Over and above these empirical conceptualizations, other “ancestral” concepts—*a priori* “categories”—function as the transcendental conditions for experience itself, which “contain nothing empirical.”⁶² Both empirical and “pure” concepts of the Understanding enable cognition in general, as they translate diffuse sense data into meaningful information. However, Kant maintains that even though we can cognize representations of objects given in intuition, we can’t have knowledge of objects “in themselves.” Due to the fact that representations are always already mediated by these categories, there’s no way to prove the existence of objects independent of human subjectivity, as establishing such knowledge would require us to transcend the limits of possible experience. Because we must unavoidably use the apparatus of reason to acquire knowledge about the world, there’s no way to determine the ontological status of the

⁶⁰ Lewis P Hinchman, *Hegel’s Critique of the Enlightenment* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984), 73.

⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 15th printing, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), A69/B94.

⁶² Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A95.

objects in intuition. Kant explains that reason tends to overstep its subjective boundary and assert contradictory metaphysical claims or antinomies, like positing the finitude or infinitude of the world. For Hegel however, reason isn't merely a subjective cognitive faculty for positing isolated determinations and judgments, and therefore can't commit logical fallacies. Rather, Hegelian Reason is the speculative faculty that grasps the unity of opposites as they are *in themselves*. Put differently, for Hegel, antinomies aren't "errors" of reason, they are rather true expressions of the contradictory nature of reality as a differentiated whole that contains opposition within it. By drawing a dividing line between ideal subjective "reason" and objective, empirical "things in themselves," Kant thus alienates the rational subject from lived reality and forecloses the possibility of understanding true objectivity.⁶³ In sum, Kantian theoretical philosophy treats reason as an instrument acting upon the world—as the abstracting and isolating Understanding—rather than the ideal-rational expression of a dialectical whole that includes both substance and subject.

In Hegel's view, Kant's moral philosophy also expresses the one-sided character of the Understanding, as for Kant, practical morality involves the rational agent freely willing a moral law derived from reason itself, whose content is not determined by any contingent conditions, like one's inclinations.⁶⁴ The moral law must be universally

⁶³ "*Objectivity* here means the element of *universality* and *necessity*, i.e., the element of the thought-determinations themselves – the so-called *a priori*. But the Critical philosophy expands the opposition in such a way that experience *in its entirety*, i.e., both those elements together, belongs to *subjectivity* and nothing remains opposite it but the *thing-in-itself*." Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1*, §41.

⁶⁴ In Kant's view, "...the particular—impulses, inclinations, pathological love, sensuous experience, or whatever else it is called—the universal is necessarily and always something alien and objective." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 211.

applicable, as well as freely legislated and followed by the autonomous rational subject. By Kant's lights, if the law expressed a particular set of empirical circumstances or contingent content, the law couldn't be categorical, nor could it be considered "free" from non-rational determinations. Instead, Kant holds, the moral law is a "fact of pure reason of which we are conscious *a priori* and which is apodictically certain."⁶⁵ Yet, as we've just seen, theoretical Reason can't be indifferent to the sensuous world, as the appearance of objects in our experience is what enables all cognition in the first place. This isn't the case for Kant's "moral" reason, as the moral law must be "mixed with no alien addition of empirical stimuli" and "regards [the empirical] with contempt."⁶⁶ This inconsistency between Kant's theoretical and moral philosophy is significant because when Kant removes history and society from the equation, Kant provides rational agents with nothing but an empty shell of a moral law—merely the form of law, the scaffolding of a law.⁶⁷ As a result, the moral law becomes indifferent to and detached from the domain that demanded the establishment of the morality in the first place: the domain of intersubjective life. In Lukács' words, Kant's moral philosophy "expels man's living existence from ethics, subjugates it by means of laws alien to life, and thus transforms

⁶⁵ Kant, Immanuel, "Critique of Practical Reason," *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, 13th printing. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 47/66.

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary J. Gregor and Jens Timmermann, Revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25.

⁶⁷ In Adorno's words, "Moral conduct is evidently more concrete than a merely theoretical one; yet it becomes more formal than theoretical conduct in consequence of the doctrine that practical reason is independent of anything 'alien' to it, of any object." Theodor W. Adorno, "Negative Dialectics" (New York: Continuum, 1994), 207.

morality into a dead ‘positive’ thing.”⁶⁸ In turn, rational moral agents are forced to reason through and motivate their action by the deontological ends instructed by their duty, at which point, any act can be rationally upheld as moral via the principle of sufficient reason so long as it’s articulated in a universally “valid” manner.⁶⁹ Hence, the particular empirical circumstances and inclinations that Kant banished from the practical equation inevitably “show up” to “fill” the categorical imperative with content. This conflict reveals the fact that Kant’s moral philosophy is grounded in the sacrificial process of dividing up subjectivity into “rational” and “irrational” aspects and foreclosing all particularity—including the particularity of one’s own real empirical lived circumstances—from the process of willing and legislating the moral law.⁷⁰

Hegel’s analysis of Kant’s “dualistic” theoretical and practical philosophy was significantly influenced by Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, from 1795. The first half of Schiller’s *Letters* presents a critique of Kantian reason that closely resembles Hegel’s critique of the Understanding (not to mention Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental rationality), though Schiller’s solution to the bifurcation of reason into “formal” and “sensuous” “impulses” doesn’t always seem to involve their speculative unification. Rather, in many places, Schiller retains the separation between intuition and reason, and calls for their harmonization or mutual

⁶⁸ Georgy Lukács, *The Young Hegel Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics*. (Gardners Books, 1975), 153.

⁶⁹ Kenneth R. Westphal, “Hegel’s Critique of Kant’s Moral Worldview,” *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 133–76, 159.

⁷⁰ For more on the role of sacrifice in Kant’s practical philosophy, see Bubbio, *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition*.

engagement via experiences of beauty.⁷¹ This difference notwithstanding, Schiller's descriptions of the philosophical antagonism between the rational and the sensuous emphasize the brutality involved in the process of abstraction and subordination.

Straightaway, in the first letter, Schiller observes that:

...in order to seize the fleeting appearance he [the philosopher] must bind it in the fetters of rule, dissect its fair body into abstract notions, and preserve its living spirit in a sorry skeleton of words.⁷²

While Schiller is more grandiloquent than Hegel, Hegel's interpretation of Kantian subjective reason as insidious and destructive was heavily influenced by Schiller's depiction of it as such.⁷³

Over and above the domain of Kantian "subjective" idealism, Hegel detects the tendency to "separate and dominate" in the paradigm of modern reason writ large: for instance, the movement of imposing abstract laws onto material reality is replicated in Enlightenment natural scientific thought. Even though the modern scientific perspective

⁷¹ Throughout the *Letters*, Schiller is inconsistent regarding the sublation of the antagonism of thinking and perceiving. In some places, as in letter 15, Schiller seems to want to maintain the separation between the "formal" and "sensuous" impulses but balance them via the "play impulse," a concept that builds upon Kant's "free play" of the imagination. In other places, Schiller's conception of the "reconciliation" of the two impulses gets as close to Hegel's *Aufhebung* as one can get. In the 18th letter, Schiller states: "...it is said that Beauty *combines* those two opposite conditions, and thus removes the opposition. But since both conditions remain eternally opposed to one another, they can only be combined by cancellation (*Aufgehoben*)." Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 88.

⁷² Schiller, *Letters*, 24.

⁷³ In addition to Schiller's use of the concept *Aufgehoben*, Schiller also uses the concept *Zerstückelung*—dismemberment—to describe "the pernicious tendency of our contemporary character." In this context, Schiller describes both the psychological effects of the disintegration of modern society into a "moral state of nature," defined by "open force"—a thinly veiled allusion to the Reign of Terror—as well as the violent division of the sensuous from the intellect via modern thought. However, the full quote reads: "I will gladly concede to you that, little as individuals could derive any profit from this dismemberment of their being, yet the race could have made progress no other way." Schiller, *Letters*, 43. Similarly, Hegel famously uses the same concept—*Zerstückelung*—in the Preface of the *Phenomenology* where he makes the same point in a different way: "It [the life of Spirit] wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 18.

upholds the existence of objects, it too ends up abstracting from the objective world and locating the “truth” of reality in a noumenal realm of laws independent of the empirical world.⁷⁴ Both critical philosophy and natural scientific thought like Newtonian physics are “mechanistic,” as they uphold a formal distinction and an *a priori* unidirectionality between cause and effect: for Newton, one force is “solicited” by another force, the “soliciting force,” and these two forces are external to one another.⁷⁵ Moreover, like the antithetical relationship between Kant’s moral law and the empirical particular, when this heterogenous relation of the law and its instantiations is formulated in terms of a causality, the particular empirical phenomena that make up the relation—that is, the concrete expressions of the law in nature—become superfluous to the abstract rational law, and are hence subordinated to it. In pursuit of discovering natural laws, nature itself is “gutted” and tossed away, as the law is understood as separate from its content. This tendency of science to probe and discard material particularity for the sake of rationally discovering the universal isn’t exclusive to physics. Even empirical or inductive science, as outlined in Bacon’s *New Organon*, characterizes reason as an instrument that “finds its way” into nature’s “inner chambers,” “penetrat[ing] into the inner and further recesses of

⁷⁴ Hegel illustrates the relation between the Understanding and 18th and 19th century natural science in his analysis of the dialectical concept of Force in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Though “Force” represents a revolutionary development in scientific consciousness, as it expresses the identity of a universal law and its particular manifestation via gravity, it too falls prey to the abstracting tendency of the Understanding. As modern consciousness (both subject-based and object-based) posits a non-identity between subjects and things, modern reason can only grasp what it understands as the true universal of objects through a dramatic departure from appearances, in which the truth of the object is projected outside into a “supersensible world.” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 87. Even though the uniting notion of Force “vanished” in its concept in the Understanding, it is nonetheless tethered to the full diversity of appearances as the loci of its meaning. Force as universal law also “appears,” but ultimately, the Understanding derives meaning from Force’s inclusion in the metaphysical kingdom of laws, which displaces epistemic synthesis outside the boundaries of space and time.

⁷⁵ Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 458.

nature,” to “dissect her into parts.”⁷⁶ Famously, Bacon articulates the complicity of modern natural science with instrumental, formal, and subjective modern reason. He states:

Human knowledge and human power meet in one; for where the cause is not known the effect cannot be produced. Nature to be commanded must be obeyed; and that which in contemplation is as the cause is in operation as the rule.⁷⁷

In other words, human beings must seek to discover the underlying principles that govern natural phenomena in order to use nature for human purposes: this understanding of nature as fundamentally instrumental is the unity of “knowledge” and “power.” The scientific method is employed, in other words, not for the sake of gleaning objective truths from nature “herself,” but rather employed in service of discovering subjectively rational universal laws, a discovery that enables rational subjects to easily subjugate and “use” the natural world.

Thus, the paradigm of the Understanding—as developed in Kant and elsewhere, including natural science, which takes reason and reality to be indifferent and alien to one another, and makes individual reason into a principle, the particular content of life becomes inessential.⁷⁸ Alternatively, for Hegel, the universal isn’t independent of the particular. In truth, “[the universal] is [essentially] itself while reaching out to its other [the particular] and embracing it, but without *doing violence* to it; on the contrary, it is at

⁷⁶ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. F. H. Anderson (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2015), 36, 42.

⁷⁷ Bacon, *The New Organon*, 53.

⁷⁸ Allen W. Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 132.

rest in its other as *in its own*.”⁷⁹ Due to the fact that reason as Understanding fails to grasp the inner unity of the abstract universal and the concrete particular in the total concept, the true universal, the operation or “act” of abstraction characteristic of the Understanding establishes universality only by “doing violence” to the particular, by extinguishing the non-identical.⁸⁰ For rational consciousness prematurely fixated in the paradigm of the dichotomous one-sided Understanding, the universal is won only through the annihilation of the particular object.

In whichever intellectual “realm” it manifests, the Enlightenment paradigm of the Understanding upholds the superficial separation of infinity and finitude, universality and particularity, subject and object, and cause and effect; and as governed by the principle of identity, the Understanding “chooses a side.” Again, while Hegel acknowledges that the Understanding is a condition of *all* thought and is “the most astonishing and mightiest of powers,”⁸¹ he nonetheless takes issue with the fact that modern thought remains stuck in patterns emblematic of Kantian idealism and the Understanding, which falsely subordinates the particular to the universal. Indeed, in Hegel’s words, “when they [modern thinkers] refuse to move beyond this absolute difference of essences, then they elevate the understanding, absolute division, *destruction of life*, to the pinnacle of spirit.”⁸² As Hegel points out, it’s lamentable that secular Enlightenment thought—which

⁷⁹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 532.

⁸⁰ Rocío Zambrana comes to a similar conclusion in her article, “Logics of Power, Logics of Violence (According to Hegel).” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 2, Law and Violence (Fall 2014): 11–28.

⁸¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 18.

⁸² Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 264. Italics my own.

supplanted religious abstraction, hierarchy and determinism with empirical scientific knowledge and concrete human freedom—persistently destroys or reduces the richness and complexity of sensuous life to lifeless laws and ideals. Hegel provides a clue as to why modern Reason is stuck in the paradigm of the Understanding in his early text *Faith and Knowledge*. He states:

Those things whose mechanism we have discovered can also be produced by us if the means themselves are *in our hands*. In this manner, what we construct *at least in our imagination* we can comprehend; and what we cannot construct, we also cannot comprehend. The cognitive process of understanding is a ceaseless equating that we call connecting and that is a continual diminution and simplification of the manifold, to the point, if such were possible, of its complete elimination and annihilation.⁸³

Thus, the supremacy of the separating and dominating function of the Understanding in modern consciousness is symptomatic of the human desire to rationally master the unknown and to reconcile subjective “construction” and objective “comprehension.” By “discovering” the “mechanisms” of nature, Enlightenment thought effectively pulled back God’s curtain and found human hands maneuvering the metaphysical levers of reality, opening up the possibility of rational autonomy. The problem is that the modern mode of thinking that subscribes to the logic of the Understanding pursues this rational “reconciliation” of self and world already saddled with the assumption that the rational and the real are isolated from one another, and that the universal must be restricted to one side. By imposing a unidirectional causal structure on reality that ontologically subordinates particular objectivity to universal subjectivity,

⁸³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Faith & Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 371.

the Understanding cordons itself off from the Absolute it attempts to cognize.⁸⁴ Inevitably, the Understanding's ceaseless abstraction flattens, equates, and deadens the "stuff" of life, which forecloses the possibility of achieving the reconciliatory ends it seeks. In spite of its rational intentions, the Understanding's one-sided domination of the particular by the universal involves the "elimination" and "annihilation" of the manifold of experience. Hegel goes as far as to claim that Reason as Understanding "is nothing but the dead and death-dealing rule of formal unity."⁸⁵ He comments that when the Understanding becomes paradigmatic in Enlightenment thought, "when they [thinkers] refuse to move beyond this absolute difference of essences, then they elevate the understanding, absolute division, destruction of life, to the pinnacle of spirit."⁸⁶ In other words, Reason as Understanding, predicated on the strict alienation of the sensible and the intelligible, is raised to the status of the Absolute, the same dichotomous structure—which is, in truth, generative of and produced by the active *unity* of universal and particular—spills over into the realm of spirit, or the social, historical world. In his critique of Kantian morality, Hegel notes that this abstract metaphysics enables and entails the sacrifice of the "finite" concrete particular to the "bad infinite" abstract universal—the paradoxical and self-defeating destruction of life for the sake of the preservation of life—regardless of Kant's conciliatory intentions. In sum, though modern consciousness ultimately seeks autonomy and rational unity with nature, the modern

⁸⁴ Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, 32.

⁸⁵ Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, 52. This quote refers to Fichte's subjective idealism.

⁸⁶ Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 264.

paradigm that dominates the empirical and the contingent manages to replicate—rather than overcome—the “pre-modern” hierarchy of transcendent universal and sensuous particular. Formulated another way, Hegel shows us that when reason as Understanding subjugates and negates its material expression in the world—without which it wouldn’t exist—Enlightenment reinstates the hierarchy of transcendent *a priori* sacred and immanent *a posteriori* profane; “Enlightenment reverts to mythology.”⁸⁷

1.2 Adorno and Horkheimer’s Critique of Instrumental Reason: Means and Ends

In his work “Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment,” Max Horkheimer re-articulates Hegel’s observations regarding the primal motivation and the destructive consequences of the dominance of the paradigm of the Understanding. In this short text, Horkheimer echoes Hegel:

Science gives to man the power over that which earlier seemed completely under control of uncanny forces. The awe of nature as an overwhelming unpredictable Being has been replaced by confidence in abstract formulae... Eventually, mythology, as the adequate expression of man’s relationship with nature, vanished and mechanics and physics took its place. Nature lost every vestige of vital independent existence, all value of its own. It became dead matter—a heap of things.⁸⁸

For both Hegel and Horkheimer, rather than establishing a “connection” and a “relationship” with the forces of nature, mechanistic scientific reason, governed by

⁸⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi.

⁸⁸ Max Horkheimer, “Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment,” in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 437.

“abstract formulae,” “annihilates” nature and transforms it into “dead matter.” Thus, a century after Hegel, Horkheimer repeats almost the same critique as the early Hegel—a critique that Horkheimer works out most comprehensively in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-written with Theodor Adorno. In *DoE*, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain the Hegelian position that abstraction is a necessary feature of reason in general as well as in the genesis of modern self-consciousness. They also maintain—like Hegel—that the separation and isolation of the particular and the reification of abstract universal laws to the level of supreme truth is *de rigueur* in the modern post-Enlightenment world, and that this reification of Enlightenment begets destruction.⁸⁹ Thus, all three thinkers admit their allegiance to the reflection typical of Enlightenment thought, whilst maintaining that Enlightenment thought—the “current” paradigm of reason—nonetheless lacks self-awareness *vis-à-vis* its presuppositions of the strict division of subject and object and even its destructive nature.

Unlike Hegel’s critique of the Understanding however, which routinely connects the modern intellectual tendency with the requisite “premature” logical moment, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental rationality emerges after and builds upon critiques of modern reason by Nietzsche, Marx, Weber, Freud, Lukács, and Benjamin, and responds to the tumultuous and violent historical developments that occurred only after Hegel’s lifetime: Stalinism, the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, and widespread exploitation brought about by “late” monopoly capitalism. Rather than appeal to religious

⁸⁹ In his chapter titled “Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel,” J.M. Bernstein notes that Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly acknowledged that the *DoE* was a “generalization and radicalization” of Hegel’s chapter on the Enlightenment from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Tom Huhn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 22.

hierarchy or redemption, these catastrophic modern projects relied upon secular Enlightenment principles like freedom and progress to legitimize and motivate their destructive methods: for instance, the Nazis emblazoned the Hegelian sentiment “Arbeit macht frei,” or “Work sets you free,” above the entrances to the concentration camps. Due to their commitment to presenting a realistic picture of their dark historical present, rather than an ideal one, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of Enlightenment focuses on the relation of instrumental reason to modern culture and society.⁹⁰ In spite of this perspectival difference, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain the Hegelian position that modern reason—as epitomized in Kantian philosophy, Baconian natural science, and capitalist commodity fetishism, all of which fall under the Enlightenment umbrella—fails to reconcile the rational and the real, but rather functions as an instrument that bifurcates reality into universal subject and particular object, and overpowers the latter.⁹¹ Though the Holocaust isn’t exclusively Enlightenment’s fault, so to speak, the Enlightenment paradigm’s tendency to abstract and undermine the empirical particular left room for unthinkable “rational” destruction to emerge on the stage of history.⁹² With the benefit of hindsight, Adorno and Horkheimer imply that if reason is historical—as Hegel pointed out—reason in the 20th century is in trouble: the modern economic, social and political forces that dialectically generate and uphold modern reason are dangerously close to

⁹⁰ Throughout *DoE*, Adorno and Horkheimer use the concepts of reason and Enlightenment interchangeably. In turn, my use of Enlightenment and instrumental reason is also roughly interchangeable; in contexts where the two concepts aren’t interchangeable, I will explicitly signal their distinction.

⁹¹ “What appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand.” Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21.

⁹² A more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between modern reason and the Holocaust can be found in Chapter 3.

overpowering and permanently obliterating reason's revolutionary or speculative potential.

One of the aims of *DoE* is to present a critique of Enlightenment thinking as it shows up via science, literature, modern subjectivity, culture, morality, and politics, though these “domains” aren't obviously distinguished from one another in the text (by design), and the “critique” of Enlightenment in the book is occasionally ambivalent and frequently ambiguous. Adorno and Horkheimer's “critique” is neither critical in the Kantian sense, built upon an axiomatic assertion of subjective rational autonomy, nor critical in the colloquial sense, as criticism: the former can be characterized as systematic and linear, and the latter can be characterized as naively value-laden, a position that would decree that Enlightenment is a *bad thing*. Like Hegel, Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge the shortcomings of the Enlightenment paradigm without dismissing it outright or calling for its wholesale elimination, because they understand reason—the intellectual product of Enlightenment—as the source of the problem of destructive instrumental reason (*Verstand*), as well as the solution to it (*Vernunft*). However, Adorno and Horkheimer contend that Enlightenment abstraction, rational calculation, and the idea of the subjective autonomy are much “older” than we moderns generally take them to be. They contend that “myth,” an animistic pre-reflective mode of thought and being, contained the seeds of modern reflective Enlightenment; and conversely, modern Enlightenment contains irrationality, barbarism, and the surrender of agency—myth—within it.⁹³ For Adorno and Horkheimer, the domination of empirical particularity by the

⁹³ Though Adorno and Horkheimer don't explicitly define the concept of myth, Adorno gets closest in his essay “The Idea of Natural History:” “This concept [myth] is also vague, and its exact sense

rational subject replicates the pre-modern mythical brute impulse for domination generated out of fear; in trying to overcome the forces of fate via reason, reason emulates the irrationality it attempts to surpass.⁹⁴

Much like Hegel's conception of reason as Understanding, instrumental reason, for Adorno and Horkheimer, involves the subordination of the empirical particular to the rational law-giving subject, a scenario in which reason functions as the "mathematical apparatus" that subjects "all existing things to logical formalism."⁹⁵ Rather than recognizing rational subjectivity as dependent upon nature, Enlightenment conceives of subjective reason as a tool that operates on nature. Instrumental reason gains mastery over the diverse manifold of life and forces it to conform to the logical principle of identity, a process that loses track of what it intended to realize. Instead of bridging the gap between understanding and intuition, the ideal and the material, the instrument of reason becomes like a "too frequently sharpened razor blade," a "mere dull apparatus," that prohibits real cognition.⁹⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer associate instrumental reason

cannot be given in preliminary definitions but only in the course of analysis. By it is meant what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history." "The Idea of Natural History," in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 253. In other words, myth is the force of non- or extra-human nature and the unknown—that which we can't rationally control—within ourselves and the world.

⁹⁴ In my view, the idea of prehistory functions differently in different chapters of *DoE*. For instance, in the Odysseus essay, Adorno and Horkheimer's references to antiquity, the primitive, myth and related concepts are utilized critically to draw out the ideological anachronism of modern German Philhellenism, whereas in the "Elements of Antisemitism," these themes are invoked literally, referring to both the psychoanalytic understanding of the primitive within ourselves, as well as a transhistorical conception of the Jew. The former usage is analyzed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, and the latter usage is analyzed in Chapter 3.

⁹⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 20-21.

⁹⁶ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, [Nachdruck der Ausgabe] New York, Oxford University Press, 1947 (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), 50-51.

with Kantian reason and scientific consciousness, especially in the first chapter “The Concept of Enlightenment” and the third chapter “Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality.” In the latter, they state:

The true nature of the schematism which externally coordinates the universal and the particular, the concept and the individual case, finally turns out, in current science, to be the interest of industrial society. Being is apprehended in terms of manipulation and administration. Everything—including the individual human being, not to mention the animal—becomes a repeatable, replaceable process, a mere example of the conceptual models of the system.⁹⁷

In other words, modern reason retrieves diverse content from the sensible world and “translates” it into the uniform rational language of concepts and categories.

However, by converting lived material into abstract and universally communicable data, instrumental reason renders the substance of objective reality irrelevant to its new rational form. Reason as Enlightenment effectively disembowels being and makes it infinitely exchangeable with all else. Via the language of exchangeability, Adorno and Horkheimer also establish a symbiosis between reason and social relations, what they call “industrial society,” triangulating the ways instrumental reason appears in the realms of modern philosophy, science, and capitalist society.

Though *DoE* establishes instrumental reason as a phenomenon that surfaced long before our time, Horkheimer notes that the conception of reason as *exclusively* an instrument and the “highest intellectual faculty of man” is “formulated more clearly and accepted more generally” during *his* time, the 20th century, “than ever before;” so much so that “the principle of domination has become the idol to which everything is

⁹⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 65.

sacrificed.”⁹⁸ In his view, though instrumental reason aimed to bring knowledge and truth down to earth, instrumental reason today has outgrown its mediating function and transformed into an objective force, independent of the rational subject it allegedly set free from nature. Specifically, Adorno and Horkheimer posit an isomorphism between instrumental reason and the mechanistic calculating logic of capitalism, in which diverse phenomena are separated from their lived empirical content and made to fit the “conceptual” form of the exchangeable commodity. In *DoE*, the concept of abstraction—the central characteristic of the Hegelian Understanding—has Marxist connotations, as the requisite abstraction of universality from empirical particularity that plays out in rational thought is expressed “materially” in the abstraction of exchange value from use value. Though the original 1944 edition of *DoE* utilized Marxist terminology throughout, signaling their tacit endorsement of historical materialist critique, Adorno and Horkheimer replaced these Marxist concepts with more indeterminate language in the second edition, in 1947: for instance, “class domination” in the first edition is replaced with “domination” in the second, and the word “capitalism” is fully absent from the second edition. Their decision to replace explicitly Marxist concepts with broader, more socio-politically indeterminate concepts was motivated by a few factors: first, the genuine political risk involved in demonstrating sympathy for Marxism, immediately associated with communism; second, a more complex global political-economic situation, which required a shift to more politically-oriented conceptual description; and third, Adorno and Horkheimer’s growing unease with the “science” of Marxism, especially in light of

⁹⁸ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 96.

Stalinism's dogmatic implementation of Marxist doctrine. Nonetheless, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of Enlightenment remains largely applicable to both political and economic administrations: for instance, the flattening and elimination of individual difference in Nazi Germany was mirrored in the capitalist tendency to do the same.⁹⁹ These granular conceptual changes notwithstanding, Marxist theory looms large in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason.¹⁰⁰

1.3 Sacrifice and Enlightenment

Before addressing sacrifice in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the 1940s, it's worth mentioning that Adorno first developed a philosophical theory of sacrifice in relation to Kierkegaardian sacrifice, which as Adorno observes, "occupies the innermost

⁹⁹ William van Reijen and Jan Bransen, "The Disappearance of Class History in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, A Commentary on the Textual Variants" in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 248-252.

¹⁰⁰ I disagree with James Schmidt, who holds that these conceptual substitutions thoroughly de-Marxify the *DoE*, on the grounds that though Adorno and Horkheimer replaced concepts related to class and class struggle, they kept the concept of exchange, which shows up in the book 41 times. If we take seriously Robert Hullot-Kentor's supposition that "Adorno's project is unthinkable except as a critical transformation of Hegel's doctrine of the ruse of reason," the most important feature of this "critical transformation" is the introduction of Marx's idea of exchange value. As discussed in Chapter 2, the cunning or ruse of reason involves an identity and a non-identity between subjective cause and objective effect. This dialectical relation of unity and disunity between a subject's action and the objective "life" of that action is epitomized in the Hegelian thesis of *DoE*, that Enlightenment is already myth: though Enlightenment "intends" rational progress, it manifests as barbarism. The Marxian gloss that Adorno and Horkheimer add to this division inherent in the cunning of reason is the fact that in modern industrial society, the non-identical particularity of objects, their original character as useful things, becomes subordinated to the object's universal identity with other objects through capitalist commodity exchange. This hegemonic process of the commodification of society is the dialectic of enlightenment itself (not to mention the economic structural foundation of modern sacrifice). In my view, the project of *DoE* is incomprehensible without Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, even though references to Marx's conception of class struggle is intentionally absent from the second version. See James Schmidt, "Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Social Research* 65, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 812; as well as Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 36. A more detailed discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer's relationship to Marxism and Marxist categories occurs in Chapter 3.

cell of his [Kierkegaard's] thought." Adorno's study *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic*, came out on February 27th, 1933, the same day that, as Robert Hullot-Kentor notes, Hitler suspended freedom of the press and declared a state of emergency.¹⁰¹ This historical coincidence is relevant to Adorno's interpretation of Kierkegaard, which ultimately serves as a blueprint for Adorno's critique of mid-20th century European religious romanticism and burgeoning fascist ideology, as opposed to a faithful and comprehensive close reading of Kierkegaard. However, Adorno wasn't simply an uncharitable reader: rather, Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard excavated the ideological seeds planted in Kierkegaardian existentialism that Kierkegaard himself couldn't have detected. As Adorno says, "the innermost (and hence from Kierkegaard hidden) dialectical truth could only be disclosed in the posthumous history of his work."¹⁰² Adorno observes that Kierkegaard's vehement rejection of philosophical idealism in favor of poetic Christian existentialism unconsciously replicates the idealist subordination of reality to the independent autonomous knowing subject. In other words, the egoism and impulse for domination that Kierkegaard reviles as fundamental to Enlightenment rationality—tendencies that he aims to overcome by sacrificing his attachments to the material world—abides by the same hierarchical one-sided logic as subjective idealism, albeit in opposite form. Adorno observes:

Reason, which in Hegel as infinite reason produces actuality out of itself, is in Kierkegaard, again as infinite reason, the negation of all finite knowledge: if the former is mythical by its claim to universal sovereignty, the latter becomes mythical through universal annihilation. Kierkegaard's continuously repeated

¹⁰¹ Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction," in *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, by Theodor W. Adorno, *Theory and History of Literature*, v. 61 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xi.

¹⁰² Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 85.

assurances that he was not one of the faithful are therefore not to be taken as an expression of Christian modesty but as the truth of the matter. Precisely the assurances—conjuring formulas like the words “scripture” and “paradox”—are too stereotypically repeated to ever confirm revived sentiment of modesty; they do not sternly ward off imposture from religion, but rather the reconciling word from the mythical circle that it would burst. In the ideal of speaking “without authority,” the profound knowledge of the heterodoxy of paradox—which Kierkegaard sets up as a standard of Christianity—becomes obdurately impenitent.¹⁰³

Essentially, Adorno points out, Kierkegaard’s material self-denial and attendant modesty, a smug pat on the back, are gestures that negatively affirm the supremacy of human agency over all else. This tendency is simply a religious version of instrumental reason or the domination of nature, which itself bears traces of the mythic brutality that reason attempted to break through. To reiterate, as many scholars note, Adorno’s philosophical interpretation of Kierkegaard is mostly incorrect.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s attempted reconciliation with the divine via the sacrifice of material goods *and* the retreat into inwardness—a critique that closely resembles Hegel’s critique of the Unhappy Consciousness and Faith in the *Phenomenology*—is nevertheless an accurate evaluation of the nihilistic and individualistic religious attempt to reconcile itself with the divine by alienating itself from, and in so doing, exerting control over, the world.

Later, in the *DoE*, Adorno and Horkheimer shift the focus of their critique of sacrifice from religious romanticism, as in Kierkegaard, to Enlightenment thought. In his essay “Back to Adorno,” Robert Hullot-Kentor goes as far as to state that: “[For Adorno

¹⁰³ Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 119.

¹⁰⁴ Vanessa Rumble, “Sacrifice and Domination: Kantian and Kierkegaardian Paradigms of Self-Overcoming,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 20, no. 3 (July 1994): 19–35, 19.

and Horkheimer] The pivotal point at which myth becomes enlightenment and enlightenment becomes myth is sacrifice,” and, “*Dialectic of Enlightenment* thus presents the origin of reason in sacrificial cunning.”¹⁰⁵ Though “sacrifice” is peppered throughout *DoE*, Adorno and Horkheimer develop the most comprehensive theory of sacrifice and Enlightenment in Excursus I on the *Odyssey*. In it, Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrate that though Enlightenment wished to leave “irrational” violent sacrifice behind, the modern era ushered in a new kind of “rational” sacrifice, in which human freedom and progress are predicated upon the domination of nature and other human beings. Adorno and Horkheimer present Odysseus as exemplary of the “bourgeois individual,”¹⁰⁶ a literary expression of the modern subject who achieves autonomy only through moments of reversion to cruelty. To save himself from the wrath of the gods, Odysseus uses sacrificial cunning or “defiance made rational”¹⁰⁷ to overcome the creatures that stand in the way of his homeward passage. Rational sacrifice, as in Odysseus’ use of cunning as a survival tactic, demands the denial of the full “humanity” of a victim as well as one’s own humanity. Through the character of Odysseus, Adorno and Horkheimer illustrate that what modern reason takes itself and its corresponding lifeworld to be—rational, autonomous, progressive, peaceful—is only a partial self-image: sacrificial destruction or calculated bloodshed remains. In sum, the sacrificial processes typical of the ancient “barbaric” world are retained in the “bourgeois” modern world, albeit in so-called

¹⁰⁵ Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 38, 41. The relationship between sacrifice and cunning will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 46.

“rational” guises. If, as Adorno and Horkheimer themselves claimed,¹⁰⁸ *DoE* is a “critical transformation” of Hegel,¹⁰⁹ sacrifice must retroactively haunt Hegel’s critique of reason, despite its absence in Hegel’s own analyses of the Understanding in particular.

Structurally speaking, the abstracting process of Understanding and Enlightenment, governed by the principle of identity, mirrors the process of sacrifice, in which an opposition between the material and ideal is “reconciled” via destruction.

However, if the only difference between their accounts is that Hegel neglects to explicitly utilize the concept of sacrifice in relation to the Understanding, whereas Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly utilize the concept of sacrifice in relation to instrumental reason, Hegel’s critique of the modern Understanding would suffice as an analysis of the relationship between modern reason and sacrifice on its own. What Adorno and Horkheimer’s explicit theorization of sacrifice *vis-à-vis* Enlightenment adds to Hegel’s implicit account of sacrifice is their recognition of modern sacrifice as a material *and* ideal phenomenon. Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theory is an interdisciplinary study of society: in Darrow Schechter’s words, Frankfurt School critical theory “attempts to theorize the historical events of the 20th century in terms of institutionalized identity thinking.”¹¹⁰ Due to this orientation, Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of sacrifice is “always already” a critique that applies both ideally and materially, operating on two levels, as philosophical and social critique. Their references to sacrifice

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 38.

¹⁰⁹ Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 36.

¹¹⁰ Darrow Schechter, *The Critique of Instrumental Reason from Weber to Habermas*. (New York: Continuum, 2010), 94.

in both their analysis of Enlightenment thought in the first chapter and bourgeois cunning via Odysseus in the second chapter thus reverberate with literal contemporary significance. These prior philosophical and cultural references to sacrifice, which—if hard pressed—could *still* be characterized as abstract, shed all metaphorical trappings by the final chapter, “Elements of Antisemitism,” added after the war. Here, Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly connect their analysis of sacrifice *vis-à-vis* the dialectic of self-preservation and rational mastery to the sacrifice of the Jews:

If the holders of economic power have once overcome their fear of employing fascist agents, in face of the Jews the harmony of the national community is automatically established. They are sacrificed by the dominant order when, through its increasing estrangement from nature, it has reverted to mere nature.¹¹¹

Explicitly, here, Adorno and Horkheimer establish a relationship between capitalism, fascism, instrumental reason, and the domination of nature through the phenomenon of sacrifice (as it relates to the sacrifice of the Jews). After bearing witness to the Holocaust—which is to say, encountering the most acute regression of Enlightenment to barbarism—Adorno and Horkheimer retain almost none of the hope that Hegel maintained regarding the possibility of modern reason to sublimate its dialectical waystation of the Understanding and realize the speculative unity of reason and society.¹¹² Adorno and Horkheimer recognize that the destruction of the particular by the

¹¹¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 152-3.

¹¹² Even after the French terror, Hegel held out hope for the realization of true Reason in modern society. Had Hegel witnessed the catastrophes of the 20th century—carried out in the name of rational social organization and technological progress—that Adorno and Horkheimer witnessed, Hegel probably wouldn’t have been so optimistic about *Vernunft*’s expression in the modern state. This contrast in perspective shows up, for instance, in Hegel’s positive attitude toward public administration and

universal via instrumental reason is mirrored and upheld by the sacrifice of nature and people in both capitalist society writ large, and in isolated instances of modern political sacrifice, as in Nazi Germany. Modern reason's intolerance of internal difference manifests in actual, literal sacrifice: the efficiency and innovation of capitalist industrial society is built on the exploitation and murder; and the "experimental method" of scientific and technological development involves the annihilation of both human and non-human organisms, taken as mere "specimens." Thus, in a more overt sense than in Hegel, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize that Enlightenment demands and begets *real* bloodshed. Nevertheless, while their allusions to the catastrophes justified by and brought about via the sacrificial logic of modern instrumental reason allow the connection between reason and sacrifice to become more tangible, Adorno and Horkheimer never construct a straightforward argument for this connection between reason and empirical sacrifice. They never directly name or theorize modern sacrifice as a historically-situated material phenomenon, as doing so would contradict the ambition of *DoE*: establishing a transhistorical connection between myth and Enlightenment, and by extension, emphasizing the staying power of sacrifice in modern thought and history. Building a coherent or linear narrative connecting pre-modern to modern material sacrifice would also contradict the methodological ambition of *DoE*, which involves constellating disparate observations taken from a variety of intellectual domains, as opposed to constructing systematic arguments or delivering historical or sociological reports. All the

bureaucracy in the *Philosophy of Right*, as an institution that safeguards the freedom of individuals (see Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §295). Alternatively, Adorno and Horkheimer inherited Max Weber's view of bureaucracy as an "iron cage" that functions in the modern state as an obstacle to the exercise of freedom. Historically, Adorno and Horkheimer's understanding of bureaucracy responds to the growing alliance between state bureaucracy and capitalism which suppressed—rather than enabled—individual freedom.

same, it is due to—rather than in spite of—the interdisciplinary and fragmentary nature of Adorno and Horkheimer’s text that we can more readily recognize the connection between instrumental reason and modern sacrifice.¹¹³

By unearthing the contours of instrumental reason and then discerning them in their present milieu, Adorno and Horkheimer carry out a study of instrumental reason that turns most of the same stones as Hegel’s critique of the Understanding. Yet, in contrast to purely philosophical analysis, Adorno and Horkheimer’s genealogical critical-theoretical analysis allows the reader to recognize the instrumental process of sacrifice—as opposed to mere violence or cruelty—in today’s world through its relation to modern reason, a recognition that would have been overlooked without Adorno and Horkheimer’s establishment of the continuity of modern Enlightenment and ancient myth. All the same, Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of sacrifice does not fall into the trap of a genetic fallacy: by locating modern sacrifice in mythic sacrifice, Adorno and Horkheimer do not reduce sacrifice to myth. Rather, in J. M. Bernstein’s words, Adorno and Horkheimer rather “dismantle the conceptual dualism of enlightenment and myth, and thereby the idea of history it grounds.”¹¹⁴ If modern reason exhibits the drive for self-preservation and mastery that we identify with “primal” irrationality, we can more easily see that the brutality we associate with pre-modern mythical thinking might appear in our present

¹¹³ On the function of Critical Theory’s philosophical method, Martin Jay states: “Indeed, one might say that the reproach of eclecticism sometimes made by more orthodox Marxist critics of critical theory – here I am thinking particularly of Goran Therborn’s attack on Habermas – can be refuted precisely by reference to the justification of a non-identical interdisciplinary method... Here the apparent failure of the Institutes initial ambitions can, paradoxically, be seen as a source of its ultimate strength.” Martin Jay, “Positive and Negative Totalities: Implicit Tensions in Critical Theory’s Vision of Interdisciplinary Research,” *Thesis Eleven* 3, no. 1 (May 1981): 72–87, 84.

¹¹⁴ J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85.

paradigm, in reason's contemporary incarnation. The figurative nature of their analysis enables Adorno and Horkheimer to demonstrate that modern reason is dialectical insofar as it is both modern and regressively sacrificial; that the abstraction from and domination of the particular, that's characteristic of instrumental reason, shows up in the modern sacrifice of people and things.

All things considered, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the longevity and interconnection of reason and sacrifice does not bode well for the future. If instrumental reason is a modern instantiation of the drive for self-preservation, it does seem like humanity is destined to eat its own tail, regardless of its intellectual and sociohistorical circumstances. The aporia of reason as self-defeating and instrumental on the one hand and as emancipatory on the other hand is—at least during Adorno and Horkheimer's time—an obstacle to reason's transformation, due to the institutionalization and reification of the former valence of reason in service of violence and death on a global scale. Adorno and Horkheimer do maintain that modern reason has the potential to sublimate its sacrificial logic: they state, "freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking,"¹¹⁵ but they're not getting their hopes up.¹¹⁶ It is these "hopes" that Adorno and Horkheimer read into Hegel's metaphysics as naively optimistic: they accuse Hegel of collapsing thought and being, a move that allows Hegel to retreat from

¹¹⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi.

¹¹⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer articulate this sentiment via a jab at Lukács, who saw revolutionary potential in the proletariat, the identical "subject/object" of history. They disagree: "...[today,] the entire human being has become at once the subject and the object of repression. In the progress of industrial society, which is supposed to have conjured away the law of increasing misery it had itself brought into being, the concept which justified the whole—the human being as person, as the bearer of reason—is going under. The dialectic of enlightenment is culminating objectively in madness." Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 169.

the slaughter bench of history into the “safety” of the absolute. By prioritizing the unity of the concept, Adorno and Horkheimer imply, Hegel failed to recognize that in certain social formations—like industrial capitalism—the fear of nature and drive for self-preservation can become so powerful, hegemonic, and pervasive, that they have the capacity to pervert reason entirely and wield it not just as a tool, but as a fully automatic weapon. However, Adorno and Horkheimer’s standpoint of radical immanence stops short before exceeding the limits of its own (tragic, catastrophic) experience. In Simon Jarvis’ words, “the breaking off of Adorno’s thought...is to bear witness to what thought lives off.”¹¹⁷ In other words, in attempting to truthfully express the dialectical relation of thought, nature, and society in their bloody historical moment; and in pursuit of this end, rejecting the standpoint of the absolute; Adorno and Horkheimer confine themselves to theorizing the non-identical from within it, and are thus unable to speculate in any clear terms about the possibility of moving past sacrificial modernity.¹¹⁸

1.4 Back to Hegel: Kantian-Abrahamic Sacrifice

Though Hegel doesn’t theorize the connection between sacrifice and modern reason as directly as Adorno and Horkheimer do, Hegel comes closest to establishing

¹¹⁷ Simon Jarvis, “The ‘Unhappy Consciousness’ And Conscious Unhappiness: On Adorno’s Critique Of Hegel And The Idea Of An Hegelian Critique Of Adorno,” *Hegel Bulletin* 15, no. 01 (1994): 71–88, 80.

¹¹⁸ On the inherent limits of the project in the *DoE*, Adorno wrote in a 1945 letter to Lowenthal: “In reality, two things must be made quite clear: first, that there is no positive ‘solution’ in the sense of providing a philosophy which could simply be contrasted to subjective reason; secondly, that the critique of subjective reason is only possible on a dialectical basis, i.e. by demonstrating the contradictions in its own course of development and transcending it through its own determinate negation.” Quoted by Rolf Wiggershaus in *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson, First MIT Press paperback edition, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), 332.

their relation very briefly in 1798's the *Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, a connection scrutinized by J.M. Bernstein in his commentary titled "Love and Law: Hegel's Critique of Morality." In Hegel's early essay, he presents the transition from alienated Abrahamic metaphysics and morality to speculatively unified Christian ethicality as a lens through which we moderns can retroactively recognize the spiritual sublation of the dichotomous Understanding by true speculative reason, what Bernstein calls the reconciliation of "love and law."¹¹⁹ Like Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Odysseus* essay, Hegel establishes the connection between instrumental reason and sacrifice in the *Spirit of Christianity* by reference to a sacrificial paradigm from the past, in this case, biblical times: the "near-sacrifice" of Isaac by Abraham.

At the start of the *Spirit of Christianity*, Hegel presents the pre-Christian Jewish world as estranged and cold due to its two-worlds metaphysics, in which the transcendent lawgiving God presided over and dominated human and natural life. Explicitly, Hegel identifies the Judaic extra-experiential *a priori* law, that rules over the concrete "profane" particularity of human inclinations and circumstances, with the Kantian moral law and the abstract universality of Understanding. Like Kant's instrument of reason, God was, for Abraham and the Jewish people, the mediator between the individual "subject" and

¹¹⁹ Bernstein introduces Hegel's issue with transcendent Abrahamic law: "In making command prior to truth, one places it beyond the realm of evidence and so rational criticism. It is the combination of the radical separation of nature and ideality, on the one hand, and the command structure of self-subjection on the other that turns sentimental life into pathology. For Hegel the emblematic episode in which this structure is realized is the near sacrifice of Isaac. In this episode we find the paradigmatic playing out of the contest between love and law; it is, of course, equally, the source of Hegel's contention that the structure of Judaic lawfulness involves, essentially, the severing of bonds of love." J. M. Bernstein, "Love and Law: Hegel's Critique of Morality," *Social Research* 70, no. 2 (summer 2003): 393–432, 404.

the “objective” world, in which the latter constituted an alien ontological “other.” Hegel describes Abraham’s existence as such:

Abraham, as the opposite of the whole world, could have no higher mode of being than that of the other term in the opposition, and thus he likewise was supported by God... His Ideal [God] subjugated the world to him, gave him as much of the world as he needed, and put him in security against the rest. [Real human] Love alone was beyond his [Abraham’s] power; even the one love he had, his love for his son, even his hope of posterity—the one mode of extending his being, the one mode of extending his being, the one mode of immortality he knew and hoped for—could depress him, trouble his all-exclusive heart and disquiet it to such an extent that even this love he once wished to destroy; and his heart was quieted only through the certainty of the feeling that this love was not so strong as to render him unable to slay his beloved son with his own hand.”¹²⁰

By conceiving of God as exclusively infinite and sacred, and thus diametrically opposed to and separate from the empirical “finite,” Abraham could only access the transcendent truth by emulating God—by dominating and subjugating nature, even going as far as to sacrifice his own “natural” posterity, Isaac. In the Abrahamic world, God’s word was the eternal law, whereas the contingencies of “human” law—which we can recognize in *de facto* institutions like the bonds of familial love and the establishment of a spiritual community—were, in turn, inessential and arbitrary. Even though Abraham doesn’t go through with the sacrifice of Isaac due to God’s intervention, the relation between Abraham and Isaac, father and son, is nevertheless “mediated” by that sacrifice:

¹²⁰ Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 187.

in Bernstein's words, "...from henceforth the father is always the law of death and the son forever dead."¹²¹ Thus, very briefly here in his analysis of Jewish "reason," Hegel touches upon the way in which the alienation of the universal from the particular enables or begets destructive sacrifice.

In the latter half of the text, Hegel illustrates what a spiritual shift from Understanding to Reason entails via the transformation of Judaism into Christianity. In one passage, Hegel outlines the difference between Abrahamic alienation and Christian reconciliation via the relation between father and son. Hegel explains:

...Jesus' relation to God is his calling himself the "son of God" and contrasting himself as son of God with himself as the "son of man." The designation of this relation is one of the natural expressions left by accident in the Jewish speech of that time, and therefore it is to be counted among their happy expressions. The relation of a son to his father is not a conceptual unity (as, for instance, unity or harmony of disposition, similarity of principles, etc.), a unity which is only a unity in thought and is abstracted from life. On the contrary, it is a living relation of living beings, a likeness of life. Father and son are simply modifications of the same life, not opposite essences... Thus the son of God is the same essence as the father, and yet for every act of reflective thinking, though only for such thinking, he is a separate essence.¹²²

In this example, Hegel admits that the standpoint of reflective thinking—the Understanding—sees a separation or "abstraction" between Jesus and God or son and father, a separation that is the superficial form of appearance of the relation. However, this separation persists only for this abstract standpoint, *not* for the relation in itself, which is more than a "conceptual" unity (a jab at Kant): it is a *living* unity. Unlike the Judaic-modern rational oppositions of transcendence and immanence, Christian

¹²¹ Bernstein, "Love and Law: Hegel's Critique of Morality," 405.

¹²² Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 260.

speculative reason posits a dialectical triangulation between the father, the son, and the holy spirit—a relation that allows the co-existence of subject and object, empirical and ideal, universal and particular, and doesn't require the destruction of the "lesser" term. The empirical profane and ideal sacred are essentially united.

In making this point, Hegel isn't claiming that reverting to Christian reason is the "answer" to the problem of Judeo-instrumental reason. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Hegel's invocation of the ancient world—at least in *Spirit of Christianity*—isn't a romanticization of the past or pre-modern consciousness. This approach allows the reader to see that the past—the religious alienation that begets sacrifice of the particular—remains in the present—the secular alienation that begets sacrifice of the particular. Though Adorno and Horkheimer leave the reader in the paradigm of Enlightenment and instrumental reason, and don't speculate about its overcoming in any certain terms, Hegel shows obliquely, via Christian reason, what the sacrifice of sacrifice would involve on a theological-metaphysical level. In Gillian Rose's words, Christ signifies for Hegel an "aspiration for a new kind of substantial freedom, for the reunification of subjectivity with the totality."¹²³ Even though the dichotomous metaphysics of pre-modern Abrahamic and modern Kantian reason are "materially" expressed in the sacrifice of the empirical particular, Hegel also shows that this alienated world has the capacity to generate the true speculative standpoint out of its own inner tension. Regardless of the historical circumstances, in Hegel's eyes, the metaphysical universal and particular are mutually generative expressions of one another, and as such, one can never *completely*

¹²³ Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press Ltd, 1981), 114.

destroy the other—life contains death as a requisite part, life is constituted by death. Where Adorno and Horkheimer’s thought “breaks off” in the recognition that modern reason is at an impasse, Hegel’s thought—as “speculative”—remains dialectically fluctuating. Though the redemption of reason isn’t guaranteed, it isn’t impossible either. While Adorno and Horkheimer agree with Hegel, that reason theoretically contains the seeds of its own overcoming, they also recognize that the “reunification of subjectivity with the totality” is achieved in the 20th century not through reason’s sublation and realization of the dialectical relation between subjectivity and objectivity, particularity and universality, but rather through the automatic, all-encompassing reification of the Understanding and instrumental reason in capitalist society: a fact that endangers the only possible escape route out of the sacrificial circle of modern reason—namely, reason itself.

Chapter 2: Utterances of Dismemberment: Modern Discursive Cunning

Where all previously valid determinations have vanished and the will is in a state of pure inwardness, the self-consciousness is capable of making into its principle either the universal in and for itself, or the arbitrariness of its own particularity, giving the latter precedence over the universal and realizing it through its actions – i.e. it is capable of being evil.

- Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §139

As argued in Chapter 1, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer implicitly and explicitly establish a relationship between the modern intellectual paradigm, as Understanding and instrumental reason, and sacrifice. The prior chapter analyzed this connection on a structural level—via an analysis of the movement of thought in general, modern scientific and moral reason (*a la* Kant and Bacon, and to a certain extent, Schiller)—and recognized the isomorphism of the movement of reason and the sacrificial act as instrumental processes of isolating particularity and universality, and destroying the former in service of affirmation, sanctification, or preservation of the latter. The identification of modern reason as possessing a “sacrificial logic” helped elucidate Adorno and Horkheimer’s implication, developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that modern reason “appears” in the modern world via sacrifice, a supposition that was also confirmed in Hegel’s presentation of the near sacrifice of Isaac as an example of an action enabled by the Understanding.

Chapter 1 focused on the intellectual exercise of modern reason and its philosophical foundations; as such, it didn’t address what exactly the exercise of modern reason looks like “on the ground,” on the level of intersubjective or social interaction. The absolute idealist and critical theoretical traditions reject the dichotomization of the “rational” and the “historical” or “social” registers. Though Hegel’s metaphysics

ultimately “prioritizes” the unity of the Concept and the Idea, and Adorno and Horkheimer’s account of reality “prioritizes” the negative or differentiated moments expressed in history and experience, both agree that that reason appears in the world: as a distinct form of expression of reality, reason cannot be understood as fundamentally independent of reality. As this is the case for both traditions, it’s not sufficient for the analysis of modern reason and modern sacrifice to leapfrog over the ontological point of convergence of the ideal-theoretical and the material-historical: the domain of practical human interaction.

In the *Phenomenology* and the *DoE* respectively, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer draw upon specific literary case studies—the former, Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, and the latter, *The Odyssey*—to illustrate the way that Enlightenment reason manifests on the level of discourse, via the unique way that modern subjects speak.¹²⁴ It’s worth mentioning that presenting the discursive “way things are” via literature is not the same thing as presenting an empirical or sociological report—a discrepancy that inherently limits the modern historical conclusions we can draw from the ways that our thinkers philosophically utilize these art objects. Nevertheless, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer all recognize artworks as providing insight into the world they emerge from (in a different way than philosophy proper). They make use of these specific artworks to illuminate certain modern behaviors, like the way that modern subjects manipulate language and exploit conceptual ambiguity, a phenomenon that I will refer to throughout this chapter as

¹²⁴ This isn’t to say that these are the only places where Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer utilize artworks to exemplify human behaviors, but for our purposes, Diderot and Homer’s texts function as artistic exemplars of modern ways of being, thinking and acting.

“discursive cunning.” In their eyes, modern discursive expression, exemplified by Diderot’s character the Nephew—*Le Niveu* in French or *Lui*—and Homer’s protagonist Odysseus, conveys and mimics the abstracting and isolating tendency of modern reason.¹²⁵ This chapter aims to demonstrate that, as these literary case studies show, the movement of modern reason that isolates the conceptual universal from the empirical particular—at the expense of the latter—is exercised on the intersubjective level via discursive cunning, a linguistic maneuver that establishes the requisite distance between a subject and their interlocutor that ultimately leaves room for the rational justification of modern sacrifice.

First, I will trace the genesis of discursive cunning back to Hegel’s cunning of reason through Adorno and Horkheimer’s use of cunning and provide an example of discursive cunning in Abraham’s exchange with Isaac. Second, I will identify the intellectual targets of Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of the *Odyssey*—positivist and irrationalist schools of Philhellenic literary interpretation—and demonstrate how Odysseus, who Adorno and Horkheimer portray as the prototype of the modern bourgeois individual, uses discursive cunning to belittle his mythical interlocutors and triumph over nature, a gesture that also inadvertently closes Odysseus off from both the outside world and his own inner world. Third, I will preface Hegel’s conception of discursive cunning in *Rameau’s Nephew* by locating the origins of alienated individuality in *Antigone*, and identify the target of Hegel’s cultural critique as *Bildung* romanticism. Next, I will

¹²⁵ The full inferential expanse beginning from modern reason as a philosophical paradigm and ending at modern sacrifice as material destruction will be traversed by the end of the next chapter: here, I show that the path from “mind” to “murder” is mediated by intersubjective interaction, the topic of this chapter.

analyze Hegel's use of the Nephew from *Rameau's Nephew* also as a prototypical bourgeois individual who cunningly mocks and manipulates his interlocutors by mimicking the gesticulations of the French aristocrats, a linguistic pantomime that gives the Nephew a false sense of independence from society. Finally, I acknowledge the ways in which discursive cunning functions as a bridge between modern interpersonal interactions and political ideologies, particularly through the "alienation" of historical narrative from the concrete content of history itself: a formalization of language that ontologically isolates the subject from their interlocutors and their lived contexts, and enables the rationalization of bloody political sacrifice.

2.1 Cunning in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer

To understand the relationship of cunning to discourse and subsequently to sacrifice, I will first describe Hegel's (notoriously obscure) use of the concept of cunning, and briefly note how Hegel's idea of cunning is taken up and utilized by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Odysseus* essay. Hegel's idea of the "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*) shows up throughout his corpus as a structure that connects the actions of individual people to the movement of universal history. Hegel's idea of cunning as a metaphysical bridge between the subjective register and the objective register is widely understood to be inspired by Adam Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" of the

market.¹²⁶ Hegel likely encountered the idea of the “invisible hand” in 1801,¹²⁷ when he read Smith’s 1776 *Wealth of Nations*. Smith notes that individuals invest their capital in “domestic industry” rather than foreign industry—which Smith understands as indicative of a self-interested investment, rather than an investment in serving the greater economic good. However, Smith claims that self-interested financial investments unintentionally serve the collective financial interest: at all levels of society, people’s greedy financial decisions are actually “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.”¹²⁸ In Smith’s view, therefore, under capitalism, the pursuit of self-interest produces unconscious general social benefits—to rework the famous phrase, Smith believes that the boats lift themselves, which, in turn, causes the tide to rise. Before Smith, Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* espoused a similar view on “private vice and public virtues,” a view famously despised by Rousseau: while Rousseau understood modern social institutions—specifically the institution of property—to be the source of the corruption of human nature and social inequality,¹²⁹ Mandeville posited alternatively

¹²⁶ See Edna Ullmann-Margalit, “The Invisible Hand and the Cunning of Reason,” *Social Research*, vol. 64 no. 2. (Summer 1997), 182; Adrian Johnston, “Capitalism’s Implants: A Hegelian Theory of Failed Revolutions,” *Crisis and Critique*, ed. Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda, vol. 8, no. 2 (December 2021), 123; G. H. R. Parkinson, “Hegel, Marx and the Cunning of Reason.” *Philosophy*, vol.64, no. 249 (July 1989): 287–302.; and E. J. Hundert, “A Satire of Self-Disclosure: From Hegel Through Rameau to the Augustans,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 47, no. 2 (June 1986), 235.

¹²⁷ John B. Davis, “Smith’s Invisible Hand and Hegel’s Cunning of Reason,” *International Journal of Social Economics*, vol 16, no. 6 (June 1, 1989), 51.

¹²⁸ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*. The Modern Library, Random House, Inc. Adam Smith Reference Archive (marxists.org) 2000.

¹²⁹ “Far fewer words to this purpose would have been enough to impose on men so barbarous and easily seduced; especially as they had too many disputes among themselves to do without arbitrators, and too much ambition and avarice to go long without masters. All ran headlong to their chains, in hopes of securing their liberty; for they had just wit enough to perceive the advantages of political institutions, without experience enough to enable them to foresee the dangers. The most capable of foreseeing the dangers were the very persons who expected to benefit by them; and even the most prudent judged it not

that human beings were fundamentally self-interested and cunning, but that the exercise of self-serving cunning nonetheless produced socially-beneficial or “virtuous” institutions.¹³⁰

Hegel’s use of “cunning” generally echoes the Mandevillian and Smithian conceptions of cunning as self-interested action that paradoxically benefits society at large, but in different texts—namely the lesser *Logic*, the *Philosophy of Right*, and the *Philosophy of History*—Hegel’s analyses of “cunning” foreground different ontological registers. In the third section of his 1817 *Encyclopedia Logic*, on the concept, “cunning” appears in relation to Teleology.¹³¹ In the subjective register, teleology concerns the limits of intention and purposive activity: when someone wants to achieve a particular end, their “plan” involves a kind of syllogism: the subject and their intention, the first “premise,” realizes the conclusion, the objective or “end,” via a second premise—in other words, the inferential activity of the realization or actualization of that end. The problem is, “ends” are never simply “ends”—they are themselves catalysts for new ends beyond the subject’s control or intention. Ends inevitably “get out of hand,” insofar as the subject can’t predict, rationally calculate or account for the infinite nature of the phenomena that

inexpedient to sacrifice one part of their freedom to ensure the rest; as a wounded man has his arm cut off to save the rest of his body... All these evils were the first effects of property, and the inseparable attendants of growing inequality.” Rousseau, *On the Origin of the Inequality of Mankind, The Second Part* 1754

¹³⁰ “And virtue, who from politics / Has learn’d a thousand cunning tricks, / Was, by their happy influence, / Made friends with vice: And ever since / The worst of all the multitude / Did something for the common good.” Bernard Mandeville, “The Grumbling Hive, or Knaves Turn’d Honest,” *Fable of the Bees; Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*. Project Gutenberg, Released June 4, 2018 [eBook #57260]. Lines 164-169.

¹³¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). §209, 280.

serve, in one instance, as ends. As Hegel points out, the endless generation of human thoughts, choices, and actions are what propel reason and history forward on the grand scale, regardless of whether we individuals intended for our actions to do so. Hegel calls this quasi-disconnect between subjective intention, activity and objective impact the “cunning of reason” or the “ruse of reason,”¹³² as universal Reason (*Vernunft*) is nothing other than the endless macro-process of rational micro-individuals thinking and acting “for themselves”—a naïve assumption, as, in truth, “they know not what they do.” This articulation, it’s worth nothing, is the most value-neutral of Hegel’s uses of cunning: to paraphrase commentator Edna Ullman-Margalit, the cunning of reason here assumes that an aggregate of individual actions come together to generate a social pattern that couldn’t be determined in advance, an aggregate that is more than the sum of its parts, but, importantly, the “nature” of this “more”—whether the unforeseen outcome is good or bad—also can’t be predicted in advance.¹³³ In 1821’s *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel’s use of cunning shifts away from this value-neutral focus on logical teleology and toward the Smithian conception, with its emphasis on economic activity, what Hegel calls the “reciprocity of work and the satisfaction of needs.” Hegel elaborates, “By a dialectical movement, the particular is mediated by the universal so that each individual, in earning, producing, and enjoying on his own account thereby earns and produces for the

¹³² See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Clark Butler, *Lectures on Logic: Berlin, 1831*, English ed, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) 211; and Hegel’s lesser Logic: “That the subjective purpose, as the power of these processes in which the *objective dimension* rubs up against itself and sublates itself, keeps itself *outside them* and is what *preserves itself* in them – this is the *cunning* of reason.” Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I*, §209, 281.

¹³³ Ullmann-Margalit, *The Invisible Hand and the Cunning of Reason*, 191.

enjoyment of others.”¹³⁴ In this instance, Hegel specifies the kind of individual actions at play are individual’s participation in the division of labor, which not only allows them to satisfy their own needs but contributes to the economic advancement of civil society overall. Hegel admits that individuals’ ability to reap the benefits of collective laboring is contingent upon the individual’s “basic assets” or capital, as well as their “natural skills,” which are themselves conditioned by one’s economic standing. Yet, Hegel nonetheless maintains that ““the universal differences into which civil society is particularized are necessary in character,” including differences dictated by material inequality.¹³⁵

In the Introduction to his lectures on the *Philosophy of History*, however—published after the *Philosophy of Right*—Hegel’s description of cunning sheds its economic overtones. In this case, Hegel uses the concept in his discussion of the world-historical individual, whose actions “in a state of unconsciousness,” uniquely “fell in with the needs of the age.”¹³⁶ In turn, these individuals never experienced personal happiness or had their individual passions satisfied during their lifetimes (in fact, Hegel notes, these world-historical individuals like Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, are usually sacrificed on the altar of human progress.)¹³⁷ Rather than having world-historical individuals accomplish their intended goals, Hegel explains—in his most famous articulation—the cunning of reason “sets the passions to work for itself.”¹³⁸ In sum, Hegel’s understanding

¹³⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §199.

¹³⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §201.

¹³⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Ruben Alvarado (WordBridge Publishing, 2011), 30.

¹³⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 29.

¹³⁸ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 30.

of cunning shows up in relation to logic and metaphysics, as in the *Encyclopedia*, in relation to economics and the division of labor, in the *Philosophy of Right*, and in relation to historical and rational progress, in the *Philosophy of History*.¹³⁹ In all of these instances, Hegel seems to uphold that even though cunning produces inequality, as he notes in the *Philosophy of Right*, and sacrifices the heroes of history, as he notes in the *Philosophy of History*, the cunning of reason is ultimately a progressive force on the universal level.

On the other side of failed revolutions, the rise of fascism, and the endless proliferation of exploitation via global industrial capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer retrieved the Hegelian concept of cunning from his oeuvre but left behind Hegel's optimism and his macro-level focus on the progressive movement of history. Whereas Hegel's analysis of cunning focuses on the invisibility of the invisible hand, Adorno and Horkheimer focus on the individual hand itself: They take seriously the fact that the consequences of self-interested individual actions have not advanced individual *or* collective freedom. The cunning of capitalism doesn't amount to the paradoxical production of universal freedom out of particular choice, but rather, the cunning of capitalism produces the illusion of freedom out of individual self-interest.

¹³⁹ Out of these conceptions, however, we might extract a specific insight, in addition to the obvious enduring feature of cunning as involving the relationship between cause and effect on the macro level; intention and consequence on the micro level. In his conception of the cunning of reason in the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel notes that the cunning of history involves the sacrifice of world historical individuals: they are literally crushed under the steamroller of historical progress, a steamroller which these world-historical individuals helped build. In other words, Hegel forges a connection between the cunning of reason and the sacrifice of individuals as a trans-historical phenomenon.

Adorno and Horkheimer's development of the concept of cunning is a direct reference to and departure from Hegel's concept of cunning.¹⁴⁰ While Hegel's idea of the cunning of reason sets up the relation between the individual rational subject and universal reason, Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of cunning focuses on the relation of subjective intention and effect by and for the rational subject, and how this intra-psychic cunning is utilized intersubjectively, between a subject and their interlocutors. In this way, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain the Hegelian conception of cunning as involving the emergence of deceit somewhere between the first and third "terms" in the syllogism of intention, action, and effect, but their study of cunning acknowledges that under capitalism, cunning functions as a kind of discursive currency in modern intersubjective relations and doesn't necessarily produce positive outcomes for either the individual or the collective.

2.2 Abrahamic Discursive Cunning

To illustrate "discursive cunning" or cunning as a linguistic phenomenon in a general sense, we can look to the story of Abraham and Isaac in the book of Genesis that Hegel references in the *Spirit of Christianity*, the place where Hegel identifies modern reason in the ancient world. To recall the last chapter, Hegel cites the sacrifice of Isaac in the old testament to demonstrate that Abraham obeys the transcendent, abstract *a priori* divine law over and above than the law of love between father and son, ultimately demonstrating the affinity between Abrahamic "Jewish" reason and reason as Kantian

¹⁴⁰ Allen W. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 132.

Understanding.¹⁴¹ Yet, there is more to this affinity than Hegel takes note of in his brief reference to it. In Chapter 22 of Genesis, Abraham and Isaac depart their camp, and walk together to the place where God instructed Abraham to perform the sacrifice. In lines 7 and 8, Isaac asks his father:

“Father!,” and he [Abraham] answered “Yes, my son.” And he [Isaac] said “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.¹⁴²

Regardless of whether or not God actually wanted Abraham to murder Isaac, Abraham, at this point, is gearing up to do so.¹⁴³ While Abraham’s answer to his son’s question is *technically correct*, it is linguistically ambiguous: it’s unclear whether

¹⁴¹ Some might take issue with Hegel’s comparison of Kantian reason and Jewish reason using this particular story due to the fact that in *The Conflicts of Faculties*, Kant criticizes Abraham because—among other problems Kant has with Abraham’s sacrificial scenario—the moral law that a father should abstain from killing his son is a categorical imperative that Abraham is prepared to disobey. While the divine law to obey God at all costs isn’t freely legislated by Abraham’s “reason,” Hegel points out in various places that the notion of a categorical imperative itself must, by Kant’s logic, arise out of the depths of reason alone, not from the empirical world, including the *a posteriori* relationship between Abraham and Isaac. Therefore, Kant’s own criticism of Abraham notwithstanding, Hegel’s critique of Kantian reason as a modern correlate to Abrahamic reason remains pertinent—just as Abraham is a mere vehicle for the transcendent divine will, so too is the Kantian subject the vehicle for the transcendent rational moral will, an “imperative from nowhere,” so to speak.

¹⁴² The original Hebrew: נִיאָמַר יִצְחָק אֶל־אֲבִרָהִם אֲבִירִי נִיאָמַר אָבִי נִיאָמַר בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיִה הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה:

Additions my own. See sefaria.org Tanakh <https://www.sefaria.org/topics/binding-of-isaac.org>

¹⁴³ Whether they condemn Abraham or praise him for it, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard all claim that Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac exemplifies Abraham’s submission to divine will. Yet, there is a prominent alternate interpretation—espoused most famously by Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yitzhak (aka Rashi), the medieval French Rabbi and biblical commentator—who claims that Abraham (unintentionally or intentionally) misunderstood God, who asked Abraham in line 2 to “prepare” Isaac for the sacrifice, in which “prepare” implied that Abraham should “teach” Isaac how to perform the sacrifice of a lamb, rather than ask Abraham to “bind” or “slaughter” Isaac himself. If this interpretation is correct, then it was *not* God’s divine will for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, rather, it was Abraham’s intentional or unintentional misinterpretation of God’s will that led him to bind Isaac. If this is so, the mercilessness attributed to the Jewish God by Hegel and others in the German Idealist tradition—via this very episode—no longer holds water, as the origin of so-called Jewish immorality and cruelty would be Abraham himself, not the Jewish God. (sefaria.org Tanakh commentary: <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.22.8?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en>)

Abraham's phrasing intends to communicate to Isaac that he—Isaac, "my son"—is the "sheep" for slaughter, or if Abraham includes "my son" at the end as a means to reinforce their relationship, to explicitly mention that Isaac is his son. In the former instance, Abraham truthfully indicates that his son and interlocutor, Isaac, was going to be the burnt offering that God provides; in the latter instance, Abraham lies to Isaac, as he knew that God wouldn't provide an actual sheep for this particular burnt offering. With this proclamation, Abraham—for whatever reason—decided to speak indirectly, and his statement conveys two distinct meanings at the same time; it simultaneously deceives and reveals. If read through the lens of Hegel's critique of Abrahamic *Verstand*, Abraham's answer effectively distances himself from his son, through his evasive choice of words, and—perhaps unintentionally—distances himself from God, by altering God's articulation of the command, putting his own spin on God's words. Via this brief assertion, Abraham's "Idea," rational discursive calculation, eclipses his "Ideal,"¹⁴⁴ God, even though Abraham's assumed intention overall was to subordinate himself to God completely. Thus, Abraham's statement involved a *double maneuver*—some subtle linguistic trickery that expressed both truth and falsity, and as such, established both connection and distance between himself and his son. However, by essentially manipulating the divine command via his altered report of it, Abraham's ambiguous creative mistranslation *also* put him at a distance from God, an unintended consequence that Abraham neglected to account for. Adorno and Horkheimer, commenting on

¹⁴⁴ In his description of Abraham, Hegel plays with Kant's distinction between "Idea" and "Ideal" in the *Spirit of Christianity*: "He [Abraham] himself also stood under his Ideal's dominion, but the Idea was present in his mind, he served the Idea, and so he enjoyed his Ideal's favor." Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 187.

Odysseus' employment of a similar linguistic gesture in his communication with the mythical creatures he encounters, observe the following: "Defiance and beguilement are one and the same... Cunning, however, is defiance made rational."¹⁴⁵ If, to follow Hegel's example to its logical conclusion—inasmuch as we're reading the character of Abraham as foreshadowing modern reason—Abraham's subtle trickery here, his discursive cunning, is a sly maneuver that anticipates the "defiance" or opposition of the modern subject to the world outside itself, that same external world to which the rational subject owes its existence. Via this discursive cunning, Abraham exploits the relationship between a state of affairs and the linguistic representation of that state of affairs—word and thing—which effectively deceives the other, as well as—probably—himself.

2.3 Introversion of Sacrifice: Odyssean Discursive Cunning

Alongside their discussion of sacrifice, Adorno and Horkheimer's discussion of cunning occurs in the first *Excursus* in *DoE*, titled "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," henceforth referred to as the Odysseus essay. Whereas the first chapter of *DoE* on "The Concept of Enlightenment" presents the general contours of the dialectic of modern reason and myth via philosophy and science, the second chapter brings the dialectic of Enlightenment to life via a deliberately anachronistic reading of the *Odyssey* as a modern text. Though Adorno and Horkheimer's choice of a canonical ancient epic poem as a proto-modern artwork seems dubious, it makes sense for three reasons: first, it underscores the dialectical message of the *DoE* in general—namely, that so-called

¹⁴⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 46.

“irrational” myth bore markings of enlightenment, and enlightenment thought expresses certain “mythic” or regressive features (like sacrificial logic). Secondly, and more significantly, the *Odysseus* essay functions as an intellectual cultural critique of 19th and 20th century German Philhellenism;¹⁴⁶ furthermore, and alongside this critique, the *Odysseus* essay indirectly articulates Walter Benjamin’s critique of historicism that he outlined in his “Theses on the Concept of History,” published in very close proximity to Adorno’s initial forays into writing on Homer and the *Odyssey*.¹⁴⁷ The latter two polemical functions of the essay are distinct but related. Ultimately, they support the notion that the *Odysseus* essay doesn’t treat the *Odyssey* as an artifact—it treats the *Odyssey* as a modern text—nor does the *Odysseus* essay allege to be an “authentic” analysis of the *Odyssey*, as, according to Adorno and Benjamin at least, these aims are impossible to achieve. In commentator Martón Dornbach’s words:

[In the *Odysseus* essay,] Adorno turns to the *Odyssey* to discern in a germinal form the defining tendencies and aporias of modernity. It is thus not with the *Odyssey* that his allegorical reading is principally concerned, but with the culture that owes its very shape to the *Odyssey*.¹⁴⁸

In other words, the *Odysseus* essay presents contours of the modern world through the lens of the *Odyssey*. Though the *Odyssey* is a document that comes from the ancient world, it’s not a fossil: not only was ancient Greek poetry and literature central to

¹⁴⁶ These contemporary themes notwithstanding, the *Odysseus* essay cannot be *reduced* to a critique of 20th century Philhellenism. As is apparent to anyone who reads it, Adorno and Horkheimer’s claims in the essay are paratactical, rather than straightforwardly argumentative; as such, the *Odysseus* essay is constructed in such a way as to open itself to interpretation as both a critical theory of society and as a philosophy of history.

¹⁴⁷ Marton Dornbach, *The Saving Line: Benjamin, Adorno, and the Caesuras of Hope* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 77.

¹⁴⁸ Dornbach, *The Saving Line*, 77.

19th and 20th century Germany’s self-understanding, but in a larger sense, whether we admit it or not, how we read the *Odyssey* tells us more about ourselves—our philosophical presuppositions, aesthetic proclivities, and ideological commitments—than it does about ancient Greece. Though antiquated concepts like “barbaric,” “savage,” “primitive,” etc. are peppered throughout the essay, and it’s true that there are places where Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly situate the *Odyssey* in antiquity or “pre-history,”¹⁴⁹ the contemporary reader of the *Odysseus* essay mustn’t understand these themes that Adorno and Horkheimer retrieve from the *Odyssey* as evidence of backward-looking romanticism, identifying these concepts as simply unconscious residues of the primordial past surfacing in the present.¹⁵⁰ On the contrary, for Adorno and Horkheimer, pre-modernity and modernity are concomitant: “sacrifice,” “myth,” the “primitive,” etc. are *living modern forces*.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *New German Critique*, no. 56 (1992), 117.

¹⁵⁰ I read the *Odysseus* essay as a critique of the present, but, on the contrary, I read the “Elements of Antisemitism” as directly invoking themes that aren’t necessarily immanent to the 19th or 20th century, because, for one thing, antisemitism precedes the modern age. Chapter 3 contains a much more detailed discussion of the Elements, including the question of the historical scope of its critique.

¹⁵¹ Susan Buck-Morss makes a similar point about Adorno and Horkheimer’s “articulation of historical origins” in *DoE*: “[For Adorno and Horkheimer] To identify the historical “source” (*Ursprung*) or historical prototype (*Urbild*) or historical development (*Urgeschichte*) was to construct it from the perspective of the present, and for the purpose of criticizing the present.” Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, Free Press paperback ed (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 60. Throughout the *DoE*, Adorno and Horkheimer refer to ideas like “prehistory” and “nature,” and utilize prose that seems to favor romantic intricacy and impact rather than clarity, justification, and sequential reasoning (which, I will admit, frequently obfuscates their conclusions and detracts from the “rigor” of their claims). On the surface, this tendency aligns them with 20th century stylists like Heidegger and Derrida, whose concepts seem simultaneously slippery and dogmatic. As such, if Adorno and Horkheimer, especially in the *DoE*, are read as simply literary theorists rather than as philosophers or critical theorists, it’s easy to lump them in with the aforementioned thinkers, who have generally deconstructionist and anti-materialist leanings. In spite of their—especially Adorno’s—writing style, which sometimes betrays their intentions and intellectual commitments, their use of words is informed and motivated by a dialectical understanding of concepts. For example, like Hegel, Adorno and Horkheimer see the schism of nature and history as the form of appearance of nature and history within the

The intellectual-cultural “targets” of the Odysseus essay are two schools of Philhellenic literary interpretation: first, the politically conservative irrationalist school, which grew out of a lopsided reading of Nietzsche, represented primarily by Klages, Bachofen and Borchardt; and second, to a lesser extent, the “positivist” philological school, represented primarily by Wilamowitz-Möllendorf.¹⁵² The former camp of neo-romantic archaicists idealized ancient Greece and its artistic outputs, but recognized certain “democratic” and “rational” qualities in Homer’s epics that they associated with the hyper-rational cosmopolitanism they despised.¹⁵³ These “pre-fascist epigones”¹⁵⁴ took issue with Homeric epic poetry because unlike the more “authentic” form of ancient Greek poetry, lyric poetry, the Homeric epic was *too modern*—not esoteric, mythological, archaic, and primitive enough—a conclusion that led Borchardt to

modern infrastructural paradigm which grows out of modern capitalist social relations—a notion which conflicts with, for instance, Heidegger’s idiosyncratic “earth” and “world” distinction. What’s more, Adorno appropriates the phrase “natural history” from Marx’s own *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1944 (See Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 62), whose analysis of these “metaphysical” domains was left intentionally sparse. Put differently, Adorno and Horkheimer attempt to do with words what Marx attempted to do with economics, albeit in a much more convoluted form: namely, immanent rather than transcendent criticism.

¹⁵² When describing the intellectual backdrop of Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay, commentator Kate Fleming groups Hegel with irrationalists like Bachofen, using Hegel’s affinity for ancient Greece and apparent antisemitism as evidence of an affinity between fascist irrationalism and Hegelian thought. (See Kate Fleming, “Odysseus and Enlightenment: Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialektik Der Aufklär,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 19, no. 2 (June 2012): 107–28, 112–113). While Hegel did idealize ancient *Sittlichkeit* as well as disparage the Jews, Hegel didn’t romanticize the mythological or “primal” elements of Greek art and society in the same way that the 20th century fascists did. To affiliate Hegel’s Philhellenism with the 20th century naïve and regressive fascist ideology deceptively makes Hegel’s appreciation of ancient Greece appear to be nostalgic or primitivist: on the contrary, Hegel never called for a “revival” of the Greek polis, as he knew that such a “return” was fundamentally impossible. Furthermore, Hegel understands the ancient Greek metaphysical *Gestalt* as essentially limited, as an immediate unity that excluded individuality (see the first section of Chapter IV in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on Antigone). A more detailed discussion of the mis-association of Hegel with both irrationalism and fascism is outlined in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

¹⁵³ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” 110.

¹⁵⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” 110.

denounce the epic as a novel. In the *Odysseus* essay, Adorno points out that the image of ancient Greece that these irrationalists longed to return to was an illusion, as features of Enlightenment modernity like domination, calculation, rational exchange, and exploitation were already present in the ancient Greek myths they revered.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, this reductive reading overlooked the fact that the *Odyssey* presented *both* “mythical” and “Enlightened” elements; the *Odyssey* is much more complex than the conservative anti-modernists admitted. As a response, at the start of the *Odysseus* essay, Adorno polemically appropriates Borchardt’s characterization of the *Odyssey* as a novel as an entry point into his larger critique of the 20th century German ideological appropriation of Greek art, not only as false and naïve, but also hypocritical.¹⁵⁶

Like Adorno and Horkheimer, the second Philhellenic school that Adorno and Horkheimer take aim at, represented by positivist philologists like Wilamowitz, rejected the naïve nostalgic idealization of ancient Greece and its artworks by the irrationalists. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer however, the positivist philologists overcorrected by neglecting to pay heed to the mythical elements of epic poetry. Instead, they enacted dry historicist readings of the *Odyssey*, stripping it of mythological significance and dissecting it as if it were the lifeless object of a scientific experiment. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, what the irrationalist and classical philological interpretations of the *Odyssey* share is a blindness to the influence of their ideological commitments on their readings, the former projecting a nostalgic fantasy onto it, and the latter dismissing

¹⁵⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, “*Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment*,” 111.

¹⁵⁶ Dornbach, *The Saving Line*, 80.

its mythological dimensions as scientifically irrelevant. Adorno and Horkheimer's ideological critique of these two branches of German Philhellenism draws upon Benjamin's "Theses" in which he explains that "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" and that "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is about to overpower it."¹⁵⁷ Not only does Benjamin acknowledge that the "way things were" is fundamentally ungraspable, but he also warns that cultural objects from the past will always be used to legitimate the status quo in the present. Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer, who adopted this Benjaminian approach, demonstrate that in early-mid 20th century Germany, the *Odyssey* functioned as an ideological and cultural mirror, and that readings that claimed to be the authoritative or singularity correct interpretation of the *Odyssey* were always going to be partial, deceptive, and insidious via their purported authenticity.

In the first paragraph of the *Odysseus* essay, the authors introduce what I view as three key interpretive claims that are relevant to the discussion of discursive cunning. They are presented here (out of order):

1. "In the epic, the historical-philosophical counterpart to the novel, novelistic aspects ultimately begin to show through, and the venerable meaning-charged cosmos of the Homeric world reveals itself to be the work of ordering reason, which destroys myth precisely by means of the rational order in which it reflects myth."

¹⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 255.

2. “Homeric discourse creates a universality of language, if it does not already presuppose it; the epic dissolves the hierarchical order of society by the exoteric form of its presentation, even—and precisely there—where it glorifies this order.”
3. “...The hero of the adventure proves to be the prototype of the bourgeois individual...”¹⁵⁸

In typical fashion, Adorno and Horkheimer don’t defend or argue for these conclusions in any traditional sense. However, in order to draw out the connection between modern reason, discursive cunning, and eventually sacrifice, it’s helpful to clarify—as best one can—at least some of what the *Odysseus* essay is doing.

In the first section of the essay, Adorno and Horkheimer set up the first important interpretive claim: they position *Odyssey* at the crossroads of Enlightenment and myth, history and prehistory, and claim that this dialectic is expressed in a literary form that expresses qualities of the modern novel (the formulation they polemically borrow from Borchardt): the *Odyssey* documents the rational separation of the individual self, via the protagonist Odysseus, from animistic nature and the forces of mythological fate. Odysseus occupies the central narrative position, whereas the “old demons”—the sirens, the lotus-eaters, Circe, Polyphemus, et al—occupy the “borders” of the story, a spatial configuration that subordinates diffuse, chaotic nature to the rational human subject who bestows order and linearity upon it. The story moves forward via Odysseus’ encounters with the mythological figures, during which Odysseus manages to survive by wielding his powers of calculation and deception, also known as cunning: “The instrument by

¹⁵⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, “*Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment*,” 109.

which the self survives adventure, casts itself away in order to preserve itself, is cunning.”¹⁵⁹ Via a series of successful tricks, Odysseys makes it seem to the mythical creatures as if he was playing by the divine rules that maintain the subordination of human beings to mythical nature, but in every instance, Odysseus exploits those very rules in order to escape them, finding loopholes and ambiguity, demonstrating his superior understanding of them. Each time, Odysseus shows the mythical creatures he meets that divine law—like all law—is, by design, up for interpretation. Adorno and Horkheimer characterize this procedure of false obedience as such: “The formula of Odysseus's cunning is that split-off, instrumental spirit [Geist] adapts resignedly to nature, renders unto nature what is nature's, and precisely thereby deceives it.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, Odyssean cunning is manipulation via adaptation: it involves mimicking the creatures he confronts as a means to fool them—using nature to subordinate nature. This mimesis is echoed by the literary vehicle that carries the story, “The epic poem imitates the spell of myth in order to soften it.”¹⁶¹ Thus, both the narrative form of the *Odyssey*, as a hero's journey, as well as the content of the story, Odyssean cunning in practice, bear witness to the dialectic of nature and history. When Odysseus outsmarts mythical fate using calculating reason, he appropriates the cruelty and indifference of nature for the sake of ameliorating the cruelty of nature. Odysseus uses nature against itself for the sake of establishing human mastery of nature, which is to say, civilizing progress. Though

¹⁵⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” 114.

¹⁶⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” 122.

¹⁶¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 49.

Adorno and Horkheimer locate this muddy entwinement of callousness and rational calculation in the *Odyssey*, their latent targets are the modern fascist and scientific ideological dogmas, which prosper via the formula of Odyssean cunning, by utilizing what they allegedly seek to ameliorate: domination. What's at stake in this interpretation is the idea that hierarchization of the particular or personal interest over above the universal or communal interest (which occurs both in the content and form of Odysseus' story) has the potential to support an "us" vs. "them" understanding of individual choice and action, which can rationally enable or allow for violent sacrifice (as was the case in the Nazi holocaust of the Jews).

The second two interpretive claims, that Homeric prose creates a "universality of language" which "dissolves the hierarchical form of society," and that Odysseus "proves to be the prototype of the bourgeois individual" both hinge upon the relation between cunning and exchange—an aspect of Adorno and Horkheimer's use of "cunning" that indirectly addresses the capitalist economic conception of "cunning" as espoused by Mandeville, Smith, and Hegel. A defining feature of capitalist exchange is the fact that seemingly equal exchanges, as in the exchange of the worker's labor for a wage, aren't equal: the worker isn't fully compensated for the surplus value they create over and above the cost of their labor. While the establishment of wage labor theoretically represented the "triumph" of contractual equality over arbitrary hierarchy, it hides an unequal relation under the guise of an equal one. The contractual exchange obscures the fact that someone—the worker—is being swindled, a fact that is difficult to recognize when every commodity's prices, its "money name," is understood as written in the universal language of value, assumed to be exactly proportional to the value of whatever

it's being exchanged for. When Adorno and Horkheimer call Odysseus the “prototype of the bourgeois individual,” they are bringing out the fact that Odysseus’ voyage involves carrying out a series of unequal exchanges in which Odysseus creates the illusion of a fair trade as a means to deceive the individual on the other side and, time and time again, Odysseus is able to come out on top. These unequal exchanges include those that Odysseus enters into using the currency of his word. Adorno and Horkheimer note that, “Cunning, [is] a medium of exchange - one in which everything takes place above-board, in which the contract is fulfilled and yet one party is cheated...”¹⁶² Hence, Odysseus, the cunning proto-capitalist, cheats his interlocutors via the guise of honesty. However, the fulfillment of his subjective intention is only half of the “cunning” formula: in cheating others, Odysseus also *ipso facto* cheats himself.

To demonstrate this phenomenon, Adorno and Horkheimer present an episode from the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus deceives and escapes the clutches of the cyclops Polyphemus using discursive cunning. In Book 9 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men are being held captive by the son of Poseidon, the giant cyclops Polyphemus. After Odysseus gets Polyphemus drunk, Polyphemus asks who had brought him the gift of wine, to which Odysseus replies with another version of his own name, “Oudeis,” a name that also means “no man” or “nobody.” After Polyphemus falls asleep, Odysseus blinds him with a wooden stake. When Polyphemus cries out to his fellow cyclops on the island for help, the other monsters ask him who had injured him, to which Polyphemus

¹⁶² Adorno and Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” 125.

responds: “My friends, it is Noman that is slaying me by guile and not by force.”¹⁶³ As a result, his friends dismiss Polyphemus’ cries as nonsensical, and they ignore him.

Subsequently, Odysseus and his men manage to flee Polyphemus’ cave by clinging to the underbellies of sheep. As Odysseus and his compatriots sail away, Odysseus yells back at Polyphemus: “Cyclops, if any one of mortal men shall ask thee about the shameful blinding of thine eye, say that Odysseus, the sacker of cities, blinded it...”¹⁶⁴ Though his fellow men attempt to dissuade him from owning up to this trick, Odysseus can’t help himself from revealing the ruse to his victim Polyphemus. On Odysseus’ verbal bait and switch, Adorno and Horkheimer comment:

Mythical fate, *fatum*, was one with the spoken word. The sphere of thought to which fateful decrees - immutably carried out by the mythical figures - belong, does not yet recognize the distinction of word and object. The word is to have direct power over the object; expression and intention are one. Cunning, however, consists in the exploitation of this distinction.¹⁶⁵

Odysseus is able to deceive Polyphemus based on his ability to wield polysemy as an instrument of war, whereas the creature is at a disadvantage: Polyphemus only understands homonymy, a direct or simply identical relation between word and object. Like Hegel, Adorno and Horkheimer explain that Odysseus’ discursive cunning here “exploits” the distinction between “expression and intention”—unlike the overarching cunning of reason (*List de Vernunft*), which transcends the boundary of subjective reason, Adorno and Horkheimer draw attention to the fact that rational cunning (what we might

¹⁶³ A.T. Murray, *The Odyssey with an English Translation* (London, William Heinemann, Ltd.: Harvard University Press, 1919). Book 9 line 405.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0136>

¹⁶⁴ Murray, *Odyssey*, Book 9 line 500.

¹⁶⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” 124.

call *List de Verstand*)—as in this episode—involves a subject recognizing the gap between intention and effect, and capitalizing on it. However, the cunning rational subject isn't immune to being subjected to the cunning of reason. As Adorno and Horkheimer observe:

Odysseus makes the linguistic discovery of what developed bourgeois society calls formalism: the price of the perennial bindingness of words is that they distance themselves from all fulfilling content and from this distance they refer to all possible content, to "Nobody" as much as to Odysseus himself... The two contradictory acts of Odysseus in his encounter with Polyphemus - he responds to his name and he disowns it - are indeed identical. He acknowledges his name to himself by disavowing himself as "Nobody"; he saves his life by making himself disappear.¹⁶⁶

In addition to cheating Polyphemus, Odysseus cheats himself in two ways. First, he becomes the victor only by losing or denying himself, by becoming the absence of a subject—"nobody." When he risks his and his men's lives by compulsively calling back to Polyphemus using his "real" name, he does so to ensure that he becomes a subject once again.¹⁶⁷ Second, on a deeper level, he denies or loses himself by using reason, that which was meant to secure the obsolescence of blood feuds and arbitrary cruelty, to establish his superiority. Rather than triumphing over the indifference of nature, he internalizes the indifference of nature and exercises it shrewdly. Odysseus is victorious

¹⁶⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," 124.

¹⁶⁷ "It is as if he who has always just escaped were still so under the power of the primeval world that, having once been named "Nobody," he fears that he will once again become "Nobody" if he does not re-establish his own identity by means of the magic word, which has only just been separated off from rational identity." Adorno and Horkheimer, "Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," 131.

only via a loophole—a “formality”—consequently reinforcing the rule of violence in a modified, diluted form. By wielding discursive cunning, Odysseus is split in two; he is “man” and “nature;” though he represses himself as nature, nature rears its ugly head via his self-assertion as “man.” By setting up this relationship between “bloodless” discursive cunning (as the go-to survival mechanism of the bourgeois subject) and that which it enables—namely, the “bloody” sacrifice of the empirical other—Adorno and Horkheimer suggest here in the Odysseus essay that the “dialectic of enlightenment” manifests in real bona fide sacrifice.

2.4 First as Tragedy (*Antigone*): Prelude to the Nephew’s Discursive Cunning

On the surface, Adorno and Horkheimer’s portrayal of Odyssean cunning appears to deviate from Hegelian cunning, insofar as Odyssean cunning—which they define as “the subjective development of the objective untruth of sacrifice, which cunning replaces”¹⁶⁸—takes place on the level of the intersubjectivity, rather than the grand scale of history itself, like Hegel’s cunning of reason. However, an oft-overlooked point of convergence between Adorno and Horkheimer’s “subjective” cunning and Hegel’s “objective” cunning can be found in ancient Greece and concerns the notion of the “domination of nature,” or the installation of human rational freedom as the principal force of metaphysical agency. Though Odysseus was the ancient Greek arbiter of cunning in the *DoE*, Antigone serves a similar symbolic function in a few places in Hegel’s oeuvre; though, in the *Phenomenology* specifically, Antigone is less the “agent” of

¹⁶⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.

cunning—as in Odysseus’ case—and more like its victim.¹⁶⁹ Like Odysseus, Antigone represents the proto-emergence of the modern ‘I’ from the undifferentiated ‘We’ of ancient Greek life. However, rather than consciously asserting the supremacy of reason over nature, as Odysseus does, Antigone distinguishes herself from the rest of the uniform polis when she defies Creon’s “human” law, choosing rather to abide by and speak out on behalf of the “natural” law, the law of the family. After his analysis of *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel subsequently references the play in the Introduction to the second volume of his tripartite Encyclopedia, dedicated to the *Philosophy of Nature*. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel quotes the Greek chorus’ “Ode to Man,” recited after Creon hears the news that Polyneices has been buried. In Hegel’s quotation of the poem, he inconspicuously stitches together two independent lines the “Ode” together using a dash, implying (deceptively) that these lines occur in succession: Hegel tacks line 332 of the Ode, “Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man,” onto line 360 of the Ode, “He has resource for everything. Lacking resource in nothing he strides towards what must come.”¹⁷⁰ As we’ll see, this isn’t Hegel’s only instance of “unfaithfully” grafting together disparate lines from literary works to serve his own purposes. This “unfaithfulness” notwithstanding, Hegel here explicitly draws

¹⁶⁹ In the play itself, the subject of the chorus’ Ode to Man is ambiguous: though it’s possible that the chorus is responding to Antigone’s bravery in defying Creon and burying her brother, it’s also possible that the Chorus is commenting on Creon’s position as the enforcer of “Man’s” law. In other words, the “cunning” individual referenced in the Ode to Man could be either Antigone or Creon. See Gregory Crane, “Creon and the ‘Ode to Man’ in Sophocles’ *Antigone*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 92 (1989) 113.

¹⁷⁰ Sophocles, *The Antigone of Sophocles*, ed. Sir Richard Jebb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0011.tlg002.perseus-eng1>. Additional thanks to Idris Robinson for assistance with the ancient Greek translation.

together the paradoxical main ideas of Sophocles' poem: that 1. Of all of nature's terrifying and awesome capacities, "Man" is unparalleled; and 2. That this infinite force, "Man"—who has all "resources" or means at his disposal—is finite, and "strides" towards death. After his quotation of Sophocles, Hegel comments:

Whatever forces Nature develops and lets loose against man—cold, wild beasts, water, fire—he knows means to counter them; indeed, he takes these means from Nature and uses them against herself. *The cunning of his reason enables him to preserve and maintain himself in face of the forces of Nature, by sheltering behind other products of Nature, and letting these suffer her destructive attacks.* Nature herself, however, in her universal aspect, he cannot overcome in this way, nor can he turn her to his own purposes. (β) The other characteristic of the practical approach is that, since it is our end which is paramount, not natural things themselves, we convert the latter into means, the destiny of which is determined by us, not by the things themselves; an example of this is the conversion of food into blood. (γ) What is achieved is our satisfaction, our self-feeling, which had been disturbed by a lack of some kind or another. The negation of myself which I suffer within me in hunger, is at the same time present as an other than myself, as something to be consumed; my act is to annul this contradiction by making this other identical with myself, or by restoring my self-unity through sacrificing the thing.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: Being Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2004), 5. Emphasis mine.

In the first half of this remarkable passage, Hegel uniquely refers to the “cunning of *his* reason”—Man’s reason—rather the cunning of reason or the cunning of history (writ large). Though Adorno and Horkheimer don’t directly reference this passage from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*, this passage describes cunning as instrumental reason, the “practical” approach to nature: “Man” views nature as “alien” to himself, and as “means” which must be sacrificed or consumed for the sake of his self-preservation. However, Hegel shifts to a discussion of the cunning of history, explaining that nature, in “her universal aspect” can’t be “overcome” via the individual’s rational choices and actions. In the second half of the paragraph, Hegel notes that our “self-feeling” is “satisfied” through sacrifice, as in hunger and the conversion of food into blood: sacrifice, in this latter instance, is an organic “natural” ceaseless process—hunger can’t be “mastered.” Hence, this quote presents a picture of cunning as the human-rational sacrifice of nature. If read in tandem, this gloss on Sophocles’ “Ode to Man” in the *Philosophy of Nature*, dedicated to the cunning of reason, and Hegel’s analysis of Antigone in the *Phenomenology* as the proto-emergence of the individual out of nature, the cunning of history, the senses of cunning as “subjective” (*à la* Adorno and Horkheimer) and “objective” (*à la* Hegel) lose their polarization. Cunning is operative on both subjective-rational and metaphysical-rational levels, both as the individual’s guile *and* history’s guile: and, more significantly, cunning here is presented as an intentional sacrifice—the negation of an “other.”

2.5 Two-Faced *Bildung*: The Refined Culture of Alienation

On Hegel’s account, Antigone’s defiance foreshadowed not only the estrangement of individuality from the collective substance of Greek *Sittlichkeit*, but her individuation

also ushered in the disintegration of the law of nature and the law of human reason, and the splitting apart of the private and public domains. The ancient Greek social unity “shatters into a multitude of atoms”¹⁷² by the necessary emergence of Spirit as individuality. This atomization explodes into the imperialist wars of the Holy Roman Empire, which effectively transformed ethical citizens into legal persons—dispersed owners of property—united with one another and the state only through the contractual relationship of property ownership. Subsequently, the absolute monarchy and the early modern feudal subject emerged out of the social fragmentation of the Roman Empire. Through the schism of individual and state, the feudal subject emerges in an oppositional position, against or in conflict with external “alien” authority. Hegel explains that unlike the simple identity of the Greek world or the diffuseness of the Roman world, the late feudal world is “self-alienated...[into] a world that is double, divided and self-opposed.”¹⁷³ The early modern feudal subject is characterized by “alienation,” [*Entfremdung* or *aliénation*] insofar as property, the prerequisite of modern personhood,¹⁷⁴ is alienable or freely exchangeable. In turn, a person’s property doesn’t *define* its owner in any essential manner: they are free to give away their property, both physical property and the various properties of their personality, which they “freely”

¹⁷² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 289.

¹⁷³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 295.

¹⁷⁴ “But the circumstance that I, as free will, am an object [*gegenständlich*] to myself in what I possess and only become an actual will by this means constitutes the genuine and rightful element in possession, the determination of property.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §45. “The whole issue can also be viewed in such a way that alienation is regarded as a true mode of taking possession. The first moment in property is to take possession of something immediately; use is a further means of acquiring property; and the third moment is the unity of the first two, namely taking possession of something by alienating it.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §65.

appropriated. At the same time as alienation “frees” this late-feudal subject from the fetters of inalienable “natural” qualities, alienation also contributes to the subject’s condition of estrangement from the world, including their estrangement from the state in particular. Rather than merely accept subjugation to the powers that be, the alienated modern subject either aligns themselves with the state—a position Hegel calls the “noble consciousness”—or opposes it—aka “base consciousness.” At the same time, individuals’ judgments about the world are also alienable and changeable: a “noble” state-loving consciousness can easily become “base” state-hating consciousness; one’s perspective on “good” altruistic institutions transforms into “bad” selfish institutions, and so on. Regardless of their economic status, these late feudal subjects are formally the same; that is, both lovers and haters of the state live in a psychological, cultural, and legal state of alienation.

What distinguishes this historical and social Spirit chapter from the prior shapes of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* is precisely alienation: socially and historically-mediated personhood is predicated on idea of self-determination, which requires the ability to distance ourselves from those aspects of our personhood that we can’t change—one’s natural, pre-determined, or inherited qualities. Hegel explains that this eradication of arbitrary determination in favor of free self-determination engenders a new linguistic paradigm. In referring to oneself as “I,” the individual immediately asserts themselves as—paradoxically—a singular universal: individuality expressed through a general category. Though language might seem like a form of personal expression, Hegel notes that speaking oneself into being is necessarily social, as language is fundamentally intersubjective. He explains that even though language, as the objectification or

externalization of thought, *always* involves alienation or separation, linguistic alienation takes on a specific historical significance: specifically, in pre-revolutionary France, the modern crafty “language of flattery” emerges, exemplified in Louis XIV’s pronouncement, “*L’état c’est moi*”—a statement which both identifies and distinguishes the micro and macro, and involves a convergence of the individual human subject and the abstract universal authority. However, if this new kind of articulation—the spoken conflation of the royal name with royalty itself—involves the ambiguation of the finite individual and the universal law, concepts themselves take on a new role: language becomes a currency of power—alongside, of course, the ever-powerful violence. In addition to the fact that dichotomous principles like good and bad become interchangeable, the opposed concepts “noble” and “ignoble” themselves become inverted. These polarized linguistic categories—which, on the surface, appear static—frequently shift into one another, based on the changing relationship of individuals to their lived context. In a state of existential confusion, on the brink of French and industrial secular revolutions, the modern subject is confronted with a world in which neither the actual existence of power nor the concepts that power uses to express itself seem to possess essential eternal truth. As such, this new linguistic paradigm has consequences in the social register: if modern speech gains the capacity to coronate, it might also have the power to dethrone—a supposition that throws all prior hierarchies into question. This new type of slippery speech, that vacillates between hermeneutic stasis and movement, high and low, which was generated out of the paradigm of “free” subjectivity as alienated, is the paradigm of discursive cunning.

It's important to note that though the general process of alienation as self-objectification emerges before the Spirit chapter, as early as in the Self-Consciousness chapter, this modern variety of alienation is different from the earlier form of alienation (what we might call alienation as such or objectification) in a few ways. First, modern alienation is alienation *as opposition*, rather than merely differentiation: when Hegel notes that it involves the “perversion of every determinateness into its opposite...,” it's clear that a concept and its “other” are set against one another. Second, as previously noted, this alienation is historical: it emerges out of the modern material institution of property, it is the defining feature of modern individuality, and it is the defining cultural feature of Europe during Hegel's time—Hegel states that “...it is only *this* alienation that is the essential nature and support of the whole.”¹⁷⁵ Though individuality itself necessarily involves the ability to transform and change by cultivating various aspects of one's unique personality, Hegel points out that modern individuals only understand this process of self-distinction via the one-sided logic of the Understanding which situates the subject against and above the empirical world. In Chapter VI, Hegel demonstrates that this reification of subjectivity flows into the cultural sphere: individualism becomes the dogma of modern European culture, so much so that the individual who considers himself to be wholly independent becomes a “type” of modern person, an “*Espèce*.”¹⁷⁶ This is Hegel's own culture—*Bildung*—epitomized in Diderot's character of the Nephew from the conversational satirical novel *Rameau's Nephew*, who parodies estranged modern

¹⁷⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 300. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 298.

culture by pantomiming the linguistic gestures of individuals in the aristocratic social circles that he runs in. As just noted, over and above the specific context of pre-revolutionary France, Hegel explains that this “lacerated consciousness” persists even *after* the revolution and has become the mode of modern consciousness in general, conditioned to default to the principle of identity and the flat bivalent logic of the Understanding. Hegel shows that lacerated consciousness, for whom the outside world is abstracted or detached from the realm of ideas, is the paradigmatic subject of sacrificial modernity, the “type” of solipsistic rational agent who consciously or unconsciously endorses the instrumental sacrifice of people.

Hegel’s analysis of *Bildung* also functions as a commentary on the late 18th and early 19th century literary tradition also called *Bildung*, which served as the cultural progenitor of the 20th century irrationalist and romantic targets of the Odysseus essay. Like Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of their intellectual culture, Hegel’s critique of *Bildung* doesn’t amount to a wholesale rejection of romanticism—for instance, he agrees with romanticism’s critique of modernity, as in Schiller’s *Letters on Aesthetic Education*. Rather, he reckons with *Bildung*’s theoretical blind spots and shortcomings. Though *Bildung* is usually translated as “education,” the concept relates to the noun *Bild* or image, and the verb *bilden*, to construct or form. *Bildung* thus functions as both a noun and a verb at once: it refers to culture itself, as well as education, the process of becoming cultured. As “education,” *Bildung* is a practice of cultivating one’s sensibilities and attempting to harmonize one’s “natural” and “rational” inclinations; alternatively, as “culture,” *Bildung* is a particular configuration of behaviors and exercises that foregrounds the importance of aesthetic experience as the vehicle for the establishment of

rational civilization. *Bildung*'s equivocation between value-neutral education on the one hand and the promotion of a markedly bourgeois variety of intellectual and aesthetic culture on the other hand is central to Hegel's strategic use of *Rameau's Nephew* in the *Phenomenology* and the overall message of *Rameau's Nephew* itself,¹⁷⁷ not to mention is itself an instance of discursive cunning. Though *Bildung* romanticism as a literary movement mainly flourished after the revolution, the cultural significance of individualism and aesthetic self-cultivation pre-dates the revolution, as Diderot showcases in his novel.

Advanced by thinkers like Schlegel, Schiller, Schleiermacher, Tieck, Novalis, and Hölderlin, among others, *Bildung* romanticism developed in response to both the bloodshed and chaos of the French Revolution as well as the dominance of Enlightenment materialism and empiricism. Proponents of *Bildung* supposed that in order to avoid extreme political unrest and cruelty (like that of Robespierre's Terror), citizens of any would-be republic must be spiritually prepared to build a rational and harmonious form of life, a process that involves curbing one's primitive instincts and bringing them in line with one's rational faculties. As the original proponent of *Bildung*, Kant understood *Bildung* as the cultivation of "inner" nature, self-directed learning, in pursuit of both virtuousness and individual freedom.¹⁷⁸ Kant's *Bildung* involved looking inward

¹⁷⁷ In 1799 Friedrich Schlegel, the ringleader of the early romantic circle, stated, with uncommon and uncharacteristic clarity, his view of the *summum bonum*, the supreme value in life: "The highest good, and [the source of] everything that is useful, is culture (*Bildung*)."¹ Since the German word *Bildung* is virtually synonymous with education, Schlegel might as well have said that the highest good is education. Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003), 88.

¹⁷⁸ Simon Lumsden, "The Role of *Bildung* in Hegel's Philosophy of History," *Intellectual History Review* 31, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 445–62, 446.

and distancing oneself from external stimuli in order to sharpen one's internal faculties. After Kant, Schiller—the most prominent representative of the *Bildung* tradition—retained the Kantian notion of *Bildung* as self-cultivation, but he distanced himself from Kant's anti-empiricism, and incorporated external stimuli and sensuality into his understanding of proper self-development. Schiller's *Bildung* functioned both as a practice of inner reflection as well as general state of being that he called the “aesthetic” mode, a mediating subjective comportment that brings “natural” and “rational” being into accord through experiences of beauty. For Schiller, beauty “bridged” the internal-external divide; it was both “an object for us” and “a state of our personality.”¹⁷⁹ The problem is, in both the Kantian “inner” conception and the later Schillerian “aesthetic” conception, proponents of *Bildung* nonetheless failed to adequately connect the dots between one's subjective cultivation, individual aesthetic experience-as-virtue, and political involvement. Proponents of *Bildung* neglected to lay out the causal links between individual meditation, aesthetic education and collective political freedom.¹⁸⁰ Put differently, it's not clear how, exactly, the educated individual becomes a good citizen.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Schiller, *Letters*, 122. Adorno's conception of the transformative potential of beauty is remarkably similar to Schiller's. See Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*, 34.

¹⁸⁰ While Hegel accepts the idea that self-cultivation enables rational decision-making and action, which allows for a more generative conception of modern freedom, his idea of freedom necessarily transcends the subjective and aesthetic registers. For Hegel, the rational, sensuous ‘I’ is always already an individual participant and expression of an historical ‘We;’ as such, the objective and subjective registers can never be neatly collapsed, nor can one be neglected in pursuit of bettering the other. As this is the case, Hegel's portrayal of the *Bildung* literary tradition's agenda—individual development via aesthetic education as somehow collectively or politically redemptive—showcases the fact that *Bildung*'s ambitions remained far-fetched and narrow-minded.

¹⁸¹ In spite of the resemblance between *Bildung* and the (economic) cunning of reason as both metaphysical “bridges” between spheres of life, the latter at least recognizes how isolated economic investments add up to benefit “larger” domestic industry, whereas the former leaves the question of the subjective to objective “leap” open-ended.

Though Hegel doesn't explicitly say as much, his affinity for Schiller notwithstanding, Hegel's presentation of *Rameau's Nephew* in his discussion of *Bildung* in the *Phenomenology* implies or suggests that the *Bildung* aesthetic tradition posited a misleading inference between individualist self-cultivation and universal political freedom—an inference that cunningly disguises the alienation of the individual from the collective in the conceptual trappings of liberal egalitarianism.

As commentator James Schmidt points out, Hegel also uses *Bildung* in the *Phenomenology* in two ways, which draws attention to *Bildung*'s equivocation between the vocations of education and culture: first, in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel introduces *Bildung* as the immanent dialectical “process by which spirit and consciousness develop;” and second, in Chapter VI, he uses *Bildung* to refer to a “particular historical period” defined by alienation and laceration.¹⁸² In this way, Hegel's critique of *Bildung* brings out the ways that alienation is both a requisite for dialectical development as well as a modern preoccupation: Hegel recognizes the historical and ontological necessity of alienation as free and rational self-cultivation in the pursuit of spiritual self-consciousness on both individual and collective levels, but Hegel also recognizes his intellectual fellow travelers' emphases on individualistic self-styling as fundamentally limited and misled, as it assumes that a harmonious and functional society can and should be brought about through “cultivating one's garden,” a conclusion that fails to recognize that individuality isn't an isolated *tabula rasa*, but is rather a particular expression of—and an active participant in—historical and universal conditions, even if

¹⁸² James Schmidt, “The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe, and Hegel,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, John's Hopkins University Press, 57, no. 4 (October 1996): 625–44, 631.

individuality attempts to distance itself from its concrete socio-empirical context. In the latter instance, Hegel utilizes the character of the Nephew from Diderot's text as an archetype of the self-opposed consciousness of *Bildung* romanticism, but unlike the Nephew's interlocutor in Diderot's text—namely the Philosopher, *Moi*, who earnestly believes that proper education is the vehicle for the creation of upstanding virtuous citizens and ethical society—the Nephew craftily wields *Bildung* against itself, utilizing the erudite language of refined early modern French culture to parody the gamut of empty gestures, idioms, and vapid behavioral norms of the ruling class, a performance that reveals the culture of *Bildung* to be a romantic bourgeois charade.

2.6 Then as Farce (*Rameau's Nephew*): The Nephew's Discursive Cunning

Though Diderot began writing *Rameau's Nephew* in 1761—in French—the first actual publication of the book was Goethe's German translation of 1805, two years before the publication of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In 1804, the manuscript made its way to Jena and into the hands of Schiller. Hegel has Schiller to thank for his exposure to *Rameau's Nephew* in the first place: it was Schiller who convinced Goethe to translate *Rameau's Nephew*, in spite of Goethe's preliminary misgivings about the undertaking.¹⁸³ Goethe understood the text as Diderot's creative response to critics of his Encyclopedia, and Goethe accordingly included footnote comments providing historical context for his readers—in particular, Goethe saw Diderot and Palissot's dispute over the role of social norms in relation to moral judgments as the main conflict in the background of the

¹⁸³ Jocelyne Kolb, "Presenting the Unpresentable: Goethe's Translation of *Le Neveu de Rameau*," *Goethe Yearbook* 3, no. 1 (1986): 149–63, 151.

dialogue.¹⁸⁴ With this interpretation in mind, Goethe's translation modified Diderot's original text in a few ways; most noteworthy was Goethe's addition of footnotes implying that the Nephew's musical talent had the power to "mitigate moral depravity,"¹⁸⁵ thus echoing the principal message of *Bildung's* advocates. However, while Goethe reinterprets Diderot's text in such a way as to conflate aesthetic cultivation and rational aptitude (whilst bypassing the realm of the social), Hegel's reinterpretation of Diderot (by way of Goethe's translation) concludes the exact opposite: not only does aesthetic cultivation fail to produce upstanding subjects—and subsequently a harmonious civilized society—but self-consciously "moral" or "immoral" subjects alike live in a world characterized by self-opposition, disunity, irony, and "dismemberment," a truth that is only acknowledged and embraced by the "lacerated" consciousness of the sycophantic and sardonic Nephew. In Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology* at least, Hegel shows that the truth of modern *Bildung* is not the idealistic universal unification of sensuousness and intellect, but rather "objectively" conditioned self-divided alienation.

Like his quotation of Sophocles in the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel also presents his reading of *Rameau's Nephew* by taking certain formal creative liberties. To begin with, he quotes the text three times in the *Phenomenology* but never directly attributes those quotes to *Rameau's Nephew*.¹⁸⁶ Hegel's three uncited quotations of Diderot concern: 1. The notion of a modern "type" (*espece*) of person who thinks that they're

¹⁸⁴ Schmidt, "The Fool's Truth," 629.

¹⁸⁵ Schmidt, "The Fool's Truth," 635.

¹⁸⁶ Translators added footnotes citing *Rameau's Nephew* only after the *Phenomenology* had already been published. See Schmidt, "The Fool's Truth," 632.

wholly unique; 2. The language of self-estranged spirit, characterized as the “madness of the musician,” “impervious and mocking;” and 3. The secular spirit of Enlightenment that quietly pervades every literal and metaphorical corner of the modern European world, sneaks up on its comrade, Faith, and “shoves it to the floor.”¹⁸⁷ Moreover, in these uncited quotations, Hegel grafts together lines from different parts of *Rameau’s Nephew* but fails to clearly signal this pastiche. This formal collage of Diderot’s text itself echoes the Nephew’s frenzied impressions of the aristocracy, whose positions he rarely “cites” or contextualizes. In this way, Hegel’s abstraction of Diderot’s character from the text and his positioning of the Nephew’s cunning at the center of his analysis of *Bildung*, Hegel transforms the literary character of the Nephew into the paradigmatic alienated modern subject. In particular, Hegel shows that both pre-revolutionary France and his own post-revolutionary era a few decades later are occupied by “types” of people whose individuality is premised on an artificial separation from the social whole.

Diderot’s conversational novel *Rameau’s Nephew* consists of a dialogue between two characters, the Philosopher or “honest consciousness,” referred to only as *Moi*; and the Nephew, the “lacerated consciousness,” referred to as *Lui*.¹⁸⁸ The Nephew—Jean-Francois Rameau—or “*Rameau de neveu*” is the nephew of a famous musician (and his namesake)—“*le grand Rameau*,” or Jean Phillippe Rameau. Like Odysseus’ wordplay with the name, the ambiguity in the name Rameau adds to the lesser Rameau’s trickery, who strategically assumes the mask of his uncle’s culture in order to survive in the

¹⁸⁷ The following chapter of this dissertation provides a more detailed analysis of this third instance.

¹⁸⁸ A third voice—the voice of the narrator—only interjects a few times.

modern world. Due to the fact that the repetition of the name was such a fitting literary device for Diderot's story, Schiller and Goethe even assumed that the greater Rameau was an entirely fictional character, though he was indeed a real mildly-famous baroque composer working during Diderot's time.¹⁸⁹ In addition to the repetition of "Rameau", Diderot heightens this ambiguity of the name via his use of *Lui* and *Moi*, indefinite pronouns, for the two "opposed" perspectives, such that the identities of who is really speaking becomes muddy—a formal exemplar of Hegel's point that, in the world of *Bildung*, all categories morph into their opposites.

The dialogue between the Nephew and the Philosopher takes place in the Café de la Régence near the Palais du Royale, though the narrator explains that he'd met the Nephew before, during dinner at the house of a mutual acquaintance, a cultured French nobleman. In contrast to the real Rameau's—the uncle's—genuine artistic skill, success, and high esteem in French aristocratic circles, the lesser Rameau is a penniless and debauched sycophant, possessing none of his uncle's talent. He nonetheless manages to ride on his uncle's coattails and rub elbows with his uncle's wealthy patrons, due to his ability to "talk the talk" of high culture and mimic the gestures of these aristocrats who are his meal ticket. In spite of appearances, the Nephew is genuinely down and out, and relies on his wits and bourgeois performance for his survival. Over the course of the conversation between the "honest" Philosopher and the cunning Nephew, it becomes clear that everyone in pre-revolutionary society is self-interested, hypocritical, and

¹⁸⁹ J.M. Fritzman and Isabella C. DeMarte, "Diderot's Uncle, Hegel, Or, Rameau's Nephew as a Branch of The Phenomenology of the Spirit," *1650-1750: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* 14 (2007), 2.

cunning. Hegel recognizes the Nephew's pantomime as simply the way people act in the modern cultural world and positions the Nephew's behavior as such. Hegel borrows the Philosopher's description of the Nephew (in quote marks):

The content of what Spirit [as *Bildung*] says about itself is thus the perversion of every Notion and reality, the universal deception of itself and others; and the shamelessness which gives utterance to this deception is just for that reason the greatest truth. This kind of talk is the madness of the musician 'who heaped up and mixed together thirty arias, Italian, French, tragic, comic, of every sort; now with a deep bass he descended into hell, then, contracting his throat, he rent the vaults of heaven with a falsetto tone, frantic and soothed, imperious and mocking, by turns', 1. To the tranquil consciousness which, in its honest way, takes the melody of the Good and the True to consist in the evenness of the notes, i.e. in unison, this talk appears as a 'rigamarole of wisdom and folly, as a medley of as much skill as baseness, of as many correct as false ideas, a mixture compounded of a complete perversion of sentiment, of absolute shamefulness, and of perfect frankness and truth. It will be unable to refrain from entering into all these tones and running up and down the entire scale of feelings from the profoundest contempt and dejection to the highest pitch of admiration and emotion; but blended with the latter will be a tinge of ridicule which spoils them.'² The former, however, will find in their very frankness a strain of reconciliation, will find in their subversive depths the all-powerful note which restores Spirit to itself.¹⁹⁰

By referencing the 'madness of the musician' and his 'rigamarole of wisdom and folly,' Hegel directly refers to the performance of the Nephew in *Rameau's Nephew* as the "content" of Spirit as *Bildung*, modern cultural consciousness. In the second half of the quote, Hegel points out that the genuinely dishonest character in the dialogue is revealed to be the "honest" consciousness of the Philosopher *Moi*, who is unable to recognize that his own values mutate into their opposites—in the modern world, even the Philosopher is a phony. Moreover, *Moi* stubbornly clings to the conviction that education and aesthetic cultivation produce upstanding individuals, in spite of the fact that his conversation partner is quite plainly evidence to the contrary: the Nephew is well

¹⁹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 319.

educated in high culture, which is what enables him to be such a convincing mimic. Regarding this acuity, Hegel explains that “The disrupted consciousness...is consciousness of...the absolute perversion. What prevails in it is the Notion, which brings together in a unity the thoughts which, in the honest individual, lie far apart, and its language is therefore clever and witty.”¹⁹¹ In other words, the disrupted consciousness uses the discursive norms of his time to reveal their baselessness, the “total perversion” or complete alienation of “good” and “bad” in his aristocratic context. The Nephew’s “clever and witty” linguistic cunning uses the words of the aesthetically educated to undermine the virtuousness of aesthetic education, a stunt which makes the “honest” Philosopher look foolish and naïve by contrast, as his pathological sincerity reveals itself to be out of touch and idealistic. Nonetheless, though the Nephew’s effective, witty, discursive stunts covertly expose the superficiality of bourgeois culture (and, more importantly, ensure that he’ll eat tomorrow), the Nephew thereby merges with his ever-changing persona, and lacks meaningful subjectivity underneath the frenzied pantomimes. In spite of his “aesthetic education,” the Nephew’s debauched nature goes all the way down.

What Hegel-via-the Nephew illuminates here is the fact that *Bildung*’s project of social revitalization was well-intentioned but unsuccessful, due to the fact that in its emphasis on individual cultivation, *Bildung* neglected to acknowledge that aesthetic sensibility cannot provide the means for survival: individual cultivation alone can’t repair the “disrupted” or “lacerated” consciousness typical of modern society, nor can it

¹⁹¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 319.

ameliorate social and economic inequality, a material fact that limits the moral efficaciousness of aesthetic education. For Hegel, the Nephew is the prototype of the modern individual, who—like Adorno and Horkheimer’s Odysseus—preserves himself by deceiving others using discursive cunning, and, in so doing, deceives himself. This latter deception in question can be understood via Hegel’s notion of the cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*), operative over and above the cunning of subjective reason (*Verstand*), the former manifesting as objective conditions beyond the individual’s conscious control. The intellectual separation or distance that undergirds and facilitates the Nephew’s cunning charade is not simply a display of trickery or his intellectual superiority, it is also—crucially—the means through which the Nephew sustains his own life. Instead of revealing the Nephew’s solipsistic *independence* from his interlocutors, the Nephew’s cynicism and cunning is instead evidence of his material *dependence* on them—a tragic disconnect between modern reality and the typical modern subject’s self-conception that Diderot, Hegel and Adorno and Horkheimer recognize as prevalent and problematic feature of their cultural worlds.

As Adorno, Horkheimer, and Hegel show, though Odysseus and the Nephew are able to meet their biological needs and gain the discursive upper hand by using cleverness, neither of the protagonists are able to fully overcome the conditions of their external worlds (the arbitrary destructiveness of the ancient mythical world, and economic immiseration under the *ancien regime*). This failure manifests in the fact that in pursuit of their own isolation from and “mastery” over their empirical circumstances, both protagonists must rely on the “master’s tools,” so to speak: the establishment of “pure” independent individuality is reliant upon their relation to nature and other people,

regardless of the protagonists' intentions. In both instances, discursive cunning—a “species” of cunning—is a process that involves a self-interested cause, a linguistic ruse or deception, and an effect. Nevertheless, against this value-neutral (Hegelian) formula of the cunning syllogism, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize that within the paradigm of instrumental reason and the domination of nature, cunning fails to bring about universal freedom, the reconciliation of the individual and the universal. Rather, cunning begets further cunning, further unequal exchanges, rather than collective freedom—cunning is an end in itself: to modify Marx's description of the circulation of capital, “the movement of cunning is therefore limitless.”¹⁹²

2.7 Cunning and Modern Sacrifice: On the Uses and Abuses of Antiquity

Up until this point, I've analyzed the structural contours of modern discursive cunning—which does indeed utilize the identity-governed logical form of the Understanding. However, recognizing the ways in which discursive cunning is a symptom of modern individualism and endorses an instrumental conception of social relationships isn't enough to demonstrate how discursive cunning relates to the literal practice of modern sacrifice. As we've seen, though, in addition to the larger dialectical truth that Odysseus and the Nephew's maneuvers reveal—namely, a one-sided understanding of the relationship between the individual and the universal—Adorno, Horkheimer and Hegel also perform latent ideological critiques of their modern cultural contexts in the weeds of their literary analyses of the *Odyssey* and *Rameaus's Nephew*,

¹⁹² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981), 253.

both of which address the ways that thinkers of European *Bildung* in 18th, 19th and 20th centuries wielded discursive cunning in service of promoting irrationalism and romanticism as anti-modern reactions to modern “alienated” society.¹⁹³

Though Adorno and Horkheimer name their romantic interlocutors explicitly in the *Odysseus* essay, leaving little doubt that the *Odysseus* essay serves a polemical function, Hegel notoriously refuses to name names in the *Phenomenology*. However, according to commentator John H. Smith, “The image of Greece as a harmonious whole [in Hegel’s analysis of *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology*] has less to do with the actual historical circumstances than with a reception of a classical drama in the spirit of German classicism.” Smith continues in a direct footnote: “Hegel’s terminology makes clear that he is thinking as much of the ideals of classicism in Germany from Winckelmann to Goethe to Schiller as he is of Greek culture.”¹⁹⁴ Indeed, while there are lessons to be learned from the social unity of ancient Greece, Hegel—like Adorno and Horkheimer after him—recognized that the cultural romanticization of ancient Greece in modern Europe amounted to a fetishization of harmony and immediacy, the simple or “pure” identity of the polis, which in Hegel’s account, exploded into the indiscriminate bloodshed and atomization, by virtue of its inability to make room for individual difference. The universalism of Greece and the particularism of Rome and modern Europe exist in a dynamic relation to one another, as both abide by the logic of identity

¹⁹³ Though they are related, I do not intend to conflate this latent critique of “modern” irrationalism in the second section of Chapter VI with Hegel’s critique of Faith (and Pure Insight) in the following section, which is addressed in the following chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁹⁴ John H. Smith, *The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel’s Philosophy of Bildung* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1988), 193.

(albeit in opposite ways). Thus, Hegel's analysis of *Antigone*, as a critique of ideological one-sidedness that proved to be sacrificial, is fundamentally related to his critique of modern intellectual movements that are inattentive to or fail to recognize the dialectical and inseparable relationship between society and the individual. In theorizing discursive cunning as the primary mode of intersubjective communication in their European contexts through the mediation of Odysseus and the Nephew, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer enact critiques of their German intellectual cultural milieux. Along these lines, in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel finds fault with the modern romanticization of Diogenes as a truly free-thinking, independent subject. Hegel observes:

Diogenes, in his whole character as a Cynic, is in fact merely a product of the social life of Athens, and what determined him was the opinion against which his entire way of life reacted. His way of life was therefore not independent, but merely a consequence of these social conditions, and itself an unprepossessing product of luxury. Where, on the one hand, luxury is at its height, want and depravity are equally great on the other, and Cynicism is then evoked by the opposite extreme of refinement.¹⁹⁵

Hegel here brings out two key elements of the fetishization of ancient culture that are also more generally operative in the disrupted *Bildung* of his day: first, it misrepresents Diogenes as existing outside the society he criticized; and second, the socioeconomic inequality of Athens helped produce Diogenes' cynicism. In other words, the Understanding is both philosophically *and* ideologically operative (intentionally or unintentionally); *and moreover*, material conditions generate—at least in part—ideology,

¹⁹⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §195.

though ideology doesn't necessarily reflect the "true" structure of those material conditions. Though both Odysseus and the Nephew choose to deceive their interlocutors to preserve themselves, they—like Diogenes—are also deceived by a false sense of independence, as well as blind faith in their capacity to rationally dominate their "natural" circumstances. In addition to the insight that "lacerated" society and "lacerated" alienated personhood go hand in hand, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer also show that the formal separation of the world from the subject allows for the cunning separation of history from concepts. When concepts or ideas are vacated of meaningful empirical content—a requirement for the intersubjective practice of discursive cunning—a (fabricated) ancient "pre-modern" world can be easily dislodged and mobilized to legitimate political decisions and events in the historical present.

Based on these observations, it is not a coincidence that the romanticization of ancient Greece and Rome figured prominently in the intellectual scaffolding of political regimes whose ideological infrastructure endorsed the alienation of particularity as that which must be "cleansed" for the sake of the preservation or resuscitation of abstract universality—exemplified, for instance, in both Robespierre's Terror and Hitler's Third Reich.¹⁹⁶ In these two very different cases, the "authenticity" of ancient Roman and ancient Greek life was repackaged and put to use in service of upholding both the hyper-rational and irrational elements at play in both the Terror and the Holocaust. For Adorno, Horkheimer and Hegel, this ideological manipulation of the content of history is a

¹⁹⁶ On the use of ancient Rome and ancient Greece in Jacobin and Nazi ideologies respectively, see Chapter I of Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) and Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, trans. Richard R. Nybakken (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016).

modern phenomenon; the “vanishing” of history is only possible after the Enlightenment’s radical formalism—the ever-negating and abstracting logic of the Understanding—becomes irresistible, and permeates every register of modern life like a “perfume in an unresisting atmosphere.”¹⁹⁷ Even naïve attempts to push back against the “negativity” of Enlightenment, like those of the Philosopher, “aggravate the disease.”¹⁹⁸ Discursive cunning is evidence that modern reason isn’t merely an isolated philosophical process of comprehension: it is the engagement with other people and the outside world via instrumental reason. Cunning therefore functions as a link: in Hegel, cunning is the teleological link between individual intention and action to objective universal or historical movement, and in Adorno and Horkheimer, cunning is the link between irrational and arbitrary violence (as in “pre-modern” nature) and rational, calculated violence (as in the bourgeois world). In addition to these, both demonstrate that discursive cunning also brings the instrumental Understanding out of the mind and into the sociohistorical world via language, and enacts the isolation of the concrete, empirical particular from the abstract, ideal universal in and through the intersubjective isolation of the modern individual from other people. While it isn’t the case that all romantics and cynics become executioners, irrationalism and modern skepticism nevertheless share unconscious commitments to the principle of abstract identity that undergirds modern alienation and instrumental reason as well as the “rational” practice of modern sacrifice.

¹⁹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 332.

¹⁹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 332.

Chapter 3: Modern Sacrifice in the Terror and the Holocaust

Though the ideological mobilization of antiquity as a legitimating ground for modern political institutions is somewhat ubiquitous, this gesture is the most powerful and effective when it's employed during state-building war: the mobilization of ritual sacrifice as the prototypical founding act of a nation.¹⁹⁹ While the routine sacrifice of human beings in the modern world is typically hidden or pushed out of sight, the continued existence of modern sacrifice occasionally makes itself undeniably known. To borrow Hegelian language, “world historical” modern events—like Robespierre’s Reign of Terror and the Nazi holocaust of the Jews—render the practice of sacrifice in the modern world visible.²⁰⁰ These two specific episodes, which prominently feature the mass sacrifice of human beings for secular modern state-building ends shaped the thought of Hegel and the Frankfurt School more than any other historical events. What distinguishes their analyses of the role of sacrifice in the course of these events from other analyses of nationalist sacrifice, which understand these flare-ups of mass violence to be inconsistent with or exceptions to the rule of modern civilization, is the fact that Hegel and members of the Frankfurt school, especially Adorno and Horkheimer, contend that these instances of “visible” modern sacrificial violence, employed in service of the

¹⁹⁹ Take, for instance, quotidian classicism in American patriotic culture: the Latin motto of US Marines, “semper fi,” as in *semper fidelis*; the Latin *E pluribus unum*, “out of many, one” on US currency; the Greek phrase “*Molon labe*,” “come and take it,” as the slogan for the American right to bear arms; and so on.

²⁰⁰ Rather than draw a causal, historical, or ideological connection between these two disparate historical events, I analyze these as the most significant instances of modern rational sacrifice in the work of Hegel and the Frankfurt School respectively.

establishment of the modern state, represent an intensification and material manifestation of the underlying logic of modern Enlightenment society. For Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, in particular, the real, embodied instrumental murder of human beings is a logical outgrowth of the modern rational paradigm, rather than a deviation from it.

In what follows, I argue that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer recognize the Terror and the Holocaust as instances of modern political sacrifice that express the bloody logic of modern reason in the world. First, I outline the differences between “exceptional” forms of modern political sacrifice as distinct from the kinds of modern rational sacrifice that defined the Terror and the Holocaust—though these two strains of modern sacrifice can coexist—and I address the misinterpretation of Hegel’s account of self-sacrifice as proto-fascist. Next, I introduce Hegel’s discussion of sacrifice in the Terror through Faith and Pure Insight, the metaphysics of utility, and the pure identity of the individual and universal self, which is expressed in the guillotine’s violent and unfeeling enforcement of the general will through the sacrifice of individuality. I then present Adorno and Horkheimer’s “liberal” and “fascist” theories of antisemitism, which they approach from the standpoints of politics and economics on the one hand and anthropology and psychoanalysis on the other. I underscore that in spite of their theoretical and historical differences, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer’s analyses of modern political sacrifice recognize their conformity with the logic of instrumental reason. Furthermore, they acknowledge that the formalization, repeatability and efficiency that define sacrifice in the Terror and the Holocaust affect sacrificial agents themselves, eroding their ability to rationally reflect on their actions. While Hegel maintains that reason still has the capacity to sublimate formal, instrumental, subjective reason as Understanding, Adorno and

Horkheimer doubt reason's ability to overcome the modern sacrificial paradigm, as mechanized instrumental reason pulls everything into its well-oiled machinery, even rational subjects themselves.

3.1 Against the Exception Theory of Modern Sacrificial Violence

In modern political warfare, revolutionary or otherwise, the practice of sacrificial violence serves several vital functions: among other aims and outcomes, strategic sacrifice produces scapegoats, martyrs, and anthropologically sublimates the power of individual gods, kings, and other authority figures—all of which serve to spiritually ground new political or state formations, as well as unify and agitate citizens.²⁰¹ In one fell swoop, these neo-ritualistic sacrifices symbolically wipe the slate clean and sanctify the new state; they do so by intentionally expressing a paradoxical return to pre-modern rites. In order for these sacrifices to function this way, they are usually staged and performed as spectacles. Accordingly, these sacrifices can be considered *exceptional* because they involve the strategic invocation of the ancient, mythical power of ritual sacrifice within the modern, secular context: the tension between the pre-modern-theological and the modern-secular is precisely what produces the unifying, agitating, and cathartic effect. The most relevant and famous example of this kind of modern-exceptional sacrifice is the regicide of Louis XVI, who became both a “legendary republican scapegoat” and a “royalist martyr” after his death.²⁰² In 1792, two weeks

²⁰¹ See Jesse Goldhammer, Introduction, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); George L. Mosse, “Fascism and the French Revolution,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, (2023), 17.

²⁰² Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic*, 19.

before the king's power was suspended, a bust of Junius Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic (by filicide), was installed in the Jacobin club. This gesture symbolically linked the French king to Brutus' sons, and solidified the necessity of the king's death for the sake of the establishment of the republic.²⁰³ It's worth reiterating that in these instances of modern sacrifice, the sacred being for whom the sacrifice is performed usually isn't a transcendent god: in the case of the regicide of king Louis XVI, the aim of universal equality, liberty and fraternity via the republican state was an ideal, but an ideal borne of human reason. Whether the sacrificial agent admits it or not, modern sacrifice—in all its forms—is performed by a rational human subject for the sake of the realization of rational human ends.

In this chapter, I analyze a different kind of modern political sacrifice that nonetheless exists alongside these kinds of “exceptional” modern sacrifices. I build upon Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's presentations of modern sacrifice during the French Terror and the Holocaust that are distinct from these exceptional instantiations of sacrifice because the sacrificial victims of non-exceptional modern sacrifice—what I will call modern sacrifice proper—is not a singular entity, as in the regicide, but rather an exchangeable, substitutable representative of a category. Of course, the singularity or uniqueness of the sacrificial victim in *all* kinds of sacrifice—including pre-modern, “exceptional” modern, and genuinely modern—is subordinated to the victim's function as the means to a higher end. However, as Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer point out, the degree of abstraction that characterizes the modern sacrificial victim is so extreme that

²⁰³ Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic*, 35.

the unique identity of the victim is arbitrary: the victim might as well only exist conceptually, as they are treated simply as a particular manifestation of an abstract universal. In the reduction of the embodied victim to an abstract concept *and* to a useful means to an end, the logic of the Understanding and instrumental rationality, as processes that instrumentalize the particular for the sake of affirming the subjectively-rational, becomes clear. To describe this shift in the conception of the sacrificial victim *vis-à-vis* modern sacrifice, Adorno and Horkheimer use Hegelian language: the “in itself” of the victim, or the individuality that qualified them as worthy of the sacred rite, becomes “for him,” or understood as meaningful only as a tool for the affirmation of the rational subject.²⁰⁴ Accordingly, modern political sacrifice abides by the bivalent logic of modern reason, which posits the incompatibility of identity and difference, subject and object, universality and particularity, as well as self and other—dichotomies that, in truth, are fundamentally related. Accordingly, in modern nation-building projects, the rational “cancellation” of concrete particularity for the sake of abstract universality is a logical framework that’s perfectly suited to justify and structure the material “cancellation” of individuals in the world. “Bloodless” modern reason is expressed in the world via “bloody” modern sacrifice.

While Hegel straightforwardly identifies the sacrificial destruction of the Terror as the violent eruption of abstract modern reason, Adorno and Horkheimer’s identification of the Holocaust as a sacrificial expression of modern reason is more complicated. First, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize that

²⁰⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

modern sacrifice is an enduring feature of liberal capitalist society—the sacrifice of workers is a structural component of capitalism, and moreover, brutal remnants of feudal society, like slavery, murder, and expropriation, also remain integral to modern capitalism’s functioning. After Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize violent catastrophes as a consequence of—and therefore internal to—the social conditions that are already in place: in Benjamin’s words, “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”²⁰⁵ In this way, modern political sacrifice is but one instance of the material expression of modern sacrificial rationality. Second, unlike the French revolutionaries’ “rational” intention to raze the aristocratic few in order to establish universal equality and self-governance by the many, the holocaust of the Jews was, in a number of ways, irrational, especially with regard to the political project of Enlightenment liberalism as well as from the viewpoint of economic utility.²⁰⁶ Nevertheless, both Hegel and the Frankfurt School hold that modern rationality—regardless of whether it shows up in philosophy, morality, science, economics, or politics—contains and generates irrationality. The irrational features of the Nazi fascist

²⁰⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

²⁰⁶ In the *Dialectical Imagination*, Martin Jay describes the political and economic conclusions of Kirchheimer’s investigation of Nazi criminal law, which acknowledges the irrational rationality of Nazi law, as well as the Nazis’ contribution to the deterioration of Germany’s economy: “The Nazi claims of a ‘concrete’ policy had been realized in certain areas, such as anti-Semitic legislation and pro- populationist measures (for example, reducing sanctions against illegitimate births and supporting larger families). But in most other areas, such as agriculture, where the ideology of ‘blood and soil’ had been sacrificed to the demands of modernization, this was not the case. In fact, the basic thrust of Nazi law was in the direction of that technological rationality that Horkheimer had emphasized. ‘Rationality here,’ Kirchheimer wrote, ‘does not mean that there are universally applicable rules the consequences of which could be calculated by those whom they affect. Rationality here means only that the whole apparatus of law and law-enforcing is made exclusively serviceable to those who rule.’” On the economic front, Jay continues: “...the Nazi party was now involved in creating a competitive economic apparatus of its own, which helped increase its bureaucratization. But this meant a betrayal of earlier Nazi promises: “The party proved no support for the independent middle classes in their struggle for survival, but, instead, actually hastened their final decline more than any other single factor in modern German history.” Martin Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 159-60.

regime, on both structural and ideological levels, were intermingled with the rational features of the prior liberal state and economy.

Before tackling Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's respective studies of modern political sacrifice and its relationship to modern reason, I will first speak to the misinterpretation of Hegel as a proponent of modern patriotic sacrifice and, by extension, as a proto fascist. These related charges rest on a misunderstanding of Hegel's analysis of self-sacrifice and the state. I'll first describe Hegel's conception of political self-sacrifice and then address the inconsistency between Hegel's account of self-sacrifice and the Hitlerian conception of self-sacrifice.

3.2 Hegelian Self-Sacrifice

As noted in the previous chapter, in the *Phenomenology's* section on "Culture and its Realm of Actuality," Hegel explains that early modern French society is populated by alienated subjects who were either amenable to or resentful of the governing authority, though these seemingly opposed positions, acceptance or rejection, tend to morph into one another (and thus aren't as opposed as they're held to be). Along with the linguistic inauguration of the universal-individual modern subject, a new relationship to the state emerges: the "heroism of service," a development of "noble consciousness" or a "virtuous" identification with state power. This subject is seemingly willing to freely sacrifice themselves for the "universal" state power over and above their individual self-consciousness.²⁰⁷ However, Hegel explains that in the historical world of pre-

²⁰⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 306.

revolutionary *Bildung*, this self-sacrificing soldier or “hero” is merely a “haughty vassal,” who, despite appearances, actually represents the self-interest of his estate or class rather than the interests of the overarching collective state. Accordingly, this deceptively chivalric bourgeois individual is secretly reluctant to risk their life for the sake of the general interest: they are “all talk.”²⁰⁸ This haughty vassal is representative of the alienated antisocial bourgeois subject (like the Nephew) whose self-professed agenda masks a drive for individualistic self-interest and self-preservation above the collective interest. Instead, Hegel presents the idea that self-renunciation for the sake of the state is actually “truer” than the bourgeois self-preservation that pervades modern society. Hegel states, “...the true sacrifice of *being-for-self* is solely that in which it surrenders itself as completely as in death, yet in this renunciation no less preserves itself.”²⁰⁹ Thus, the bourgeois “selfishness” on behalf of the subject is evidence of the fact that modern Spirit remains divided between individual subjects and an “external” power, the state, which doesn’t express the individual’s interest. The early modern state remains alien to the individual whilst exerting power over the individual. The vain individual consciousness resents this alien power, and is unwilling to sacrifice their life for the higher purpose of the state. Hegel espouses a related view in his essay on *Natural Law*. Contrary to empirical natural law, which, like in Hobbes’ view, understands self-preservation as the guiding principle of the state of nature, Hegel claims that the individual’s self-sacrifice for a greater cause demonstrates a few things. First, it is evidence of the subject’s ability

²⁰⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 307. For a more historically-specific analysis of this aristocratic subject, see Terry P. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 153 and Harris, *Hegel’s Ladder vol II*, 278-280.

²⁰⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 308.

to choose freely and rationally to risk their lives and sublimate their drive for self-preservation, their existence as mere nature. Second, the individual's self-sacrifice also illuminates the intrinsic connection between the individual's choices and the preservation of the state—in these instances, the interests of the individual and the state are identical. As such, self-sacrifice can only be considered rational when there is a genuinely reciprocal relationship between the free, autonomous individual and the state.

Indeed, in the *Phenomenology*, the *Natural Law* essay, and the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel laments the fact that in modern “estranged” European culture, individuals are too self-interested and accordingly not willing to sacrifice their lives for the greater good—a position that evokes the fascist propensity for sacrificing the individual “I” for the sake of defending the collective “We.”²¹⁰ This reading of Hegel as espousing a proto-fascist conception of sacrifice was a popular interpretation among 20th century French Continental thinkers, who criticized Hegel's philosophy on these grounds (among others).²¹¹ There is also loose historical support for connecting Hegel to 20th century fascism, as a misinterpretation of Hegel's conception of the state was famously influential for Italian fascists Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini. However, these

²¹⁰ See, for instance, this passage from *Mein Kampf*: “The man who loves his nation can prove the sincerity of this sentiment only by being ready to make sacrifices for the nation's welfare. There is no such thing as a national sentiment which is directed towards personal interests.” Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), trans. James Murphy. (Germany, 1939: Project Gutenberg, 2002). <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601h.html>

²¹¹ See Shlomo Avineri, “The Problem of War in Hegel's Thought,” in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. Jon Stewart, (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 131. The main culprit of this reading is Kojève, whose Lectures on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—attended by the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hannah Arendt, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Lacan, and Andre Breton, among others—hastily “Marxified” and politically radicalized Hegel's *Phenomenology* by positioning the life and death struggle from the Lordship and Bondage section of “Self-Consciousness” as the center of the *Phenomenology* and Hegel's system overall—a wildly incorrect gesture, by Hegel's own lights.

serious charges rest upon an incorrect conception of what Hegel means when he talks about the state and how it relates to the individual. Here and elsewhere, Hegel ambiguates between the concrete state—as in the early modern state he references in this section on Culture—and the absolute state of *Sittlichkeit* which represents the dialectical unity of the I and the We, most closely represented by the ancient Greek polis. Crucially, this non-alienated absolute state, the Idea of the state, is only recognizable from the perspective of Absolute Knowing and—as a sublation of the alienation of individual and universal—cannot be realized in a society defined by estrangement, which is Hegel’s conception of modern society in general.²¹² In other words, the “true” sacrificial relation that Hegel describes here is impossible in the modern world precisely because of the fundamental and thoroughgoing divide between the individual and the collective in modern society. Thus, rather than advocate for a “contemporary” political project grounded centrally in the call for soldiers to risk their lives, *à la* Hitler, Hegel’s reflections on both the estrangement of the modern individual from the collective as well as the ubiquity of the bourgeois impulse toward self-interest and self-preservation function as meta-historical social critiques of a modern state that does not reflect its individual subjects. Hegel is pointing out that by opposing the “individual” to the “collective,” “person” to “state,” modern reason unconsciously imposes the framework of sacrifice onto every phenomenon, such that “choosing” any philosophical or political position requires the “destruction” or annihilation of its other. Rather than advocating for modern political sacrifice, Hegel introduces the idea of voluntary self-sacrifice as a means to illustrate the

²¹² See Walter A. Kaufmann, “The Hegel Myth and its Method” in Stewart, *Hegel: Myths and Legends*, 89.

extent to which the modern state must function as an expression of individuality, rather than the exclusion of it. In Cat Moir's words:

...the idea of the state as Hegel articulates it is just that: *an idea*, which not only fails to correspond with reality as it is actually lived, but in our belief that the idea actually represents or expresses reality, *conceals the true nature of reality from us*.²¹³

In other words, taking Hegel's conception of the state *vis-à-vis* his discussion of self-sacrifice as an instance of historical prescription—in which Hegel voices support for the governments of the European nation states that surrounded him—would require readers of Hegel to abstract Hegel's discussion of self-sacrifice from the rest of his analysis of modern politics and culture, which, as we've seen in the previous chapter, isn't particularly rosy. Moreover, such a reading misunderstands Hegel's dialectical method, which operates on multiple levels. For Hegel, there is a difference between, on the one hand, an analysis of politics or society that's superficially consistent within the logic of its immanent state of affairs, and on the other hand, a deeper philosophical analysis of politics and society on the level of "the concept," which has in its scope considerations that reach beyond the immediate self-contained historical and empirical facts of the matter.²¹⁴ If we apply this two-tiered analysis to fascist self-sacrifice, Hitler's

²¹³ See Cat Moir's "Second Nature and the Critique of Ideology in Hegel and the Frankfurt School" in Paul Giladi, ed., *Hegel and the Frankfurt School: Traditions in Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2021). 121-122.

²¹⁴ Hegel articulates the difference between these two kinds of analyses in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*: "This distinction, which is very important and should be firmly borne in mind, is at the same time a very obvious one; a determination of right may be shown to be entirely grounded in and consistent with the prevailing circumstances and existing legal institutions, yet it may be contrary to right [*unrechtlich*] and irrational in and for itself, like numerous determinations of Roman civil law [*Privatrecht*] which followed quite consistently from such institutions as Roman paternal authority and Roman matrimony. But even if the determinations of right are rightful and rational, it is one thing to demonstrate that this is so – and this cannot truly be done except by means of the concept – and another to depict their historical emergence and the circumstances, eventualities, needs, and incidents which led to their

request that Nazis lay down their lives to eliminate Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and other groups “makes sense” in light of his belief that these groups actively threatened the unity and survival of the Aryan race. Technically speaking, this reasoning is logically consistent, and therefore, on an abstract level, can be considered rational—Nazis themselves found it quite convincing. However, the “rationality” of this statement is exclusively formal. Nothing in the above inference has any objective content: both the perceived threat and the universal category of the Aryan race were fabricated by the fascists and have no meaningful empirical content. As this fascist “state” was built upon lies developed by the Nazi leadership, there is, by Hegel’s standards, no legitimate reason for individuals to risk their lives for this cause, nor is there any rational or spiritual value in it. In this way, the fascist support for self-sacrifice and the Hegelian support for self-sacrifice can only be considered compatible on the most superficial level, by way of an irrational and warped conception of the modern state.²¹⁵

introduction. This kind of demonstration and (pragmatic) cognition in terms of proximate or remote historical causes is often called ‘explanation’, or even more commonly ‘comprehension’, in the belief [*Meinung*] that this kind of historical demonstration is all – or rather, the one essential thing – that needs to be done in order to comprehend the law or a legal institution, whereas in fact the truly essential issue, the concept of the thing [*Sache*], has not even been mentioned.” Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §3.

²¹⁵ Though this analysis of the relationship between Hegel and fascism is limited to the topic of self-sacrifice, both for the sake of brevity and relevance, more detailed critiques of the association of Hegel with fascism are presented in Domenico Losurdo, *Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).; Joachim Ritter, *Hegel and the French Revolution: Essays on the Philosophy of Right*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass. ; London, England: MIT Press, 1982).; Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, 100th anniversary ed., with a new pref., Reprint [der Ausg.], London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1941 (New York: Humanity Books, 1999); and György Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (London: Verso, 2021).

3.3 Enlightenment as Pure Consciousness and the Metaphysics of Utility

In the prior chapter, I posed the question of the relation between the romantic, the cynic and the executioner: it's not clear yet how a rational and intersubjective mode manifests in bloodshed. Hegel's transition from the intellectual positions of Faith (believing religious consciousness) and Pure Insight ("negative" Enlightenment consciousness) to the positive Truth of Enlightenment as universal utilitarianism, and subsequently to the manifestation of utilitarian reason in Absolute Freedom and Terror, sheds light on the relationship between an intellectual tendency, an indifferent interpersonal comportment, and real embodied sacrificial violence.

In the cultural register, Rameau's Nephew recognized that the tenets of moral philosophy, the rules of argumentation, and his interlocutors themselves were objects for him to rationally manipulate; ultimately, his cunning independence was the only source of his agency in a world permeated by vanity, hypocrisy and socioeconomic inequality.²¹⁶ Via his ability to alienate himself from both nature and his social context, the Nephew was able to "try on" various viewpoints of particularity without adopting them as enduring or objective positions. In so doing, the bourgeois individual—epitomized by the Nephew and Odysseus—acknowledged the *inessentiality* of empirical particularity, a realization that enabled them to set themselves apart from (and against) all else.²¹⁷ Rather than succumb to total asocial nihilism, Hegel points out that alienated subject recognizes

²¹⁶ It bears repeating that for Hegel, the Nephew isn't an outsider or misfit: he is the prototype of modern rational consciousness in the cultural domain.

²¹⁷ On this phenomenon, Hinchman writes: "Thus the liberation of the 'I' proclaimed in theory by Descartes becomes in practice the cultivation and manipulation of 'images' [*Bild*]." Lewis P Hinchman, *Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984), 121.

that self-cultivation can be made universal—a position which, in the first “stage,” crystallizes into the Enlightenment positions of Faith and Pure Insight: the former, a religious “believing” consciousness concomitant with rationalism; and the latter, a rational consciousness that rejects religion and religious institutions as naïve, delusional, corrupt, and conspiratorial. Despite their opposite views on the value of religion and tradition, Faith and Pure Insight are both committed to the idea that subjectivity reconciles itself in and through “pure consciousness,”²¹⁸ either qua the universal human rational subject or qua God within, the direct connection between the individual and the suprasensible beyond. Unlike the “immature” versions of these viewpoints, the medieval Christian and theoretical and practical idealist positions, Faith and Pure Insight aren’t purely inward facing. They acknowledge that consciousness and world aren’t fundamentally separate, i.e., that spirit and substance are metaphysically related. Unlike the Nephew, they also recognize that the outside world can be rationally transformed, and in this sense, Faith and Pure Insight are the first bona-fide Enlightenment positions to “arrive on the scene.” While the *Bildung* tradition was aimed at cultivating the isolated individual, Faith and Pure Insight are the first gestalt in the *Phenomenology* aimed at cultivating social institutions.

At the end of the day, however—a long day, during which Pure Insight launches numerous weak attacks against Faith²¹⁹—Pure Insight overtakes Faith. To recall Hegel’s

²¹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 325.

²¹⁹ Pure Insight dismisses religion as irrational and untrue, but the reasons Pure Insight provides as grounds for dismissing Faith as naïve are unconvincing to the faithful—for instance, the rationalist Enlightenment’s accusation that faith’s beliefs are *delusional* doesn’t make sense to the faithful, as the distinction between “illusion” and “truth” that is constitutive of the idea of delusion doesn’t exist for Faith. In Faith’s eyes, “truth has directly the *certainty of itself*, which in its object it possesses *its own self*.”

final reference to *Rameau's Nephew*, quoted in the previous chapter, Hegel borrows Diderot's words to describe Pure Insight's swift victory over Faith: "One fine morning it [Pure Insight] gives its comrade [Faith] a shove with the elbow, and bang! Crash! The idol lies on the floor'."²²⁰ By bringing the Nephew's words into the Enlightenment context, Hegel demonstrates that modern aesthetic and intellectual culture share a metaphysical principle *and* proliferation tactic with Pure Insight: *negativity* or *negation*. As the final blow, Pure Insight reveals to Faith what Faith secretly knew all along: that the transcendent is essentially immanent, and that God and Reason are one—the I, human rational subjectivity, mediates and determines all reality. Also noted at the end of the previous chapter, Hegel explains that Pure Insight's proliferation is "comparable to a silent expansion or to the diffusion, say, of a perfume in the unresisting atmosphere."²²¹ Pure Insight's victory was easily won, as Faith was already "infected" by Pure Insight: Faith already unconsciously agreed with the premise of Enlightenment, that pure consciousness is the absolute. Yet, Faith's easy defeat notwithstanding, Pure Insight's blind commitment to negativity proved unsatisfying. Rather than accept the speculative unity of consciousness and the absolute, Pure Insight doubles down on the metaphysical supremacy of the abstract I of pure consciousness and becomes suspicious of pre-existing

(Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 202-203.) Thus, Pure Insight's critique is irrelevant, as Faith requires certainty, not justification. Further, the theological alternative to Faith that Pure Insight nominates as a rational replacement is neither appealing to Faith nor as unprejudiced as it takes itself to be: for instance, the "new" God that Pure Insight favors is the empty God of deism, that Hegel characterizes as a "*vacuum* to which no determinations, no predicates, can be attributed." (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 206.) Even though the Enlightenment pushes faith beyond its self-limitation, the Enlightenment's dismissal of Faith as unsubstantiated does itself a disservice, as Enlightenment's abandonment of the "beautiful unity" (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 211.) of Faith leaves it with a world split in two, the pure thought of deism and the pure matter of materialism.

²²⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 332.

²²¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 332.

social and political institutions that fail to reflect the rational human subject, as these institutions should exist only insofar as they exist *for* the subject *by* the subject. However, this suspicion becomes infectious: as the atomic unit of modern society, the individual of Pure Insight becomes suspicious of everything that exists outside of it. If transcendent ideas and immanent phenomena are, in truth, fabricated by us for us, all objectivity, particularity, or externality that seems meaningfully lasting or self-contained comes under scrutiny.

As “Positive” Enlightenment, what Hegel identifies with deism and materialism, Insight explicitly embraces the metaphysics of utility—a logic that was only implicit in the philosophical mode of the Understanding and in the alienated cultural mode of *Bildung*. Human rationality supplants God as the “creator” of the world, a gesture that, in turn, renders pre-existing, seemingly-independent external things—including, but not limited to, belief systems, governing institutions, customs, and laws—suspicious of being irrational and empty. The relation between subject and object undergoes a Copernican turn: external phenomena become the means through which subjective knowledge is discovered, rather than the objective source of knowledge. Despite positing the world as their epistemological and scientific starting point, both “strains” of Positive Enlightenment posit pure consciousness as absolute, albeit in different guises. While deism “begins” in finite consciousness, the God of deism is theoretical rather than living; and while materialism “begins” in the sensuous world, it nonetheless posits a conceptual non-material ground, pure matter, as its unifying principle. Though deism and materialism seem antithetical, they are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, they are both characterized by immediacy and certainty, as for the deist, God as consciousness

simply *is*, and for the materialist, material nature simply *is*; simultaneously, on the other hand, both perspectives are essentially inward-facing, “pure consciousness”—thought and matter exist insofar as they exist as objects for us.

At long last, after having traversed Reason and Culture, Hegel presents us with the institution of the bivalent logic of the Understanding as not merely the foundation of theoretical, moral, and scientific thought, but as the overall framework of modern Spirit, particularly as regards the reflection of the individual “self” as the meta-“self” of rational society. The endless “rotary motion” between the universal and individual, thought and being that typifies the intellectual process of the Understanding is now explicitly incorporated in the teleological relation of means and ends, instrumental reason. The metaphysics of utility includes the utility of rational subjects themselves: human beings, too, exist “for others.” In Hegel’s words, “Just as everything is useful to man, so man is useful too, and his vocation is to make himself a member of the group, of use for the common good and serviceable to all.”²²² The Useful brings the “two worlds” of deism and materialism down to earth, as the “ends” of the Enlightenment’s pursuits must now be human-oriented. In political thought, this shift enacts the actual “dethronement” of corrupt, inherited, hierarchical social structures—a total leveling of all prior institutions of authority that was only previously made possible via in the linguistic assertion of the singular universal “I” of Culture. The abstraction of the I from determinate “content” in representational language—a phenomenon exemplified via discursive cunning—cleared the cultural path for the political revolutionary levelling of the “content” of tradition. In

²²² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 343.

the metaphysics of utility, the philosophical, moral, and scientific logic of the Understanding migrates out of the mind and into the street—in the case of the French Revolution, the philosophical revolution and political revolution march hand in hand. Bacon’s epistemological instrumentalization of nature, Kant’s categorical imperative and transcendental I, and Rousseau’s social contract laid the foundation for the ontological democratization realized in the Declaration: every citizen now declares the abstract identity of individual and universal—*L’état c’est moi*—previously only reserved for the mouths of economically and religiously sanctioned authorities. At the same time, the problem with modern reason as the blueprint for the new society is that, as previously acknowledged, abstract identity, formalism, instrumentality, and destruction are baked into the bivalent movement of modern reason, which cannot tolerate the concomitance of universal ideas and particular embodied things, and routinely sacrifices the latter for the sake of the former. The “bloodless” logical vacillation between unified identity and atomized nonidentity in the first and second moments of the Understanding necessarily show up in the empirical world through the sacrifice of real embodied particulars, individual people, for the sake of upholding the abstract universal principles of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, evacuating these principles of content.

3.4 Absolute-Freedom-as-Terror

At the beginning of the Absolute Freedom and Terror section of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel notes that the Enlightenment doctrine of utility becomes the organizing principle of modern society, reflected in the position that the governing authority should directly represent the citizens and ensure universal human wellbeing, rather than merely the wellbeing of the few. After the inherited, hierarchical

determinations of feudal society were revealed to have no inherent value, rational utility becomes the yardstick for determining how the collective meta-subject should cultivate or form itself. As written in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the individual will and the collective or general will are identical, one and the same. However, positing the unmediated or simple identity between the individual citizen and the universal government makes the syllogism of utility cave in on itself, as the useful objective structures—namely, the institutions that make up the substance of rational society—fall out of the equation completely. Hegel’s analysis of Robespierre’s Terror is a critique of the political ramifications of the philosophy of unmediated identity, what Hegel calls “Absolute Freedom,” an extreme case of “negative freedom” as an expression of the rational will—an idea that Hegel subsequently develops in the *Philosophy of Right*. While plenty of holes have been poked in Hegel’s critique of Rousseau’s idea of the general will as presented in this section of the *Phenomenology*,²²³ Hegel’s presentation of the will in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* is a more straightforward and less controversial depiction of what exactly he takes issue with regarding the role of the will in Absolute Freedom. As we’ll see, Hegel’s critique of Absolute Freedom is a development of his critique of the Understanding as it shows up in a specific historical and political moment: Hegel encounters the same kind of abstract, identical, one-sided

²²³ Though many interpreters take Hegel to be criticizing Rousseau in “Absolute Freedom and Terror,” they take issue with Hegel’s critique of the relationship between the individual and general will that he apparently attributes to Rousseau, as Rousseau didn’t take each individual will to be representative of the general will. Over and above a critique of Rousseau, Hegel seems to be criticizing a Romantic conception of freedom that is limitless. For a detailed chronicling of the critiques of Hegel’s critique of Rousseau in “Absolute Freedom and Terror,” see Robert Stern, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Routledge Philosophy Guidebooks (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 158-163.

ideas that permeate the science, philosophy, and culture of his era, though the intensification of the contradictions involved in the French Revolution begets a calamitous eruption of sacrificial reason via the guillotine.

One of the many symptoms of the modern installment of abstract reason as the governing logical paradigm regards the modern conception of freedom as the absence of all determination. If modern reason posits a thoroughgoing ontological separation between thought and world, rational subjects must choose between “thinking” and “acting.” For some with “over-refined sensibility,” like the cynic or romantic, the finite expression of the will via choice or political action logically inhibits the infinity of the will. Instead of taking an active role in the *Bildung* of modern rational society, they retreat into “inward brooding” and the aloof “aspiration... to be beautiful.”²²⁴ In their eyes, making a specific decision forecloses their ability to make any other decision, which is paralyzing: determination is a limitation on universal freedom rather than an expression of it. As a result, they take solace in “thought,” safe from the finite particularity of the empirical world. While it might seem like the revolutionary is the opposite of the cynic or romantic, as they fully embrace determinate decision making and embodied action, Hegel explains that they, too, endorse the one-sided conception of freedom that follows from the spurious metaphysics of the Understanding:

This is the freedom [of the understanding,] of the void, which is raised to the status of an actual shape and passion... if it turns to actuality, it becomes in the realm of both politics and religion the fanaticism of destruction, demolishing the whole existing social order, eliminating all individuals regarded as suspect by a given order, and annihilating any organization which attempts to rise up anew. Only in destroying something does this negative will have a feeling of its own existence [*Dasein*]. It may well believe that it wills some positive condition, for

²²⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §13.

instance the condition of universal equality or of universal religious life, but it does not in fact will the positive actuality of this condition, for this at once gives rise to some kind of order, a particularization both of institutions and of individuals; but it is precisely through the annihilation of particularity and of objective determination that the self-consciousness of this negative freedom arises. Thus, whatever such freedom believes [*meint*] that it wills can in itself [*für sich*] be no more than an abstract representation [*Vorstellung*], and its actualization can only be the fury of destruction.... An example of this was the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, during which all differences of talents and authority were supposed to be cancelled out [*aufgehoben*]. This was a time of trembling and quaking and of intolerance towards everything particular. For fanaticism wills only what is abstract, not what is articulated, so that whenever differences emerge, it finds them incompatible with its own indeterminacy and cancels them [*hebt sie auf*]...²²⁵

Hegel here provides an account of the way in which the modern conception of freedom, as abstract and subjective, becomes actual only in “the fury of destruction.” He presents the idea that Absolute Freedom misunderstands what it wills: regardless of whatever rational principle it “believes” that it’s willing—equality, freedom, brotherhood, and so on—these principles are *immediately* universalized, which not only hinders their practical application, but also requires the elimination of “non-universal” existing institutions, what Hegel calls “spheres.”²²⁶ All institutions—indeed, everything actual—by virtue of the fact that they exist in space and time, express individuality. If, as in the logic of the Understanding, universality is opposed to individuality, and these categories are deemed mutually exclusive, the actualization or enactment of an individual will (as immediately universal) manifests *only* and *exclusively* through negation. Hegel explains that empirical particularity, what he calls “real being,” has “lost the meaning of

²²⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §5.

²²⁶ H.S. Harris surmises that the elimination of the spiritual spheres that Hegel refers to in paragraph 587 of the *Phenomenology* refers to 1791’s abolition of the guilds.

utility.”²²⁷ The separation of “for-self” and “for-another” caves in: every individual citizen is immediately the Nation. In Hegel’s words, “the individual consciousness that belonged to any such sphere... has put aside its limitation; its purpose is the general purpose, its language universal law, and its work the universal work.”²²⁸ It is the simple identity of the individual and general will as the “doubled” bourgeois subject of Reason projected onto the entire cosmos that “empties” the Enlightenment’s ideals of their determinacy through the systematic, material “fury of destruction.” Hence, the overcoming of unequal society via rational cancellation or sublation, what Hegel describes as “*aufgehoben*,” appears on the stage of modern history only as scorched earth, a thoroughgoing cancellation, annihilation, or sacrifice, what Hegel describes as “*hebt sie auf*.”

By §587 of the *Phenomenology*, individual consciousness has been completely absorbed by the “consciousness” of the state, and the violent chaos of the Reign of Terror is in full swing. The full expression of Absolute Freedom is more aptly characterized by Rebecca Comay as “Absolute-Freedom-as-Terror:” Hegel’s characterizations of the identity of Absolute Freedom and Terror emphasize its *purely* destructive nature. Hegel states: “Universal freedom, therefore, can produce neither positive work nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the fury of destruction.”²²⁹ Absolute-Freedom-as-Terror never flinches, and it takes no prisoners. Hegel continues:

... by virtue of its own abstraction, it [universal consciousness] divides itself into extremes equally abstract, into a simple, inflexible cold universality, and into the

²²⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 358.

²²⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 357.

²²⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 359.

discrete, absolute hard rigidity and self-willed atomism of actual self-consciousness. Now that it has completed the destruction of the actual organization of the world, and exists now just for itself, this is its sole object, an object that no longer has any content, possession, existence, or outer extension, but is merely this knowledge of itself as an absolutely pure and free individual self. All that remains of the object by which it can be laid hold of is solely its *abstract* existence as such. The relation, then, of these two, since each exists indivisibly and absolutely for itself, and thus cannot dispose of a middle term which would link them together, is one of wholly *unmediated* pure negation, a negation, moreover, of the individual as a being *existing* in the universal. The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore *death*, a death too which has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self. It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.²³⁰

In this striking paragraph, Hegel explains that Absolute-Freedom-as-Terror is divided into two “pure” polar and identical extremes: the “simple, inflexible cold universality” of the general will and the “discrete, absolute hard rigidity and self-willed atomism” of the manifold individual wills. In this way, the back-and-forth “negative” movement of the rational Understanding, which vacillates between the pure independent subject and the world of empirical particulars becomes an immanent movement between subjective individual will and subjective general will, a closed circle that excludes empirical reality. As such, the connection between the abstract universal and empirical particular is mediated by the instrument of abstraction, that is, destruction and death. Hegel describes this death as the “coldest and meanest of all deaths.” Accordingly, aside from the spectacular “exceptional” sacrifices that were being performed during the revolution—like the parading of Foullon de Doué’s head on a pike—which functioned as strategic, symbolic revolutionary tactics; a different kind of sacrifice was also being

²³⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 359-60.

performed. The distinguishing feature of most deaths during the Terror—what makes the Terror an instance of modern sacrifice proper—is precisely how unspectacular they were, due to the substitutability of the victims, defined only as “suspects,” and how the streamlined, efficient nature of the guillotine managed to “empty” the deaths of its victims of any uniqueness or meaning. James Schmidt contends that the “mouthful of water” image that Hegel adds at the end of this paragraph is a reference to Jean-Baptiste Carrier’s “Republican Marriages.” Allegedly, between 1793 and 1794 in Nantes, the Jacobin Carrier tied pairs of men and women together and drowned them (“mouthfuls of water”), an event depicted on the front cover of the January 1795 edition of *Minerva*, a journal that Hegel was known to read. However, the importance of this image, Schmidt astutely points out, comes to the fore only through Hegel’s conjoining of the two images of the chopped cabbage and the swallowed water. These mundane, passive acts demonstrate the cold indifference of the executioner to the executed, as well as the marked efficiency of the destructive process.²³¹ In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno observes that “Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death.”²³² However, the pure identity of the particular and the universal in the Terror prefigured this 20th century observation, only to be fully realized in the sacrifice of the Jews over a century later.

²³¹ James Schmidt, “Cabbage Heads and Gulps of Water: Hegel on the Terror,” *Political Theory* 26, no. 1 (1998): 4–32, 14.

²³² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362.

3.5 The Frankfurt School's Political Analyses of Fascism

Hegel's analysis of the Reign of Terror as modern reason's guillotine can be easily read as a political: Absolute Freedom and Terror is framed as a critique of Rousseau's general will; Hegel seems to refer to specific moments during the Terror, like the alleged Republican Marriages;²³³ and Hegel's critique of the Terror had implications for his theory of the state. However, viewing any section of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—let alone the lion's share of the Frankfurt School's output—through the lens of political theory is complicated, as, to begin with, all members of the Frankfurt School generally agreed that fascism was intimately linked to the capitalist economic system—a fact that blurred the distinction between politics and economics in their studies on National Socialism. Admittedly, certain members of the Frankfurt School published works that can be more comfortably categorized as political theory, or at the very least, political economic theory, centrally concerned with questions of modern statehood. These include most prominently Friedrich Pollock's article on "State Capitalism" from 1941 and Franz Neumann's *Behemoth* from 1942. Pollock's controversial article claimed that the rise of fascism in Germany inaugurated a new stage of capitalism, in which the economy was increasingly controlled by governments and bureaucracies—as in Germany and the USSR. Pollock claimed that this shift in power indicated that free-market capitalism was increasingly subordinated to state politics. Pollock's theory proved

²³³ James Schmidt, "Cabbage Heads and Gulps of Water: Hegel on the Terror," 4-10.

divisive among the institute's members,²³⁴ and Neumann's *Behemoth*, published a year later, presented a different political-economic analysis of German fascism, arguing instead that in spite of the increasing power of state bureaucracy under fascism, market capitalism remained thriving: the "antagonisms of capitalism are operating in Germany on a higher and, therefore, more dangerous level."²³⁵ Contra Pollack, in Neumann's view, National Socialism was a "non-state:" governance was exerted *directly* on the German population—"without the mediation of that rational though coercive apparatus hitherto known as the state"—a fact that enabled the concentration of capital in large businesses without legal regulation or state interference. However, Pollock and Neumann's political-economic analyses of National Socialism were stylistically and methodologically remote from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Philosophical Fragments*—the original German title of the *DoE*. As both philosophical and fragmentary, the *DoE* aligned with Horkheimer's earlier vision of critical theory, as a method that was fundamentally interdisciplinary and concerned with the relationship between philosophical ideas and their historical expression. This interdisciplinarity was employed not in service of comprehensiveness or even consistency; rather, the book's form spoke to its ambition of a broad critical constellation. As previously mentioned, the *DoE* was a response to Hegel's treatment of the Enlightenment in the *Phenomenology*. Yet, it was also Adorno and Horkheimer's attempt to construct their own version of Hegel's speculative analysis—a project that is more philosophical than narrowly political or economic. Adorno articulated this shift

²³⁴ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson, First MIT Press paperback edition, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), 284.

²³⁵ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 286.

toward philosophical analysis—and away from “materialist” analysis—in “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History” in the “Notes and Sketches” at the end of the *DoE*:

A philosophical interpretation of world history would have to show how, despite all the detours and resistances, the systematic domination over nature has been assured more and more decisively and has integrated all internal human characteristics. Economic, political, and cultural forms would have to be derived from this position.²³⁶

By 1944, at which point the full severity of the Nazi holocaust was well known, the hunch that Adorno and Horkheimer both held before the war—namely, that the antisemitic dimension of German fascism was integral to it—had been tragically confirmed. If antisemitism, which temporally preceded both the modern state of Germany and the National Socialist regime by centuries, was an inalienable feature of German fascism, German fascism could not be fully explained through modern political theoretical or political economic analyses alone. To understand the modern resurgence of something as “deeply rooted” as antisemitism in Europe, Adorno and Horkheimer, with Lowenthal’s help, needed to draw upon conceptual resources that, in a sense, “preceded” the modern era.

In addition to the dominant modern intellectual traditions that informed Adorno and Horkheimer’s analyses of sacrifice throughout the rest of the *DoE*, Adorno, Horkheimer (and eventually Lowenthal) leaned heavily on anthropology and psychoanalysis to fill out their analysis of the modern sacrifice of the Jews in the final chapter, the “Elements of Antisemitism.” This outsized reliance on the non-Marxist categories, particularly mimesis and pathic projection, further indicated these thinkers’

²³⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 185.

departure from Marxism, especially in relation to fascist antisemitism. While Adorno and Horkheimer began inching away from Marxist theory even before the 1940s, Marxist ideas—even when his concepts were softened in 1947—are peppered throughout, as noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Nevertheless, this shift is more apparent in the Elements than elsewhere: if, for instance, the Odysseus essay’s invocation of the ancient world—as I claim in Chapter 2—functions as an analogical critique of Adorno and Horkheimer’s contemporaneous context, the “Elements of Antisemitism” seem to contain direct references to transhistorical forces. Marxist economic structures—which elsewhere appear to exist alongside non-Marxist ones, regardless of the conceptual swapping that occurred—take a backseat. In addition to Marxism’s inability to account for the proletariat’s failure to unify into a revolutionary force, Adorno and Horkheimer also judged historical materialism to be unable to address ideological idiosyncrasies like German antisemitism without reducing them to contingent superstructural symptoms of the economic apparatus.²³⁷ This concern shows up in the Elements by way of Adorno and Horkheimer’s ambiguation between modern liberalism and modern capitalism in the essay’s first two sections.²³⁸

²³⁷ Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 116.

²³⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer’s shifting perspectives on the relationship between antisemitism, capitalism, and liberal society is epitomized in these three chronological statements, which indicate an increasingly generalized understanding of fascist antisemitism: In 1939, Horkheimer stated, “he who does not wish to speak of capitalism should also be silent about fascism.” (quoted in Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 121.) In 1940, Adorno followed: “If it is true that one can understand antisemitism only if one understands National Socialism, then it must be equally true that one can understand National Socialism only if one understands antisemitism.” (quoted in Lars Fischer, “The Frankfurt School and Fascism,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, by Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O’Kane (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), 803.) In 1941, Horkheimer later noted, “As true as it is that one can understand antisemitism only from our society, as true it appears to me to become that by now society itself can be properly understood only through antisemitism.” (quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 347.)

3.6 Psychoanalytic and Anthropological Origins of Mimetic Sacrifice

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Adorno's first study of sacrifice was on the role of sacrifice in Kierkegaard, written in 1933. Once in the United States, Adorno and Horkheimer began reading the psychoanalytic work of Freud as well as the work of French anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Roger Caillois, which influenced the authors' conception of mimesis, its relation to pre-modern sacrifice, and its transformation into modern sacrifice. Mimesis is the process through which an individual imitates, adapts to, or mimics its environment whilst maintaining both its own independence and the independence of that environment. Mimesis is therefore an identification of self and other that preserves their non-identity. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud observed this kind of mimetic behavior, in which members of the primal group identified with the totem by "dressing in the skin of the animal, by incising a picture of the totem upon his own body, and so on."²³⁹ In the *General Theory of Magic*, Mauss theorized the "law of sympathy," which similarly established an intimate dialectical connection between a thing and its other; In his later work with Henri Hubert on sacrifice, this simultaneous distance and proximity, identity and difference, became central to his theorization of magical sacrificial practices.²⁴⁰ Mimesis serves as the metaphysical premise of sacrifice, which involves the sacrificial agent making themselves "resemble" divine nature—they carry out nature's laws via destruction—in order to honor divine nature. In addition to the obvious importance of the manipulation and control of nature in mimetic sacrifice, self-

²³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950), 145.

²⁴⁰ Charles H. Clavey, "Myth, Sacrifice, and the Critique of Capitalism in Dialectic of Enlightenment," *History of European Ideas*, (July 4, 2023), 1–18, 15.

preservation also underlies mimetic sacrifice. The agent “gives himself over” to the god by proxy, through the vehicle of the sacrificed object, and in so doing, survives. Yet, Adorno was also interested in mimetic behavior pushed to the point of full unmediated identity, nullifying the other by collapsing the other into the self. In Roger Caillois book, *The Praying Mantis*, Caillois observes that the female mantis devours the male mantis during intercourse. Adorno became interested in the dynamic within mimesis itself when attraction, imitation, and adaptation becomes annihilation.²⁴¹ He also recognized this impulse in modern reason, which repressed and prohibited magical mimetic rituals like sacrifice, after the subjective Enlightenment revealed mimetic sacrifice to be both deceptive and ineffective. In their analysis of antisemitism and its relationship to the sacrifice of the Jews, however, Adorno and Horkheimer sensed the return of the repressed mimetic impulse to imitate, dominate, and annihilate “external” others.

3.7 Two Theses of Nazi Antisemitism: Terror-As-Absolute-Freedom

In a letter to Lowenthal from June 3rd, 1945, Adorno voiced his hopes for the final chapter on antisemitism. Adorno wrote:

Broadly speaking, the final chapter will have to answer the questions put in the first [chapter] explicitly, even if this only means making their unanswerability genuinely clear. Otherwise, two philosophical standpoints – irresistible, imperious, subjective reason on the one hand, and the truth being contrasted with it, on the other—will be immediately opposed to each other in a highly unsatisfactory theoretical fashion.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Anson Rabinbach, “Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?: The Place of Anti-Semitism in Dialectic of Enlightenment,” *New German Critique*, no. 81 (2000), 59.

²⁴² Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 332.

Unfortunately, *The Elements* both fail to “answer” the questions of the first chapter, and the essay’s brevity, tone, and sketchy nature make reading the *Elements* an “unsatisfactory” theoretical endeavor by today’s standards. That said, it is intellectually dishonest to judge the essay using today’s standards: the conditions surrounding the final chapter’s production could only have been more catastrophic if the authors had remained in Germany. In addition to witnessing to the horrors of the Holocaust, the authors also witnessed novel forms and unprecedented degrees of political, industrial, and economic streamlining, centralization, and bureaucratization; financial crises, and global technologized warfare.²⁴³ Not only had the owl of Minerva not yet taken flight, but it also seemed highly likely that she wouldn’t survive long enough to make the trip. These historical events notwithstanding, the *Elements* structurally and thematically stands out because it expresses two different theories of antisemitism in one chapter. While the diverse claims and disciplinary perspectives intermingled elsewhere in the *DoE* are more seamlessly constellated or juxtaposed, the two main perspectives represented in the *Elements* generate tension. These opposed “philosophical standpoints” contrasted in the *Elements* aren’t those of subjective reason and objective reality, as Adorno anticipated in his letter to Lowenthal, but rather the standpoints of political-economic critique and anthropological-psychoanalytic critique.

On the one hand, in the former political-economic conception, what they call the “liberal thesis,” Adorno and Horkheimer recognize antisemitism as an outgrowth of modern capitalism and liberalism, through the liberal intolerance of unassimilable

²⁴³ Lars Fischer underscores this point in Fischer, “The Frankfurt School and Fascism,” 802.

difference (real or perceived), and the persistence of inequality in modern capitalist society. The Jew is seen as the personification of religious obsolescence, the stateless infiltrator, as well as capital itself. Viewed from the vantage point of this version of liberal-capitalist antisemitism, German fascism is an “extreme case of the totally administered world,”²⁴⁴ a radical intensification of the pre-existing destructive tendencies implicit in capitalism and liberalism, already put in place before the Holocaust. This understanding of the fascist sacrifice of the Jews is somewhat similar to the Jacobin sacrifice of individuality as a “logical” expression of the discrepancy between the lived experience of the French masses and the lofty abstract ideals of the revolution. In both instances, popular anger at the failure of the state and economic powers is violently taken out on individuals “at the bottom,” rather than those pulling the levers “at the top.” On the other hand, in the anthropological-psychoanalytic conception, via what they call the “fascist” thesis, Adorno and Horkheimer posit that antisemitism is also an outward manifestation of two related psychological forces, tendencies or drives in pathological form. The first is unrepressed mimesis, which manifests as the second, pathetic projection. The original form of mimesis, as discussed above, involves the self’s “adaptation to otherness” through imitation, either in organized magical form—as in ritual sacrifice—or in rational form—as in the human metabolization of nature via labor.²⁴⁵ Alternatively, unrepressed mimesis, as in the Nazi sacrifice of the Jews, isn’t just a regression to magical pre-modern mimesis: it is mimesis in reverse. Though the Nazis fetishized

²⁴⁴ Fischer, “The Frankfurt School and Fascism,” 812.

²⁴⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 20.

magical pre-modern mimesis, as in the Nazi affinity for primitivism, folklore, naturalism, etc.; unrepressed mimesis exhibits in a different way, as false or pathic projection. Unlike “original” mimesis, which maintains a dialectical distinction between self and other, the translation of unrepressed mimesis into pathic projection involves the individual’s drive to make the world like itself. In pathic projection, the individual projects their own unconscious or repressed traits, desires, and fears onto the outside world, in this case, onto European Jews. If original mimesis expressed the attempt of the individual to establish a connection with externality or nature through sacrifice, pathic projection attempts to sever the subject’s connection with externality or nature by absorbing it into the self by way of sacrificial annihilation, like Caillois’ praying mantis. In this case, the “Jew” is identified with the destructive power of nature and the forces of evil. Viewed from this vantage point of pathological antisemitism, German fascism is the “dysfunctional other of the totally administered world.”²⁴⁶ In both cases however, Jewish people are dehumanized and reduced to an abstract category—Jew—and identified as the limitation or obstacle blocking the Germans from achieving unity, prosperity, and happiness.

The Elements is made up of seven sections: the first and second sections mainly analyze the liberal-capitalist theory of antisemitism, and the fifth and sixth sections mainly analyze the pathological theory of antisemitism. Adorno and Horkheimer begin by setting up the two theses: the fascist thesis, which conceives of Jews as the “anti-race, the negative principle as such,” and the liberal thesis, which conceives of the Jews as

²⁴⁶ Fischer, “The Frankfurt School and Fascism,” 812.

deficient in “national or racial features... [as] a group through religious belief and tradition and nothing else.”²⁴⁷ Regarding the liberal thesis, Adorno and Horkheimer note that even when the Jews attempted to assimilate by playing by the rules—initially, Christianity’s rules, and subsequently, liberalism and capitalism’s rules—the non-Jews changed the rules every step of the way, progressively solidifying the Jew’s outsider status: “having been prevented from setting down roots they [the Jews] were then criticized as rootless.”²⁴⁸ Similarly, even in the modern era, the Jews were unable to shake their association with the economy: “Trade was not his vocation, it was his fate.”²⁴⁹ Under the aegis of abstract, formalized Enlightenment-derived rationality, liberalism and capitalism managed to conceal the persistent irrationality of antisemitism and racial hatred in general. Governed by formalistic and indeterminate modern political and economic principles, everything in modern society becomes theoretically justifiable, even something as irrational, regressive, and superstitious as antisemitism:

That the demonstration of its economic futility heightened rather than moderated the attraction of the racialist panacea points to its true nature: it does not help human beings but assuages their urge to destroy... The plausibly rational, economic, and political explanations and counterarguments—however correct their individual observations—cannot appease it [the malady of antisemitism], since rationality itself, through its link to power, is submerged in the same malady.²⁵⁰

In other words, rational Enlightenment utilitarianism always made room for the “malady” of antisemitism, because the urge to destroy—the prototypical irrational

²⁴⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 135.

²⁴⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 143.

²⁴⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 144.

²⁵⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 139.

impulse, the ever-present thorn in the side of rational civilized society—was the secret weapon of liberal and capitalist domination all along.²⁵¹

Later on in the essay, Adorno and Horkheimer turn to the fascist thesis. They observe that modern rational turn toward the subject as the ontological source of reality effected the “proscription” of uncontrolled mimesis: modern reason cut the subject off from nature and objectivity, and internalized this division, transforming the subject itself into an alienated and contradictory infinite-transcendental and finite-physical being. Yet, transcendental subjectivity itself is unified only through its relationship to externality—a fact that forecloses the possibility of fully absorbing or eliminating nature, or that which lies outside the subject. As such, Adorno and Horkheimer continue, the primal fear of nature that undergirded the “preservative” dimension of non-identical mimesis was internalized by the subject against themselves: the Kantian exclusion of empirical circumstances in moral decision making demonstrates the subject’s refusal to acknowledge themselves as empirical, natural beings. The subject’s fear of their inalienable “otherness” within, their anger at the fact that nature—even their own

²⁵¹ Throughout the essay, Adorno and Horkheimer allude to the fact that the Jews attracted this destructive urge to themselves, that antisemitism—and by extension, the Holocaust—was in some way, the Jews’ fault: “The Jews themselves, over the millennia, have played their part in this, with enlightenment no less than with cynicism... Because they invented the concept of the kosher, they are persecuted as swine.” (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 153). These moments in the essay, where Adorno and Horkheimer seem to blame the Jews for antisemitism, stick out not only because of Adorno and Horkheimer’s apparent insensitivity, but also because in affirming the Jews’ outsider status, as behind the times, and as irrational, Adorno and Horkheimer reduce “the Jews” to an abstract category, the precise tendency that they’re critiquing. Rather than filling out their analysis of antisemitism, as providing evidence that their theory is thoroughly, indiscriminately critical, and takes no prisoners, these moments undermine Adorno and Horkheimer’s overall critical project, as repeating these kinds of ahistorical generalizations about “the Jews”—the kind of generalizations that non-materialist analyses facilitate—leaves these comments vulnerable to becoming ideological fodder, which fails to distinguish between exaggerated or dramatic portrayals of the Jews from reactionary and genuinely antisemitic ones.

nature—is impossible to fully control, is projected onto the ontological external unassimilable Jews. Adorno and Horkheimer write,

They [The Jews] share the fate of the rebellious nature for which fascism substitutes them... It makes little difference whether the Jews as individuals really display the mimetic traits which cause the malign infection or whether those traits are merely imputed... They are sacrificed by the dominant order when, through its increasing estrangement from nature, it has reverted to mere nature. The Jews as a whole are charged with practicing forbidden magic and bloody rituals. Disguised as an accusation, the subliminal craving of the indigenous population to revert to mimetic sacrificial practices is joyously readmitted to their consciousness. Once the horror of the primeval age, sent packing by civilization, has been rehabilitated as a rational interest through projection onto the Jews, there is no holding back.²⁵²

Adorno and Horkheimer conclude that fascism, and its attendant antisemitism, develops an elaborate fictional story to rationalize the targeting of the Jews as the embodiment of chaos, evil, or negativity as such. Their ideological transformation of the Jewish people into a metaphysical force allows fascist antisemites to deny the Jews' humanity and unleash violent “repressed mimesis”—the fury of nature—against the Jews, who are themselves stand-ins for the fury of nature. Antisemitism is therefore a closed loop of pathic projection. The antisemite enacts the Kantian theoretical subsumption of objectivity, nature, and externality into subjectivity, which, in turn, rationally enables the practical domination, suppression, annihilation of nature—or its conduit, the Jew—in the world.

When compared, these two strains of antisemitism and their corresponding theses have seemingly different implications for Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of modern sacrifice. In the first place, fascism understood as an intensification or “extreme version”

²⁵² Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 152-3.

of the totally administered world, the Holocaust was more or less a straightforward material expression of the modern triffecta of reason as Understanding, capitalism, and liberalism—this account of modern political sacrifice of the Jews is more in line with modern reason than with irrationality. In the second place, fascism understood as the “dysfunctional” version of the totally administered world, the Holocaust represents a breakthrough of repressed nature and mass psychosis—this account of modern political sacrifice of the Jews seems to be evidence of the fundamental irrationality of fascism (against the shallow and one-sided rationality of the liberal status quo). Ultimately however, the perspectival incompatibility of these two theses is superficial: as Adorno and Horkheimer laid out in the first chapter on the concept of Enlightenment, modern reason has always be accompanied by irrationality: in the subject’s sacrifice of the empirical particular to the abstract universal—the sole function of the Understanding—the subject renders themselves, as empirical particular, subject to sacrifice. In this way, the question of the fundamental “irrationality” or “rationality” of the Holocaust falsely pits these two categories against one another. In both cases, in order for antisemitism—either political-economic or pathological conceptions of antisemitism—to become *sacrificial*, the antisemite must reduce the Jewish person to an abstract category—the stateless outsider, the personification of capital, metaphysical negativity, evil itself—rendering them substitutable, exchangeable, disposable, and equal. In fact, Adorno and Horkheimer articulate an essential commonality of liberal capitalist nations and fascist ones:

The harmonious society to which the liberal Jews declared their allegiance has finally been granted to them in the form of the national community. They believed that only anti-Semitism disfigured this order, which in reality cannot exist without disfiguring human beings. The persecution of the Jews, like any persecution,

cannot be separated from that order.* Its essence, however it may hide itself at times, is the violence which today is openly revealed.²⁵³

Regardless of the unconscious pathological motivations of the fascist, or the abstract egalitarian hopes of the bourgeois liberal, the practical social application of modern political ideology occurs only through the pre-existing channels of the governing apparatus—in the modern rational world, the status quo is always materially enforced through violence, “the scythe of equality.” Nevertheless, the ability to rationally manipulate and ultimately overcome the violent foundation of modern society—a process that, for example, informs Marx’s idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transitional phase from capitalism to communism—is an ability that has, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, been hijacked and foreclosed by the violent scythe of equality itself.

3.8 Ouroboros of Instrumental Reason, or the Machine Sacrifices the Machinist

Despite the “opposite” vantage points of objective society and the psyche, both the political-economic and pathological theories of antisemitism recognize instrumental reason, which transfigures the living individual person into an abstract threat, as an intellectual or ideological pre-requisite motivating the modern sacrifice of the Jews. Similarly, Hegel’s presentation of the general will, which abided by the bivalent logic of the Understanding, also transfigures people and institutions into ontological threats to the universal state: this is the logic underlying the Reign of Terror. Consequently, it might seem like speculative reason, *Vernunft*, could somehow break the cycle of destructive

²⁵³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 138-139.

sacrifice by recognizing its faulty underlying logic and its self-defeating nature. In Hegel's account, Spirit as Absolute Freedom eventually realizes that the pure negativity of the Terror is an unstable and unsatisfying ground for modern statehood due to its complete lack of meaningful substance. This insight—which can also be understood as the modern subject's rational recognition of their power, their individual mediating role in the determination of universal collective self-legislation—finally propels the negativity of Absolute Freedom into the positivity of the moral world view. As Hegel reminds us, whether the few surviving French republicans, standing around in the rubble, consciously knew that they were operating the levers of history is a different question. Unfortunately, though, by the mid-20th century, Adorno and Horkheimer, standing around in the rubble, are fairly certain that the flicker of true reflection, that margin of genuinely rational freedom and strength of will that “inevitably” (and unceremoniously) sublated the French Terror, appears to have been a casualty of instrumental reason itself. Adorno and Horkheimer describe the modern fascist short-circuiting of rational thought like so:

Setting out on their pillages, they [the antisemites] construct a grandiose ideology for what they do, with fatuous talk of saving the family, the fatherland, humanity. But as they remain the dupes they secretly suspect themselves to be, their pitiful rational motive, the theft which was supposed to rationalize the deed, is finally discarded entirely, and the rationalization becomes truthful against its will. The obscure impulse which was always more congenial to them than reason takes them over completely. The rational island sinks beneath the flood, and those desperately floundering now appear only as defenders of truth, restorers of the earth, which has to be reformed to its farthest corners. All living things become material for their ghastly duty, which now flinches at nothing. Action becomes a purpose in itself, cloaking its own purposelessness... Blindness encompasses everything because it comprehends nothing.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 140-141.

In this quote, Adorno and Horkheimer describe the way in which the conspiratorial narrative that pathetic projection invents to justify unleashing the fury of repressed mimesis silently falls by the wayside after it kicks off the sacrifice machine. Like the flattening, monotonous, haphazard massacre of Absolute Freedom-as-Terror, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize that the abstraction and efficiency introduced by the guillotine was updated and technologically improved in the gas chambers, and that destruction—which previously operated as means—has become an end in itself.

In Absolute-Freedom-as-Terror, the individual ‘I’ and the universal ‘I’ merge into an unbroken continuity, incapable of tolerating any individuality that it suspects could interrupt this immediate identity. The guillotine allowed this immediately universal self to liquidate individuality with such ease that individuality became exchangeable particularity and sacrifice became as thoughtless and banal as “cutting a head of cabbage.” In the truncated sacrificial syllogism that makes destruction uniform and repeatable, the subjective element, rational calculation, becomes automated, and can therefore no longer be considered rational. Sacrifice becomes instrumental destruction without a conscious purpose, utility without usefulness. The cumbersome analog annihilation of the guillotine, exerted by actual people one by one, was much less efficient than the gas chambers, which accomplish liquidation instantaneously *en masse*. If, in a sense, the human dimension of the Terror remained only inasmuch as executioner and executed had to occupy the same physical space, the gas chambers did away with the inefficient—and inessential—mediation of human interaction between sacrificial agent and victim. In Jay Bernstein’s words,

For Adorno, Auschwitz is the event in which the particularity of human beings was obliterated in a manner—rationally, systematically, and ritualistically—and on a scale that makes those features, the means of the extermination, overtake whatever ends they might have been meant to serve.²⁵⁵

In other words, the level of obliteration carried out in the Holocaust was especially gruesome not only due to the sheer number of bodies it amassed, but also due to the systematic technological automation that it employed. In addition to the automation dimension, an additional—perhaps more pivotal—difference between the liquidation carried out during the Terror and the liquidation carried out during the Holocaust regards the relationship of violent destruction during war and the routine destruction of the capitalist system. While Hegel noticed and commented on the detrimental effects of commercial society, he couldn't have predicted how powerful and hegemonic these forces could grow to be by the first half of the 20th century, nor could Hegel imagine the degree to which modern industrial capitalism could obscure the rational possibility of the realization of the concept, and the attendant political possibility of establishing a dialectically harmonious relationship between modern citizen and state, a neo-*Sittlichkeit*. To return to Wendy Brown's conception of sacrificial citizenship presented in the Introduction, Brown notes that neoliberal subjects operate with a conception of political subjectivity as rationally sacrificial: they accept their role as possibly "oblatory *vis-à-vis* the project of economic growth."²⁵⁶ The liberal idea of citizenship as an individual

²⁵⁵ Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, 380.

²⁵⁶ Wendy Brown, "Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics: Wendy Brown," *Constellations* 23, no. 1 (March 2016): 3–14, 9.

expression of the collective interest, and vice versa, is gone, because under neoliberalism, the “collective interest”—the amassing and hoarding of wealth—demands sacrificial victims: self-interested economics has eclipsed collective-interested politics.

Alternatively, Brown mentions the “public eruption of a citizenry, even an aspiring popular sovereignty” as represented by Occupy Wall Street, among other movements, as possible ways to push back against sacrificial citizenship. However, Brown’s hope, that the virtuousness of liberal democratic citizenship can be re-established, seems structurally impossible in the context of the industrial monopoly capitalist world. As Jay Bernstein notes:

...in urging the claims of democracy against the market, Brown is also urging the rationality of *homo politicus* as a theoretical and practical critical counterweight to the incipient reign of *homo oeconomicus*. If the republican ideal of active citizenship promoting the public good truly fades from view, finally stops inspiring collective public action, there is no reason to believe that a philosophical critique of neoliberal reason, instrumental reason triumphant, could matter.²⁵⁷

In other words, the revival of the notion of democratic citizenship as an ideological means to counter the abstract individual of capitalist society seems like a futile endeavor, as the economic machinery has become dislodged from its rational-liberal foundation. Adorno, Horkheimer and Hegel recognized the divisive power of modern reason to set up a mutually exclusive metaphysical opposition between the universal and particular, as well as the ways in which the political mobilization of this formalistic instrumental rationality logically erupted in mass destruction. While Enlightenment political aspirations may have had the potential to unite individuals as a

²⁵⁷ J.M. Bernstein, “Instrumental Reason,” in Peter Eli Gordon, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, 1 [edition] (New York City: Routledge, 2018), 17.

force against the atomizing anarchism of capitalism, the neoliberal capitalist genie can't be put back in the bottle. The ideological and material gutting of state power in the 21st century—to a degree that Hegel nor Adorno and Horkheimer could have foreseen—enacts the total eclipse of the social collective by abstract subjectivity, a position that understands freedom only negatively, as the exercise of individual economic self-interest. When modern instrumental reason, which has always abstracted empirical particularity from universal conceptuality, and sacrificed the former to the latter, no longer requires subjects themselves to kick off the process—as in, for instance, Kant's conception of categorical moral reasoning, Bacon's scientific investigation of nature, and even in Odysseus and the Nephew's maneuvers of discursive cunning—the ability of rational subjects to realize the true relation of particular and universal, and subsequently to change course, becomes—to put it diplomatically—unlikely.

Conclusion

This dissertation proposed the idea that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's critiques of modern reason are fundamentally connected to their analyses of modern sacrificial practices in the world. Specifically, I contended that, as grounded in the logical law of identity or non-contradiction, reason abstracts the universal subject from the material of embodied life at the expense of this material: the law of noncontradiction doesn't just isolate empirical particularity, it sacrifices it in its conversion of particularity into ideal form. This cognitive-intellectual destruction, outlined in the first chapter, manifests in both the way we relate to other people, as outlined in the second chapter, and the ways that we rationalize instrumental mass murder, both the routine human casualties of liberal capitalist society itself, as well as the episodic mass murder carried out in modern nationalist purges, outlined in the third chapter.

Contribution to Academic Scholarship on Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer

My project contributes to scholarship on Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer in a few ways. Primarily, in contrast to prior analyses of metaphorical and ritual sacrifice in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, my dissertation develops a theory of distinctly modern sacrifice (*Opfer*) as literal and rational. In my dissertation, I flesh out and combine the dispersed and often implicit references to sacrificial reason and rational sacrifice, thus establishing a theory of modern sacrifice based on their critiques of modern reason and politics. As I mentioned in the Introduction, discussions of sacrifice in secondary literature on Hegel and the Frankfurt School tend to use the concept abstractly, as a non-

destructive process operative in rational ego development (which pertains to both self-emptying sacrifice as well as the sacrifice of one's inclinations or material belongings). While these metaphorical conceptions of sacrifice aren't wrong, they are fundamentally partial, insofar as they neglect to acknowledge that these thinkers also recognize a specifically modern kind of sacrifice operative in so-called progressive, secular, rational society. By establishing that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer understand modern reason's expression in the world as the literal bloody sacrifice of particulars, I accomplish two ends. First, I interpret Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer as engaging in ideology critique, which has implications for Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's metaphysics. Second, this theory of modern sacrifice brings Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer (back) into dialogue with Marx.

My dissertation also presents Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer as engaging in ideology critique, the practice of acknowledging the ways that economics, politics, culture, history and society influence ideas and narratives presumed to be remote from the objective socio-cultural domain. In Chapter 2, I recounted two fruitful examples of ideology critique in the *Phenomenology* and the *DoE*. Odysseus represented proto-bourgeois subjectivity engaged in unequal exchanges; his central position in the story marked the juncture of ancient epic and modern novel; he expressed the dialectic of dominating enlightenment and self-preserving myth; and he became a cipher for literary and fascist Philhellenism in Weimar Germany. Similarly, the Nephew provided a snapshot of pre-revolutionary French culture; he epitomized the frenetic disrupted over-educated consciousness of Spirit as *Bildung*; he also represented a modern Diogenes, a skeptical "outsider" social critic who, on the one hand, correctly recognized 18th century

capitalist society as shallow, hypocritical, selfish and unequal, but on the other hand, incorrectly saw himself as independent from the debased society he mocked (while barely surviving on its crumbs). By acknowledging these different levels of analyses, this reading not only provides a fuller and more complex picture of the relationship between these thinkers, their theories, and their historical moments, but it also enables the reader to recognize connections between the practice of discursive cunning, the logic of capitalist exchange, the individualism of modern aesthetic culture, and the political-ideological repurposing of the ancient world. The lens of ideology critique therefore establishes multi-level metaphysical bridges between philosophical ideas, cultural practices, and economic relations without establishing a causal relationship between these domains. By outlining the relationship between modern moral, scientific, and economic reason, modern discursive interpersonal customs, and modern mass destruction, my theory of modern sacrifice allows readers to appreciate the thoroughly dialectical nature of Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's work.

On a related note, developing a theory of modern political and economic sacrifice in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer, and reading these thinkers as engaged in ideology critique, establishes a new point of convergence between these thinkers and Marx's thought. Marx explicitly uses the concept of sacrifice to characterize the compulsory and brutal nature of wage labor,²⁵⁸ and in his description of the general law of capitalist accumulation, quoting Laing's study on the living conditions in 19th century England,

²⁵⁸ "But the putting of labour-power into action – i.e., the work – is the active expression of the labourer's own life. And this life activity he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of life. His life-activity, therefore, is but a means of securing his own existence. He works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labour itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life." Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, Marxists.org

stating that poor are sacrificed to the “moloch of avarice.”²⁵⁹ Marx also comments that if money emerges with a “congenital blood stain on one cheek,” capital emerges “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”²⁶⁰ In Chapter 9 of *Wage Labor and Capital*, Marx states that: “...capital not only lives upon labour. Like a master, at once distinguished and barbarous, it drags with it into its grave the corpses of its slaves, whole hecatombs of workers, who perish in the crises.”²⁶¹ This last instance, in particular, articulates the specific kind of material sacrifice that my dialectical theory of modern sacrifice implicitly pertains to. While Charles Clavey correctly points out that sacrifice is implicit in wage labor and labor contracts, these examples don’t necessarily involve the actual sacrifice of human beings (though they can, as Marx notes in the above quote). Rather, I see Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer’s conception of modern sacrifice, which establishes a rational foundation for mass murder, as helping to illuminate two other aspects of Marx’s theory: the secret of primitive accumulation and the general law of capitalist accumulation. Essentially, both the “law” and the “secret” are revealed to be mass death. Primitive accumulation describes the perpetual undercurrent of expropriation that fuels the underground furnaces which power the “above ground” machinery of capital, which at least appears rational. This source of “free” seed capital, the theft of land, resources, and labor, is accomplished by systematic violence, conquest,

²⁵⁹ “In no particular have the rights of *persons* been so avowedly and shame- fully sacrificed to the rights of *property* as in regard to the lodging of the labouring class. Every large town may be looked upon a place of human sacrifice, a shrine where thousands pass yearly through the fire as offerings to the moloch of avarice” (S. Laing, op. cit., p. 150).” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981) 813.

²⁶⁰ Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 926.

²⁶¹ Karl Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital. Chapter 9,” marxists.org, accessed August 17, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch09.htm>.

enslavement, sheer brute force: the separation of the producer from the means of production requires the violent seizure of those means. Moreover, Marx explains that the law of capitalist wealth accumulation is pauperization: not every worker that makes up the “industrial reserve army” of proletarians can be employed at any given time. Inevitably, as a *law*, capitalism produces an underclass of paupers who effectively experience social death: unable to freely sell their labor on the market, they “fall out” of social circulation, and become human casualties of the capitalist machine. While Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer acknowledge the sacrificial dimension of capitalism—though I neglected to include Hegel’s concept of the “rabble” in this dissertation—these two essential features of capitalist society as developed by Marx “fit” the mold of modern sacrifice as I theorize it, because the individuality of these sacrificial victims of the capitalist system has been completely stripped away: these individuals are *fully* reduced to objects of “necessary” annihilation as defined by the coercive capitalist logic of perpetual growth and accumulation. Down the line, I hope to include a chapter on the relationship between Hegel, Marx and Adorno’s analyses of how modern sacrificial reason justifies and upholds the practices of “active” and “passive” mass murder through primitive accumulation and pauperization.

Finally, my dissertation takes the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seriously as a philosophical work responding to Hegel’s critique of Enlightenment.²⁶² The *Dialectic of*

²⁶² It’s also clear that, as influenced by Schiller, the *Phenomenology* and the *DoE* recognize the irresistibility of the Kantian paradigm and the sacrificial consequences of its omnipresence. While Hegel’s analysis of bloody political sacrifice as Absolute-Freedom-as-Terror is followed by another critique of “bloodless” Kantian morality, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of Kantian morality precedes their analysis of political sacrifice of the Jews under fascism, in “Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality”. However, the question of “which came first,” for both traditions, is irrelevant: the sacrificial metaphysics and morality of Kantian reason and its empirical manifestation as destruction exist in a

Enlightenment isn't typically taught in Philosophy departments, which is at least partially attributable to Adorno and Horkheimer's self-identification as critical social theorists rather than philosophers. Other contributing factors are their allergy to "totalizing" philosophical systematicity, their commitment to methodological interdisciplinarity, and their ambivalence about the field of philosophy itself, which, in the mid 20th century, was dominated by Heidegger-inflected existentialism and phenomenology on the one hand and Vienna Circle-style empirical positivism (in both sociology and philosophy) on the other hand—a division within philosophy that, to a certain extent, seems to be more or less intact to this day. Adorno and Horkheimer recognized that these traditions' disdain for metaphysics manifested as another version of what they abhorred: the denial of externality. Heidegger's ideas of *Dasein* and Being-in-the-world attempt to reconcile subject and object but hypostatize subjective immediacy as separable from "inauthentic" history and society. Similarly, the positivists aimed to reconcile perception with truth via the verifiability principle, but also end up hypostatizing subjective immediacy, as philosophical claims whose scope exceeds sensory observation—like ethical, social, or political claims—are immediately dismissed. By banishing history, society, and politics from their domains, these positions inadvertently subordinate particularity and determinacy to abstract universality without owning up to it, thus replicating the subjectivistic ideology of capitalist individualism and Enlightenment rationalism.²⁶³

dynamic relation to one another, rather than a sequential or teleological one. In both the structure of Phenomenology, as well as in the larger context of the modern world, Kantian modern reason persists on "both ends" of instances of mass political sacrifice.

²⁶³ On logical positivism: "The reduction of thought to a mathematical apparatus condemns the world to be its own measure. What appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand." Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 20. On reactionary romanticism: "Under cover

Adorno and Horkheimer highlight the shared one-sided, unreflective inwardness of romantic and materialist immediacy as disavowing particularity and determination. In Hegel's words, the "pure being" of phenomenology and "pure matter" of logical empiricism are revealed to be "pure thinking." Hence, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of neo-irrationalism and positivism in the *DoE* is a Hegelian philosophical critique of 20th century Enlightenment: in this analysis, they reveal subjective immediacy to be the unconscious presupposition shared by these two seemingly opposed philosophical schools, which incorrectly take themselves to be departures from rationalist subjectivism. Understanding the *DoE* as a Hegelian project is nothing new; the majority of Adorno scholars at this point recognize him as a self-denying Hegelian. However, my intention in doing so has to do with the book's philosophical value. In my dissertation, I intend to show that the *DoE* provides incisive criticisms of philosophical tendencies that have persisted for over a century, and should, to its authors' chagrin, be recognized as a philosophical continuation of Hegel's critique of Enlightenment—and, in turn, worthy of philosophical study.

Contemporary Resonances

Next, I will note a few ways in which my research relates to phenomena the contemporary world.

1. The eclipse of discursive cunning: In Chapter 2, I argued that the formalistic, subjectivist, and instrumental structure of modern reason is replicated in the

of this illusory enmity feeling, and finally all human expression, indeed culture itself, is stripped of any responsibility to thought and transformed into the neutralized element of the all-embracing rationality of an economic system* long since grown irrational." Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 71-2.

domain of modern interaction via “discursive cunning,” a distinctly modern mode of speech that exploits conceptual ambiguity and discursive norms for the sake of establishing the speaker’s independence from and superiority over their interlocutors. In the contexts of the *Odyssey* and *Rameau’s Nephew*, Adorno, Horkheimer and Hegel recognized these linguistic gestures as means of cloaking falsity in the guise of truth, a maneuver that was enabled by a reification of the metaphysical separation of word and thing typical of the modern rational paradigm. Though the Nephew and Odysseus had the intention of using linguistic trickery to both secure their rational superiority over others *and* ensure their means of survival, these protagonists were unable to foresee that their manipulative use of language also unconsciously reflected back on themselves, giving them a false sense of independence from other people and their social contexts. Today, the contemporary propagation of half-truths is referred to via the concepts of “post-truth,” misinformation, and “fake news,” and discursive cunning as I outlined in Chapter 2 is still a common phenomenon. However, while there are still self-interested individuals who benefit from the individual exercise of discursive cunning, intentionally conveying false—usually conspiratorial or controversial—information through narratives that have a logical structure (as in, say, Tucker Carlson), a subtler but more significant shift has occurred. Though the channels and the “reach” of discourse have expanded exponentially via social media, the number of people materially benefiting from the exercise of discourse—cunning or otherwise—now includes not only the speaker, but also the owners of the means of digital communication. In a sense,

though previously discursive cunning involved a double maneuver consisting of the subject's conscious deception of an interlocutor, as well as the conscious and unconscious consequences of this deception after the fact, online discourse today seems to involve an additional maneuver. The dialectic of self-interest and objective effect in the use of discursive cunning is now triangulated with the meta-deception of the online platform, which appears to be a neutral or democratic channel of communication, that nonetheless cunningly commoditizes discourse itself, re-transforming "word" into "thing."

2. The nationalist exploitation of antiquity: At the end of Chapter 2 and the beginning of Chapter 3, I argued that Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's analyses of discursive cunning also implicitly criticized contemporaneous strains of modern classicism. Their criticisms of the protagonists' use of language reverberated as ideological critiques of Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer's intellectual compatriots, who embraced forms of moral or hermeneutic positivism, as well as irrationalism and romanticism—schools of thought that rely on discursive techniques to demonstrate the truth of their positions (rather than material or sociological states of affairs). The metaphysical isolation of the abstract rational subject and experiential reality entailed by the Understanding, instrumental reason, and discursive cunning empties the historical past of determinate content, which enables modern ideologues to invoke ancient history as a means to legitimate contemporary violence—particularly sacrificial violence—in the present, regardless of whether the version of ancient history these ideologues invoke really happened or not. While, as I mentioned at the top

of Chapter 3, this phenomenon is fairly ubiquitous, there is a difference between invocations of antiquity as a recognition of historical inspiration or continuity, and political calls to “return” to a fictional bygone era. In India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party of prime minister Narendra Modi, aims to unify a “Hindu” supremacist India at the expense of India’s Muslim population. The BJP is carrying out this Hindu supremacist agenda by making ancient Sanskrit one of India’s national languages and replacing school history textbooks that chronicle India’s multicultural past with ancient Hindu religious scriptures, claiming that the accounts of India’s history in these mythological texts are more historically accurate than secular history. Paradoxically, India’s Cultural Minister Sharma stated that he wants to “to prove the supremacy of our glorious past”²⁶⁴ through empirical archaeological research. This paradoxical use of a modern scientific research method *against* the findings of modern science testifies to the fact that the “revival” of Hindu nationalism is a product of a modern era, not a harmonious bygone age.

I expected to conclude my dissertation with a discussion of the sublation of sacrifice, the sacrifice of sacrifice, in Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer. I considered discussing, for instance, the ways in which Hegel and Adorno look to the Holy Trinity and mimesis in artworks as structures that contain both the abstractly rational and its sublation. However, this solutions-oriented approach makes me—and likely all faithful readers of these thinkers—uneasy. Indeed, it betrays what I find most valuable in these

²⁶⁴ Tom Lasseter and Rupam Jain, “By Rewriting History, Hindu Nationalists Lay Claim to India,” Reuters.com, March 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/india-modi-culture/>.

thinkers, *vis-à-vis* their theorization of the relationship between modern reason and modern sacrifice. To put it bluntly, the metaphysical isolation of subjectivity and objectivity as well as the domination of subjective reason over material reality that is inherent in the modern instrumentally rational paradigm is tremendously difficult to see through, and in turn, even more difficult to overcome. Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer all recognize that the abstractness that characterizes our rational conception of things in the modern world effectively makes all phenomena seem simultaneously eternal and immediate: modern reason makes the historical, social, and relational nature of reality effectively “vanish.” Marx called this effect “mystification,” but this idea shows up before Marx, in Hegel, despite the fact that Hegel was unable to recognize the material origins of this phenomenon. In his section on the Enlightenment in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes modern Spirit’s experience of itself after Pure Insight has shoved its “previous” shape, Faith, to the floor. Hegel notes, “Memory alone then still preserves the dead form of the Spirit’s previous shape as a vanished history, vanished one knows not how.”²⁶⁵ This “vanishing” of the past, which also hides the interrelation of the universal and the particular, has very serious repercussions.

In the 19th century and again in the 20th century, these thinkers’ analyses of modern reason recognize the logic of identity not as moving reason to a higher reconciliatory plane, but rather, as the “mimesis of death.” To draw attention to this fact, Hegel, Adorno, and Horkheimer ring alarm bells in the guise of exaggeration. Adorno’s flair for the melodramatic isn’t in vain: he borrows the idea from psychoanalysis that

²⁶⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 332.

“only exaggeration is true.” Adorno explains that “I have exaggerated the somber side, following the maxim that only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth.”²⁶⁶ However, Hegel, too, exaggerates. In Rebecca Comay’s description of Hegel’s hyperbolic critiques of Kant, Comay observes:

Exaggeration reveals uncomfortable features of experience that would otherwise be invisible. And the exaggeration itself demonstrates just what is most distinctive about the phenomenological method. It makes the artifice and artfulness of the whole procedure explicit: the “shapes (*Gestalten*) of experience” are just that, constructions and fabrications, not found but made—fictional positions, each bearing the indelible stamp of their manufacture.²⁶⁷

Comay points out that Hegel, like Adorno, attempts to describe the reality of modern Spirit using the fundamentally limited tools of philosophy, and in so doing, allows this complexity to express itself. In other words, these thinkers’ critiques of modern reason are inevitably immanent to the paradigm of modern reason, and through their exaggerated narration of it, they reveal the frustrating immanence of their own work to this paradigm. The alternative, prescribing a straightforward “way out,” would inevitably fall prey to the tendency of modern reason to sacrifice the concrete empirical to the abstract ideal.

²⁶⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, Henry W. Pickford, and Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

²⁶⁷ Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 96.

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