

Philo, C. (2021) Nothing-much geographies, or towards micrological investigations. *Geographische Zeitschrift*, 109(2-3), pp. 73-95.

(doi: [10.25162/gz-2021-0006](https://doi.org/10.25162/gz-2021-0006))

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<https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/248193/>

Deposited on: 5 September 2022

Nothing-much geographies, or towards micrological investigations

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Abstract

As part of a wider ‘geographical’ reading of writings by Theodor W. Adorno, the Frankfurt School critical theorist, energised by a wish to discern possible lineaments of an ‘anti-fascist geographical imagination’, this paper engages in detail with Adorno’s aphoristic ruminations gathered together as *Minima Moralia* (2005 [1951]). With its close-grained attention to ‘minimal’ or ‘minor’ things – a bewildering diversity of objects, practices and events that might normally be reckoned of little account – this text exemplifies what Adorno elsewhere frames as a concern for the ‘micrological’, as well as signposting many dimensions of what he will later present more systematically as ‘negative dialectics’ (Adorno 1973 [1966]). This paper reconstructs the multiple geographies integral to many passages in *Minima Moralia*, working towards an exegesis of what is claimed there about ‘distant nearness’ and ‘space enough between them’, at the same time inspecting Adorno’s austere opposition to ‘affirmationism’ but also readiness to be a phenomenologist – even one with occasional leanings towards a more ‘romantic’ celebration of objects, however unpleasant – of the nothing-much.

Keywords

Adorno; anti-fascism; *Minima Moralia*; negative dialectics; objects; phenomenology

1. Preamble

Nothing much, of little note, trivial, petty, minimal, fragmentary – and maybe mean, shabby, damaged and suffering at the same time – as well as likely being neglected and forgotten. Such are the unprepossessing foci of attention for what the Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1966) might term ‘micrological investigations’, as perhaps the only way to spy something of the ‘non-identical’, the secret otherness of lives and worlds, that are the whispers of enchantment in an otherwise thoroughly un- or disenchanted creation. It is to wonder about a geography of very small things,¹ moments, bits and pieces, bric-a-brac, or perhaps a geography of near-silences haunted by tiny echoes of what might-have-been or

¹ Reference can be made to the Neue Kulturgeographie conference held in Bamberg in January 2015 on the ‘Geographien des Kleinen/Small Geographies’, offering a window on ‘less-than-grand’ processes and phenomena (https://nkgeographie.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/programm_samstag.pdf/freitag.pdf).

might-still-be, or perhaps the geography of a forever doomed “attempt to map what inhabits nothingness” (Pedriali 2016, 406). The purpose of this paper is to open a window on this nothing-muchness: to plot some moves integral to Adorno’s ‘micrology’ and thereby to disclose something of how he conceives of humble ‘objects’, rescuing them as he does from the multiple, intersecting tyrannies of diverse belief systems, intellectual formulations and practical (ab)usage.

There is a larger project lying in the background here: my ambition to bring Adorno’s *oeuvre* – spread across many texts, only some of which will be referenced below – into dialogue with academic human geography, itself as yet relatively unfamiliar with Adorno excepting occasional encounters with the Frankfurt School.² Underscoring that ambition is the further goal of excavating different currents of what I term ‘the anti-fascist geographical imagination’, associated with various European thinkers-and-writers who experienced, suffered from and even lost their lives due to the evils of fascism during the middle years of the twentieth century.³ Assuredly not academic geographers, these figures nonetheless displayed seeds, traces and intimations of a geographical awareness – open to matters of space, place, site, situation, location, environment, landscape and more, sometimes expressed as such, oftentimes in other vocabularies – that co-mingled with their anti-fascist convictions. For them, I argue, to think anti-fascistically was necessarily also to think geographically, an inference that I might then reverse by proposing that to think geographically is, or *should*, necessarily also be to think anti-fascistically.⁴ These are grand claims, ones that risk overwhelming what can actually be accomplished in what follows, but I state them here in the hope that they will render more

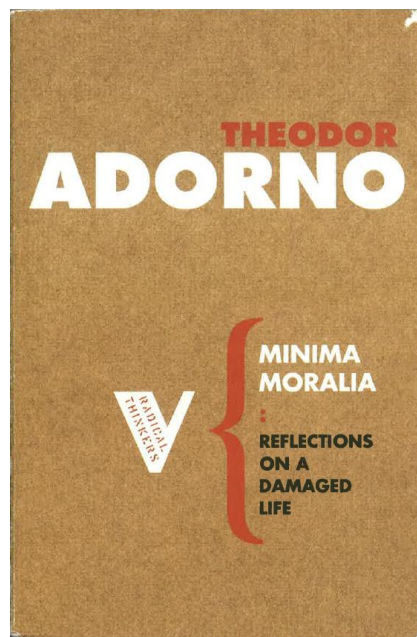
² To the best of my knowledge, engagement with Adorno by geographers writing in English is rare, excepting in quite specific fashion by the likes of Dubow (2008), who reflects on Adorno, ‘negative dialectics’ and ‘exile’, and Förtner et al. (2020), who deploy Adorno’s notion of ‘the provincial’ to illuminate the rural geography of right-wing populism. A compelling introduction to ‘the actuality of critical theory’ delivered by a leading German political scientist at a geographers’ conference, borrowing, applying and extending Adorno’s concept of ‘actuality’, has been published (Demirović 2013; also Belina 2013). Given my linguistic limitations, I acknowledge that there is likely relevant work in other languages, included by German-speaking geographers, of which I am unaware.

³ The scholars who I fold into this inquiry include Adorno’s fellow travellers in and around the Frankfurt School – Benjamin, Fromm, Horkheimer and others – and also Foucault (Cook 2018). Less obviously, perhaps, I also wish to interface Adorno with the lives and writings of three women intellectuals sometimes viewed together as a remarkable trio in adversity (Courtine-Denamy 2000): namely, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), Edith Stein (1891-1942) and Simone Weil (1906-1943).

⁴ Some geographers have of course been fascists and put their geography to the service of fascism, in so doing producing what I would regard as a travesty of ‘geography’. Just one recent inquiry into this line of complicity is Barnes and Abrahamsson (2015). It is also worth mentioning two outstanding critical-scholarly studies by Michel (2016, 2018), one exposing the anti-Semitism explicitly written into certain tracts of early-twentieth century German geography and the other charting the hesitant, in some respects unconvincing and victim-playing, ‘self-denazification’ of German geography after 1945 (the latter with brief borrowings from Adorno/Horkheimer 1991 [1947]).

intelligible why I take the path that I do through the dense thickets of perhaps the most transparently ‘micrological’ text in Adorno’s cupboard: the strange 1940s ruminations gathered together in the collection entitled *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (Adorno 2005 [1951]; identified below as *MM*: **Figure 1**). There will be no scope to explore the genealogies of Adorno’s ‘micrology’, most obviously traceable from Benjamin’s ‘magical urbanism’ (Boscagli/Duffy 2011), nor to lay out the more systematic architecture spun around references to ‘micrology’ in his final capstone work *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973 [1966]). It will nonetheless be to draw from *MM* certain key manoeuvres sketching the pattern of a sensibility for the micrological, the nothing-much and – by extension – anti-fascist geographies.

Figure 1: Front cover of author’s copy of *Minima Moralia* (Adorno 2005 [1951])



2. Introducing *Minima Moralia*

[...] a gaze averted from the beaten track, a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern, is the last hope for thought. (*MM*, 67-68)

He talks about slippers: “[s]lippers are designed to be slipped into without help from the hand. They are monuments to the hatred of bending down” (*MM*, 110). He talks about children’s toys: “[t]he little trucks travel nowhere and the barrels on them are empty” (*MM*, 228; Philo 2018). He talks about chairs, flower-vases, dogs, liver-sausage, hotels, hotel lobbies,

telephones, railway stations, fairy-tales, a polychrome garden dwarf, touched-up photographs, dinners, wrestling clubs, cats, dogs and a mammoth – and countless more *objects* besides, many of which may seem relatively small, trivial (in the grander scheme of things) and, if not always entirely off “the beaten track” (*MM*, 67), then certainly not what might, *a priori*, be expected as the most obvious lodging-places for a work of advanced philosophical, social and political theory.

Welcome, then, to Adorno’s *MM*, written between 1944 and 1949, published in German in 1951 and first translated (by New Left Books) in 1974.⁵ *MM* is an exercise in what the author acknowledges to be a “melancholy science” (*MM*, 15; Rose 1978; Said 2002), deeply scarred by the atrocities of the mid-twentieth century – the conjoined spectres of fascism and Nazism haunt the book – and the author’s own personal experiences as an intellectual (with Jewish origins) exiled from Germany and thrown into the capitalist, commodity-obsessed maw of the USA. It is divided into three parts, simply identified by dates (Part One: 1944; Part Two: 1945; Part Three: 1946-1947), each of which begins with “the narrowest private sphere, that of the intellectual in emigration,” followed by “considerations of broader social and anthropological scope” with nods to psychology (or, perhaps better, psychoanalysis), aesthetics (and art criticism) and science (natural and social), and finally by arguments about “philosophy, without ever pretending to be complete or definitive” (*MM*, 18). Adorno casts the work as aphoristic, admitting a tension between the “dialectical theory, abhorring anything isolated” (*MM*, 16) and the proliferation of short, unfinished and fragmentary aphorisms. In practice, though, there are very few conventional aphorisms, in the form of pithy one- or two-liners, since most of Adorno’s ‘aphorisms’ here are sizeable chunks of text, one, two, three or more paragraphs long (comprising 153 ‘chapters’). Fairly coherent lines of argument snake across these text-chunks, moreover, although a slightly haphazard, dizzying and indeed fragmentary character undoubtedly remains.

It is this text that I am taking as my muse for reflections upon what I am calling ‘nothing much geographies’. I accept that *MM* is not the easiest of reads, notwithstanding its aphoristic form, given the complexity and challenge of Adorno’s intellectual position: Hegelian, always seeking to understand the ‘totality’ of a situation, society or philosophy; Marxian, always alert to the social conditions under which productions of all kinds occur, repeatedly returning to Marx’s critique of exchange relations and commodification; psychoanalytic, with references to Freud, repressions, perversions, paranoias and ‘death drives’; and more loosely allied to diverse

⁵ I will be using and citing the 2005 Verso edition in English.

literary, musical and cultural ‘objects’ and associated genealogies of their appreciation or critique. Then there is Adorno’s negative dialectics, as systematised in his *magnum opus* of this name (Adorno 1973 [1966]), meaning that he simultaneously deploys ‘materials’ positively to secure a claim *and* critiques them negatively, exposing their limitations, problems and the complicities of intellectuals when treating of them (including himself, with his ‘bourgeois’, masculine and Western privileges and prejudices).

In consequence, no – or few – simple formulations drop from the pages of *MM*, and little that can be extracted in the vein of uncluttered, optimistic and affirmative statementing. And it is partly for this very reason that I wish to enlist Adorno as a spirit-guide in cautioning against what I have elsewhere called ‘the new positivism’ (Philo 2021; also Philo 2017a) in contemporary human geography and beyond: a resolutely affirmative, positive tonality of research and writing that balks at expressions of negativity. Numberless examples could be adduced of theoretical advocacy and more empirically-facing studies now comprising a body of literature neatly dubbed ‘enchanted geography[ies]’ (Woodyer/Geoghegan 2012). A coagulation of moves – non-representationalist, more-than-human, vitalist, affective, creative-geohumanistic, and more – has fostered a widespread ‘affirmationism’ setting its face against the nihilism supposed to characterise prior geographical work conducted in a more *critical* mode. Highly revelatory is Thrift’s complaint that “[i]n Foucault country, it always seems to be raining,” prefaced by the remark that, “[t]hough [Foucault] embraced a positive notion of power, the fact is that his world view is not very positive” (Thrift 2000, 269). Such a basis for judging intellectual work – less to do with scholarly argument, more to do with whether or not it is uplifting – has become a pervasive new point of departure: celebrating what is ostensibly positive and lively over anything negative or ‘deadening’ (Thrift/Dewsbury 2000).⁶ Last (2017, 73) refers to this orientation as one of “feel-good materialisms,” while Dekeyser and Jellis (2020) speak of its “affirmationism.” The latter two references reflect signs of hesitation now arising at ‘enchanted geography’, as in: stagings of debate between affirmation and ‘critique’ in Anderson’s *Encountering Affect* (Anderson 2014); chapters in the edited collection *Negative Geographies* (Bissell et al. 2021a); and Harrison’s sustained, initially lonely battle to put exhaustion, depletion, decay, losing and failing adequately to respond at the centre of non-representational geography (Harrison 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2015, 2021).

Crucially, I feel, Adorno embodies such a ‘negative geography’ with every fibre. He

⁶ Suffice to say that my claims here are highly abbreviated and ideally require elaboration and nuancing (but see Bissell et al. 2021b; Dekeyser/Jellis 2020; Philo 2012, 2017a, 2021).

countered positivism as a philosophy of the empirical, the quantitative and the unthinkingly ‘scientific’ (Adorno et al. 1981 [1966]), while his negative dialectics resolutely opposes the positive, the affirmative ‘yes’, on the ultimately epistemological grounds that knowledge can only be secured when positive statements – however compelling, however ‘politically’ appealing – are tested in the fires of negative critique, the deaffirmative ‘no, or at least not quite like that ...’. Adorno eschews simplistic oppositions between optimism and pessimism or enchantment and disenchantment, to be sure, but there can be little doubting his suspicion of the positive-as-affirmation and urging instead of unsparing attention to the ‘truthfulness’ of the negative. Tellingly, he suggests that his aphorisms:

[...] insist, in opposition to Hegel’s practice and yet in accordance with his thought, on negativity: ‘The life of the mind only attains its truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation. The mind is not this power as a positive which turns away from the negative, as when we say of something that it is null, or false, so much for that and now for something new; it is this power only when looking the negative in the face, dwelling upon it.’ (*MM*, 16 [quote from Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Mind*])

‘Dwelling upon’ what is negative, upon “[r]educed and degraded essence” (*MM*, 15), rather than seeing only its ‘façade’ before turning attention elsewhere, to the ‘something new’, is hence a key if unsettling message pervading Adorno’s *oeuvre* and seen in embryo, in solution perhaps, throughout *MM*. The “hatred of brutality” (*MM*, 68) that should energise this dwelling with the negative, far from the ‘beaten track’ of hopeful positivity,⁷ is thus the clarion-call from Adorno – one whose anti-fascist heartfelness is also crucial to this account. Whether such moves really comprise ‘the last hope for thought’, as lamented in the epigraph above, I cannot judge – and I suspect not (other moves may ultimately be more valuable) – but they still serve to forefront nothing-much geographies as, after all, just possibly something-more.

3. ‘The warmth of things’

Throughout *MM*, and as already implied, objects or things matter: they are scattered throughout the chapters/aphorisms of *MM*, allowing Adorno to do all manner of critical-conceptual work, but they are also accorded a status, a phenomenological quality, almost an agency, that – even as it sometimes sits uneasily with a certain meta-level philosophical gridding of this thought, as I will explore in closing – remains pivotal to how this text should be understood. In the context of critiquing commodification of everything, the subjecting of everything to capitalist

⁷ “The common consent to the positive is a gravitational force that pulls all downwards” (*MM*, 184).

logics of quantifiable exchange/equivalence, Adorno considers “the decline of present-giving” (*MM*, 43). When wondering about gift-giving, thereby paralleling writers who place emphasis on the survival of non-exchange based social relations under capitalism (in geography, see Gibson-Graham 2006), he puzzles at what is lost for those who abandon the practice of non-instrumental gift-giving:

In them wither the irreplaceable faculties which cannot flourish in the isolated cell of pure inwardness, but only in contact with the warmth of things. A chill descends on all they do, the kind word that remains unspoken, the consideration unexercised. This chill finally recoils on those for whom it emaciates. Every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. (*MM*, 43)

The latter sentence squares with the use that Morton makes of Adorno in his remarkable recent text *Humankind* (Morton 2017, 166-171), wherein he elaborates on how much *more* is occurring in the margins of Adorno’s writing here and elsewhere than *solely* a critique of the commodity form. For Morton, Adorno here betrays a sense of the non-instrumental commonality held by *all* ‘things’ as part of their shared co-existence in the “the symbiotic real” (Morton 2017, 1): the “eternal peace” (*MM*, 157) of things, humans including, just being things together, shared kinds or kith or ‘oddkin’ (Haraway 2016). I will briefly revisit Morton on Adorno when concluding my paper.

The ‘chill’ of those who distance themselves from ‘the warmth of things’, imagining that they can suffice in their own ‘pure inwardness’, breaks with the kin-ness – and indeed the kindness – that Adorno fleetingly locates here as the beating heart of ‘organic life itself’. ‘The warmth of things’ is a resounding phrase, to be sure, as too is Adorno’s ringing denunciation of an approach to thought dragging with it “a loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too” (*MM*, 39) – a disregard integral to a commodity culture where things indeed simply become things matched to their quantifiable exchange-value; but a disregard also endemic to fascism as it takes its jackboots to all that stands as different, warm, gifted. Such elisions are of course central to the withering analysis that Adorno has previously advanced, with Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno/Horkheimer 1991 [1947]).

What should nonetheless be stated, lest there be any confusion, is that Adorno scorns – or wants to scorn, since sometimes he wavers in this respect – any simplistic romanticism about ‘the warmth of things’.⁸ As indicated above with respect to Adorno’s negativity, including his

⁸ In Philo (2012) I trace a parallel wavering or struggle between ‘romantising’ and more ‘critical’ tendencies in Foucault or, more specifically, his shifting claims in and about his major first text commonly known in English as *Madness and Civilization* (Foucault 1965 [1961]).

debt to Hegel, he is clear that it will often be necessary to dwell with negativity, ‘looking it in the face’, and that the objects attracting his attention – and indeed that of other critical scholars – may well be ones full of horror, suffering, evil, inhumanity and more. Tellingly, he states that “[t]he expression of history in things is no other than that of past torment” (*MM*, 49). I will elaborate this matter shortly, but it is vital to appreciate that appealing to ‘the warmth of things’ is not about being comfortable with the world: it is no cozy fireside contemplation of ‘nice’ objects as they present themselves to ‘us’, and no sense of some easy immediacy of objects nestling themselves alongside ‘us’ like a loving companion animal on the sofa.

4. ‘The patience and perseverance of lingering’

At various moments in *MM*, Adorno revisits a previous injunction – that he claims to have previously made himself (*MM*, 73) – that theorising must be ‘sophisticated’ rather than ‘naïve’, where the latter implies some hypothetical capacity to enact ‘immediacy’, accessing the practical orders of life in an *unmediated* manner. That way would be to disavow a critical perspective, anchored in always seeing broader historical-social-class framings of the objects/things (periods, places, problems, issues) under scrutiny, and Adorno cannot sanction such a disavowal – and, indeed, never does throughout *MM*. He now sees problems with pitting sophistication against immediacy, however, leading into what I see as a crucial departure in his sensibility towards the humble objects/things of the world:

Even when sophistication is understood in the theoretically acceptable sense of that which widens horizons, passes beyond the isolated phenomena, considers the whole, there is still a cloud in the sky. It is just this passing-on and being unable to linger, this tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular, which constitutes not only the deception of idealism in hypostatising concepts, but also in its inhumanity, that has no sooner grasped the particular than it reduces them to a through-station [...] (*MM*, 73-74)

One might almost say that truth itself depends on the tempo, the patience and perseverance of lingering with the particular: what passes beyond it without having first entirely lost itself, what proceeds to judge without having first been guilty of [...] contemplation, loses itself at last in the emptiness. (*MM*, 77).

Paralleling other lines of argument that hesitate before the too-ready prioritisation of the supposedly general over the apparently particular – and to an extent Adorno’s guide here is Nietzsche⁹ – Adorno fosters a commitment to the particular, to the specificities and maybe

⁹ Shortly after in the same meditation, Adorno cites Nietzsche from *The Gay Science*: the scholar “who has not the eyes to see uniqueness” marks him/herself as “mediocre”; “to perceive resemblances everywhere, making everything alike, is a sign of weak eyesight” (in *MM*, 74). This problematic tendency to ‘make everything alike’

peculiarities of the singular thing/object/situation.¹⁰

He thereby urges an openness to particularity, offering this deceptively simple plea for *lingering* with the particularity, not treating it merely as a ‘through-station’ on the way to something else, some groundless judgement maybe, some grander if ultimately empty formulation perhaps. Linger should resist the impulse to ‘pass on’ too rapidly, carelessly, neglectfully, in a fashion ‘unable to linger’, in the this-here-and-now, for a while. “Knowledge can only widen horizons by abiding so insistently with the particular that its isolation is dispelled” (*MM*, 74), continues Adorno, clarifying that a proper grasp of a particularity, one *not* seeing it in splendid isolation, can only result from lingering – or ‘abiding’ – sufficiently in the orbit of the relevant thing/object/situation that its connectedness to ‘wider horizons’ can be discerned. As I will consider further, such a lingering/abiding may disclose the history, the social relations, the class composition, the psychic investments, and more, that come with the particularity and that in a sense compose it.

It is worth underscoring too Adorno’s powerful argument that the too-rushed turning-away from particularity invites in philosophical gremlins, facilitating a triumph of ‘idealism in hypostatising concepts’, rendering them *as if* truthful, real, even world-transforming forces. Moreover, he detects here a hugely disconcerting ‘inhumanity’ in this manoeuvre, a troubling affinity between thought heedless of the specific, the different, the fragile threads of lived worlds, spaces and places, and the inhumanity of powerful regimes – he does not say ‘fascist’ here, but the inference is clear¹¹ – for whom particularity may well be nothing but an irritating irregularity to be swept aside. In many respects, *MM* may be read as a paeon to such particularity and irregularity, precisely as a counter to the fascism so disfiguring Adorno’s age. He interprets hostility to lingering as permitting thought that “comes all too quickly to terms with suffering and death for the sake of a reconciliation occurring merely in reflection – in the last analysis, the bourgeois coldness that is only too willing to underwrite the inevitable” (*MM*, 74). A similar sentiment fuels how he reaches his final accommodation with the Holocaust, or

is one to which I will return in the main text.

¹⁰ Adorno’s attachment to particularity as part of an epistemological and social-theoretical assault on ‘totality’, as too-easy conceptual device and as fascistic social practice, is an absolutely decisive feature of his overall *oeuvre*, most fully elaborated and self-critically appraised in his *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973 [1966]). Helpfully, Demirović (2013, 372) argues that, “[w]here it seems that nothing is left for thinking except to promote the hegemony of the total, [Adorno] felt it was necessary to side with the particular and the concrete.”

¹¹ Earlier Adorno identifies “the totalitarian unison in which the eradication of difference is proclaimed as a purpose in itself” (*MM*, 18). He goes on to speculate that in reaction a more ‘liberatory’ social vision may ‘withdraw’ to the realm of the particular, the individual, adding that as a result “critical theory lingers there” (*MM*, 18), with the particular and individual, even if with some ‘bad conscience’ in relation to the acknowledged demands of properly dialectical thought (in which totality should always remain in sight).

at least with how to write poetry ‘after Auschwitz’, as one of needing to ‘stay with’ the suffering and death, to re-enact it in words – maybe clunky, clumsy, stuttering, *unpoetic* – so that no easy reconciliation ever be allowed (Philo 2017b). The ‘bourgeois coldness’ that potentially slides into justifying ‘the inevitable’ of fascism or late-capitalism is therefore set on the distaff side of Adorno’s plea to linger with ‘the warmth of things’, even when those things may themselves be full of suffering, death and the barely-sayable.

Subsequently, Adorno revisits these claims, identifying “this inability to make distinctions, [that] animates the great speculative systems of Idealism, [...] yoking German mind to German barbarism” (*MM*, 89). He abhors “[t]he pure unreflective act,” and instead urges the value of “the long, contemplative look that fully discloses people and things” (*MM*, 89) and which also resists any counter-temptation to become lost entirely in the thing itself, that naivety against which Adorno also rails. His ideal, meanwhile, is “[c]ontemplation without violence” (*MM*, 89): positioned as “the source of all the joy of truth, [it] presupposes that he [sic.] who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distant nearness” (*MM*, 89-90; see also below).

5. ‘Important and unimportant matters’

A parallel line of argument revolves around the hazards of too-quick a judgement about what is important, significant, valued; or, more narrowly, the pitfalls of what is too-easily regarded by the intellectual as important and hence worthy of study and reflection. Such a regard of the important can slip into an unthinking emphasis upon the general over the particular, in that what *really* matters often gets conflated with what appears to be wide-spread, affecting many peoples and places, rather than only applying to a limited situation occurring in a given time-and-place. Related binary oppositions arise between the universal and the parochial, perhaps even the global and the local, with a scalar cross-contamination occurring between conceptual – we might say philosophical – valuation of the general over the particular shading into predispositions towards elevating the large-scale (the planetary, the continental, the large-region, the big-city) over the small-scale (the neighbourhood, the next-door, the small-district, the little-village). Such scales of judgement are familiar and difficult to break, often difficult to quarrel with, and they have been disputed in various ways by geographers over recent years, notably by Marston et al. (2005) calling for ‘a geography without scale’ which pirouettes between disputing hierarchies of worth and disputing their presumed spatial correlates.

Intriguingly, at one moment Adorno addresses head-on this problematic, in a chapter

called *Great and small*, when remonstrating against what he terms “the cult of the important” (MM, 125). Doubling his remarks here with a challenge to “[t]he concept of relevance” (MM, 125) – and geographers of a certain vintage may recall what was once termed the discipline’s ‘relevance debate’ (Davies 1977) – he writes as follows:

[...] a hierarchy of importance is creeping into theory-formation which gives preference to either particularly topical or particularly relevant themes, and discriminates against, or indulgently tolerates, anything non-essential, letting it pass as ornamentation of the basic facts, finesse. (MM, 125)

Adorno laments that, “in the end[,] this cult shows an unfree, regressive quality,” risking an imposition upon thought of “spellbound fixity, and a loss of self-reflection” (MM, 125). Typically, in his negative-dialectical mode, he clarifies that such a complaint does not mean that “the hierarchy of importance should be ignored” (MM, 125), but rather should itself be subjected to sustained critical attention, not least because it can be complicit with thought-and-practice that simply repeats the *status quo*, maintaining and even entrenching inequalities. Thus:

Thought ought not, however, to repeat this hierarchy, but by completing, end it. The division of the world into important and unimportant matters, which has always served to neutralise the key phenomena of social injustice as mere exceptions, should be followed to the point where it is convicted of its own untruth. [...] The large themes will then also make their appearance, though hardly in the traditional ‘thematic’ sense, but refractedly and eccentrically. (MM, 125)

Instead of automatically supposing that “a picture of the Battle of Leipzig is worth more than a chair in oblique perspective” (MM, 126), Adorno calls for a critical appraisal of *why* such a supposition might arise, but also, by implication, calls upon critical scholars to dig deeply into the objects that are both the chair and its ‘oblique’ representation. It is to query any common-sensical “matter-of-factness” (MM, 126) in the face of objects, a querying – we might even say a ‘queering’ – of any instrumentalism of thought, any domination of thought by ‘subjective reason’, that installs a glib separation of the important (worthy of thought’s attention) from the unimportant (unworthy of thought’s second glance). In the terms of the epigraph quote at the start of **Section 2** above, here can be discerned Adorno’s call for “a gaze averted from the beaten track” (MM, 67).

6. ‘Cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material’

In one passage addressing the tangled relations of history and ‘the dialectic’, Adorno invokes Benjamin:

If Benjamin says that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and the blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. (*MM*, 151).

Adorno thereby illuminates what typically gets abandoned by the ‘victor’s’ version of history; what gets expelled, shunned and banished from the standard retellings of history, portrayed, if noticed at all, as “irrelevant, eccentric, derisory” (*MM*, 151) and indeed, as above, framed as entirely ‘unimportant’. He stands steadfastly with all those many attempts to rewrite history – and geography, and sociology, and political science, and more – with alertness to, sympathy for and hearing the experiences of the ‘subalterns’, the ‘scapegoats’ and all (human and non-human) beings left marginalised, precarious and even eradicated by both the machinations of history (by the standard ‘dialectic’ of wins and losses) and the victors’ retellings thereof. The notions of ‘waste products’ and ‘blind spots’ are also geographically evocative, prompting thoughts about the spaces of waste, dirt, darkness, cowering, rejection and the like that have percolated through many geographical texts (eg. Campkin/Cox 2008; Sibley 1995).

An aside of sorts is warranted here about what might be termed Adorno’s ‘social theory’, meaning how he conceptualises the workings of societies – in which respect he clearly remains an historical-materialist – and more particularly how he understands the relationships between human subjects, individually and collectively, and the ‘authorities’, ‘institutions’, ‘systems’ and ‘structures’ constitutive of societies, singularly and generically. In a critique well-known in Germany, Honneth (1991 [1985], xiv) identifies Adorno’s failure to do more along these lines, echoing Thrift’s admonishment of Foucault when lamenting “the negativism of Adorno’s social philosophy” and, more broadly, emphasising the extent to which Adorno spies ‘repression’ continually downtreading ‘the social’ and its capacities to resist. There is warrant for Honneth’s lament, it surely being the case that “the ‘melancholy’ and the ‘gloomy’ – as indeed the championing of the micrological – are related to Adorno’s rather overwhelming picture of the power over individual lives, unmediated by social groups or struggles, characteristic of fascist or consumer-capitalist totalitarianisms” (Anonymous reviewer, Summer 2020). Here undoubtedly lies the ‘melancholy’ cast of *MM*, and of Adorno’s negative dialectics, but to explore these dimensions further – and to connect them to how his lingering with the empirics of troubled objects, situations, peoples and places then fuels anything approaching what might be deemed a hopeful ‘politics’ – is beyond the scope of the present

paper.¹²

Something else is at stake, moreover, in that the ‘waste products’ passage quoted from *MM* leads into a rather different set of claims about what does not become ‘assimilated’ into accounts typically given about the workings of the world and its ways. As he writes:

Theory must needs deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic. (*MM*, 151)

‘Cross-grained, opaque and unassimilated’: these are ringing terms to index what Adorno – in an uncharacteristically romantic flourish – presents as ‘stuff’ that ‘outwits’ the history made (in a double-sense) by the victors, and which may, in consequence, appear somewhat ‘anachronistic’ or old-fashioned. In a more philosophical-technical guise, the impression here is also of a ‘surplus’, an ‘excess’, that cannot but elude the onto-definitional grids or apparatuses of conventional world-views, academic and popular (e.g. Dixon/Jones III 1998).

These claims speak to Adorno’s understanding of what he variously terms ‘non-identity’ or the ‘non-conceptual’ – addressed most systematically in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973 [1966]) – which, to simplify, references what compresses into and constitutes an object (or, better, the comprehension of an object) but which then remains largely hidden, opaque and hence unnamed (evading the ‘identity’ attributed) and unthought (slipping away from what is discerned, discussed and hence derived).¹³ Much of *MM* can plausibly be cast as Adorno fishing for this ‘non-identity’ buried away in the recesses of objects as diverse as a child’s toy car (Philo 2018), a dug-up mammoth and the institutions of marriage, love and fidelity; a fishing for the more expansive histories, social relations, economic compulsions and more that stand in the background of the objects concerned. The goal is to excavate what gets obscured by standard accounts; to retrieve what gets assimilated to the point of invisibility and unthinkability, but which can still be discerned by the critical ‘micrologist’.

7. ‘Reduced to replaceable, exchangeable dispositions’

Reworking points made earlier, I now elaborate Adorno’s resistance to what might be

¹² The reviewer suggests that, drawing from Honneth, “the sober, gloomy response we should have to the real horrors of the world can be a realistic starting point and motivation for concrete struggles via social institutions, movements and resources.” In some measure, though, that is akin to what I *am* deriving from Adorno’s call for lingering, and what I would also want to argue, with Adorno, about why it is *so* important to be involved in the project of ‘education after Auschwitz’ (Adorno 1971).

¹³ A properly dialectical – certainly a properly negatively-dialectical – retelling of history will of course retain an acute sense of these subaltern materials.

characterised as a comfortably affirmative phenomenology of things, one for which I confess to have affection and attraction, wherein the scholar slides towards that naïve, immediate and joyful celebration of the world and all its many-splendoured things. As Adorno objects, “[e]ven virtues like openness to life, the capacity to find and enjoy beauty in the most trivial and insignificant places,¹⁴ begin to show a questionable aspect” (*MM*, 76). In the face of “overflowing abundance, aesthetic indifference to the choice of the object” (*MM*, 76) – a reference of course to US consumer society and the proliferation of glittery commodities – there is indeed a danger of acute *indifference*, of being indifferent to the cornucopia of differences offered up to us. In a world of “fragments’ confront[ing] the subject, ... immediately and significantly” (*MM*, 76), so Adorno cautions, many dangers lurk for the dampening of critical thought. Any “readiness to discover value or beauty everywhere shows the resignation both of ... critical faculties and of the interpreting imagination inseparable from them,” which means that “[t]hose who find everything beautiful are now in danger of finding nothing beautiful” (*MM*, 76).

Adorno detects dangers arising from a kind of *indifference* – of naively celebrating all things – which, although he does not pursue this thread, risks echoing a certain species of Christian ontology: God made everything ‘on heaven and earth’, and so we, humans, should love it all, however big, small, wise, otherwise, good, bad, benevolent or malevolent. A sophisticated version of unreservedly loving ‘the plenitude’ of God’s creation features in the remarkable ‘spiritual geometry’ of Simone Weil (1909-1943), the French philosopher, political theorist, theologian and mystic, who declared that it is vital “to love everything as a whole and in each detail” (Weil 1951, 1), while speaking of the universe as “the home which lays claim on our love” (in Abosch 1994, 91). One commentator reflects that Weil “declares her allegiance to an entire universe of indiscriminately encompassing love: ‘Our love must fill the collective space to the same extent, with the same intensity, as sunlight’” (Abosch 1994, 91).¹⁵

It is crucial to appreciate the distance that Adorno maintains from such a position, on one level because he is adamant – as already explained – that so much on which we might (indeed,

¹⁴ Relatedly, Adorno spies dangers in loving the small or ‘the underdog’: “In the end, glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than glorification of the splendid system that makes them so” (*MM*, 28).

¹⁵ Much that Weil calls us to love, however, is unpleasant, even evil, and she does not offer anything like a simplistic, romanticised, rosy-cheeked Christianity, but rather something much bleaker, tougher, demanding. Indeed, she enacts a decisively ‘negative theology’, proceeding through debating the negation of anything that might be easily cast as positive or affirmative, even as she ventures ways of affirming God and creation’s truths via other routes. For a geographical discussion of Weil’s geography and theology, see Philo (2021; also see Last 2017). As a practitioner of ‘negative theology’, a term occasionally used to describe the orientations of both Benjamin and Adorno, Weil could be brought into a potentially most illuminating three-way ‘conversation’ with the latter pair.

must) linger, as the critical scholar, is going to be unpleasant, full of evil and suffering, and hence entirely *unlovely*. He is not about to suggest that we have to ‘love’ such things, even if he supposes that lingering with unloveliness can itself be a vehicle for promoting, in dialectical fashion, kindness, tenderness and a non-instrumental orientation to the world and its multiple occupants. More sharply, though, his objection is to the implied *indiscrimination* – which can also be rendered as *indistinction* or *indifference* – between things, in which regard Adorno performs a further, quite complicated, even fiendishly, dialectical dance for his reasoning. In bald outline, he critiques how loving everything, smearing a benign ‘sameness’ over all, is actually to reprise *exactly* that principle of equivalence and exchangeability which is so central to the logics of capitalism. Hence, we might state that, in arguing against a naïvely loving ‘micrology’, Adorno proposes instead a determinedly critical ‘micrology’ set squarely in the vicinity of Marxist thought.

Indeed, a critical trajectory throughout *MM* – having been fulsomely announced in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (Adorno/Horkheimer 1991 [1947]) – is the sustained assault on capitalism’s reduction of (virtually) all relations (human, economic, social, environmental) to exchange relations. Clearly orbiting in the same plane as Marx, so much is seen as problematic – alienating, deadening, disheartening – about how objects/things, including people and their activities, become denuded of their substance, their details, their meanings, and instead abandoned as mere exchange-equivalents (worth certain amounts of a universal valuing currency).¹⁶ In the ‘flatland’ of capitalist exchange, where everything is marketable and has its price,¹⁷ objects/things are indeed cut down into potentially exchangeable equivalents, flattened out into a bland sameness or, as Adorno often says, a banal ‘commensurability’. Objects/things and the ‘ideas’ that people might have about them all become victims here, the upshot being to steamroller away the precious differences that *are* the texture of lived worlds: as Adorno goes on to lament, “[i]nterchangeability subjects ideas to the same procedure as exchange imposes on things. The incommensurable is eliminated” (*MM*, 129). In the process, moreover, ‘spontaneity’ – the promise of in-the-moment, creative responses to the things of the world – gets erased from thought: “It is reduced to replaceable, exchangeable dispositions” (*MM*, 124).

¹⁶ Without a doubt, Adorno is trailing with him all of the standard Marxist understandings of how objects have their ‘use-values’ captured by ‘exchange-values’, the latter meaning what might be paid in money to secure the ‘use’ or ownership of the object; and it is of course the instrumentalism of converting the world into baskets of exchange-values that so exercises him, not the more humble instrumentalism of people ‘using’ objects as part of their survival (and sometimes joys) in their local life-worlds.

¹⁷ Another aspect of the critique here is an attack on quantification: the insistence on being able to count everything, and hence to array everything according to some singular quantitative metric. Adorno’s ongoing critiques of positivism and conventional science entrained this suspicion of quantification, in part precisely because of its complicity with capitalist exchange-relations.

Thus, for Adorno, “the first task of thought is to criticise the all-embracing commensurability that stems from exchange relationships” (*MM*, 129).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Adorno’s negative dialectics demands that he extends this vein of critical thought into an assault on the sameness-inducing conceit of loving everything equally or indiscriminately. He insists on working towards what he terms “[t]he utopia of the qualitative – the things which through their difference and uniqueness cannot be absorbed into the prevalent exchange relationships” (*MM*, 120).¹⁸ Repeatedly, in different guises and with different examples, he rehearses the importance of what remains, the differences, the unassimilable, after exchange-relations – and after the thought-labours of those who encounter them – have done their worse with respect to the things of the world. The argument returns to an appreciation of that ‘cross-grained, opaque and unassimilated material’ discussed earlier in the paper, what, in another intriguing echo of Marx, Adorno sometimes calls ‘the surplus’ for which the critical scholar must seek, but which otherwise is too easily obliterated under capitalist instrumentalism: “things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus, [...] in the autonomy of things, which ... is not consumed by the moment of action [function]” (*MM*, 40).

8. ‘Distant nearness’

If the words above entail an attempt to sketch out one way in which Adorno circumvents a too seamless love of all things, that spongy happy-phenomenology of stuff, another way in which he makes this circumvention is through insisting that – as already quoted – “he [sic.] who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distant nearness” (*MM*, 89-90). A tricky spatiality of relatedness is wrapped up in this notion of ‘distant nearness’, and it is here that the difficulty of Adorno’s approach to the problem of ‘immediacy’ – also signalled earlier – swims more fully into view. “It is precisely in the closest contact that [the critical scholar] feels the unabolished difference most painfully” (*MM*, 94), he writes at one point, confirming that close contact or slow lingering with an object is such a vital ingredient of his critical scholarship. Yet, and as should already be fairly clear, his is, to be sure, no simple-minded eulogy about the

¹⁸ It should be admitted that Adorno immediately suggests that this ‘utopia of the qualitative’, full of different and unique things, “takes refuge under capitalism in the traits of fetishism” (*MM*, 120). Consistent with other claims in *MM*, he is all too aware of how such things, if desired, can slide into being mere ‘commodities’, seized by a ‘commodity fetishism’, and so here – arguably of a piece with his relentless negative dialectics – even something that Adorno evidently regards as a ‘good thing’, this respectful, gentle openness to the multiple differentiated thingness of the world, is also acknowledged to be at risk of perversion under capitalism’s vice-like embrace. The unforgiving negative-dialectical cast of these ruminations by Adorno is central to the assessment provided by Morton with which this paper concludes.

immediacy of things in either a ‘romantic’ register – communing with the things in some unmediated manner – or a ‘positivist’ register – assuming that careful measurement of things can enable an access to the truths of their reality-in-the-world.¹⁹ Rather, critical thought, for Adorno, precisely relies upon “[k]eeping one’s distance” (*MM*, 126). “Only at a remove from life can the mental life exist, and truly engage the empirical” (*MM*, 126), he continues, adding that “[d]istance is not a safety-zone but a field of tension. It is manifested not in relaxing the claims of ideas to truth, but in delicacy and fragility of thinking” (*MM*, 126). Thought, at least in Adorno’s critical theory, is hence ‘delicate’ and ‘fragile’; not the heavy club of grand, totalising theory that obliterates particulars, nor the control-obsessed logics of positivism,²⁰ but rather acting with care, humility but also critical edge – with Marxian credentials – in its distanced, tensioned regard of worldly objects (material or indeed immaterial).

Critical thought cannot just be a surface phenomenology of things. In a passage that is almost certainly a dig at Heideggerian phenomenology, anticipating the more sustained critique of Heidegger (and his concept of ‘dwelling’) advanced in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Adorno 2003 [1964]), Adorno reflects that:

It is precisely the critical element that is wanting in ostensibly independent thought. Insistence on the cosmic secret hidden beneath the outer shell, in reverently failing to establish the relation between the two [the outer shell and what is in the shell] often enough confirms by just this omission that the shell has its good reasons that must be accepted without asking questions. (*MM*, 67).

For such *uncritical* thought, ‘the cosmic secret’ is hence discerned simply from the shell itself – in its immediacy as shell – without proper questions being asked about the shell, its outer casing and its inner content, and so, metaphorically speaking, such a mode of thought has actually neglected to take seriously ‘the beneath’ of the shell’s interior.²¹ Contrariwise, Adorno insists on a critical stance hostile to such superficial immediateness: such immediacy without distance, without discrimination or recognition of difference, which risks a bland saming of all objects under scrutiny – all shells share the same ‘cosmic secret’ – and hence exactly that conversion of these objects into equivalent, exchangeable things (as per the critique explored

¹⁹ Positivism is “wanting to be no more than a mere provisional abbreviation for the factual matter beneath it” (*MM*, 126).

²⁰ In which connection, Adorno bemoans “the control mechanisms of science” (*MM*, 128). Adorno was of course a fierce critic of positivism, being a central figure in German social sciences’ so-called ‘positivism debate’ of the 1950s and early-1960s (Adorno et al. 1981 [1966]).

²¹ Intriguingly, Förtner et al. (2020, esp. 12-14) develop aspects of how Adorno critiques Heidegger’s rustic-agrarian-inspired ‘jargon of authenticity’, complete with its dismissal of an inquiring self-reflexive mode, as an element within their explication of why certain rural regions (in Germany and possibly elsewhere) can become bastions of right-wing populism.

in the previous section).

Put differently, and couched more in terms of humans relating to one another (so that the other object is a person), Adorno argues as follows:

The presumption of undiminished nearness [...], the flat denial of strangeness, does the other supreme wrong, virtually negates him [sic.] as a particular human being and therefore the humanity in him, ‘counts him in’, incorporates him in the inventory of property. Wherever immediateness posits and entrenches itself, the bad mediateness of society is insidiously asserted. (*MM*, 182)

This account could not be clearer: a crude assumption of ‘nearness’ to the other person, denying that there may be anything different, strange, difficult or perhaps ‘surplus’ about this other person, mistakenly renders him or her as really just the same as the beholder, bereft of whatever makes him or her a distinct nugget of humanity in this creation. The consequence of such ‘bad mediateness’ is that this other person loses his or her particularity as *this* human, not *that* human or indeed *any* human, and – at least in a certain kind of conceptual horizon – becomes equivalent, exchangeable and little more than just a bit of ‘property’ to be bought, sold or maybe even discarded. For Adorno, there have to be strategies for resisting this outcome, for rescuing incommensurability: “Only by the recognition of distance in our neighbour is strangeness alleviated: accepted into consciousness” (*MM*, 182). In a different register, therefore, Adorno returns to ‘keeping one’s distance’ and thereby enforcing what, in a ringing phrase, he casts as “the dissolution of sham immediacy” (*MM*, 198-199). Moreover, elsewhere he proposes that “[t]he cause of immediacy is now espoused by the most circumspect reflection,” requiring the most careful, critical treatment of immediacy, before adding that “[t]his is tested on the smallest scale” (*MM*, 182). ‘Testing’ the challenges of critically thinking immediacy, and doing so ‘on the smallest scale’, does also intimate something of why the prime crucible for Adorno’s orientation is ‘the micrological’, where everything at stake for him in the realisation of thought’s ‘last hope’ becomes crystallised with reference to what may be the smallest of objects, events, situations.

9. ‘Space enough between them’

In a closely parallel move, Adorno rails against ‘sham immediacy’ through a second foray into the spatiality of relatedness, one where at issue is once more the careful negotiation of distance, but now with heightened attention to how relations *both* sustaining of “the good life” (*MM*, 15) *and* generative of advanced critical scholarship are constituted through the spaces-between whatever is relating or to be related. In approaching this problematic, Adorno contemplates

what he calls “the practical orders of life” (*MM*, 40), bemoaning how these orders become increasingly drained of “tenderness” (*MM*, 41) – especially between people, but arguably also, in the spirit of what Adorno writes elsewhere in *MM*, between people and objects – precisely because of their ‘colonisation’ by “bourgeois reason” (*MM*, 41).²² Tenderness, Adorno reflects, resides in “the possibility of relations without purpose” (*MM*, 41), hence equating to people/objects defiantly *not* caught within what become, under capitalist enlightenment, the increasingly prevalent cages of instrumentality (of ‘instrumental reason’ or, in the formulations of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and, more particularly, Horkheimer, ‘subjective reason’).

And there is a geography to both tenderness and its loss, integral to the forms – to the spaces, material and imagined – of interaction between people (and, by extension, between people and objects). Adorno reflects on how such interaction, under the capitalist pressure of “time is money” (*MM*, 41), demands to be as swift and efficient as possible, uninterrupted by frills or diversions that might detract from the business (literal or otherwise²³) in hand. Indeed, “[e]very sheath interposed between men [sic.] in their transactions is felt as a disturbance to the functioning of the apparatus” (*MM*, 41). In illustrating this claim, in the spirit of *MM*’s constant dive into the small seeming banalities of life, he writes as follows:

That, instead of raising their hats, [men] greet each other with the hallos of familiar indifference, that, instead of letters, they send each other inter-office communications without address or signature, are random symptoms of a sickness of contact. Estrangement shows itself precisely in the elimination of distance between people. (*MM*, 41)

The compulsion is towards an immediacy of interaction, with any intervening ‘sheath’ thinned to its tiniest limit, such that any form of distance between parties to the interaction – material distance, but also social and emotional distances – is reduced to its barest minimum. It is to be as “straightforward” (*MM*, 41) as conceivable, but in its straightforwardness – its elimination of distance – there lies what Adorno terms this ‘sickness of contact’.

Such sickly contact arguably does not leave enough room or opportunity for anything meaningful to occur *between* the interacting parties. In the absence of any ‘sheath’ of material, social and emotional ‘stuff’ through which the interactees must sift and sort, the largely utilitarian contact between them remains denuded, barren, sterile:

For only as long as they abstain from importuning one another with giving and taking, discussion and implementation, control and function, is there *space enough*

²² My use of ‘colonisation’ here reflects Habermas’s more formalised account of how the ‘life-world’ becomes ‘colonised’ by the ‘system-world’: see, from the geographical literature, Gregory 1978; Phillips 1994.

²³ Later Adorno adds that “[e]verything is [now] business” (*MM*, 41).

between them for the delicate connecting filigree of external forms in which alone the internal can crystallise. (*MM*, 41; my emphasis)

There are difficult allusions here to Adorno's wider philosophy of forms/substances, but there remains something compelling, for me, in the notion that a healthy, non-sick, contact requires 'space enough between them' – the interactees – for the delicate filigree of deeper, non-instrumental relations to take shape.

In this connection, Adorno quotes the Jungian psychologist G.R. Heyer (1890-1967), who described how people "not yet fully formed by civilization" tend, in their interactions with others, to approach topics *indirectly*, such that "the conversation must move towards its real object [its ostensible purpose] as if by itself, in spirals" (in *MM*, 41). The spatiality of interaction is here framed as potentially either 'straight' and direct or proceeding in 'spirals' and indirect:

[...] the straight line is now regarded as the shortest distance between two people, as if they were points. Just as nowadays house-walls are cast in one piece, so the mortar between people is replaced by the pressure holding them together. Anything different is simply no longer understood, but appears, if not as a Viennese specialty with a head-waiterly tinge, then as childish trustfulness or an illicit advance. (*MM*, 41)

Intriguingly for geographers, Adorno disputes a picturing – an enactment – of human interaction as straight lines between points, the distance of travel from point-to-point thereby minimised, and gestures towards an alternative: human interaction as spiralling, meandering through a 'sheath' or through the 'mortar' (a pebbly substance) that once held bricks in place (**Figure 2**). At the same time, chiming with Matthew Hannah's recent efforts to compose a socio-spatial theory of direction (Hannah 2019), Adorno critiques overly-directed interactions in favour of celebrating more indirect spiralling ones, speeding not through some abstract 'space' cleared of all obstacles but rather shouldering through a substantive 'space' full of clutter. He relates such spiralling to a fussy Viennese confection, but also to illicit liaisons or to the ways of a child (echoing a constant theme through his *oeuvre* whereby the child and his/her life-world is held up as a critique-full mirror to over-instrumentalised practical orders: see also Philo 2016, 2018).

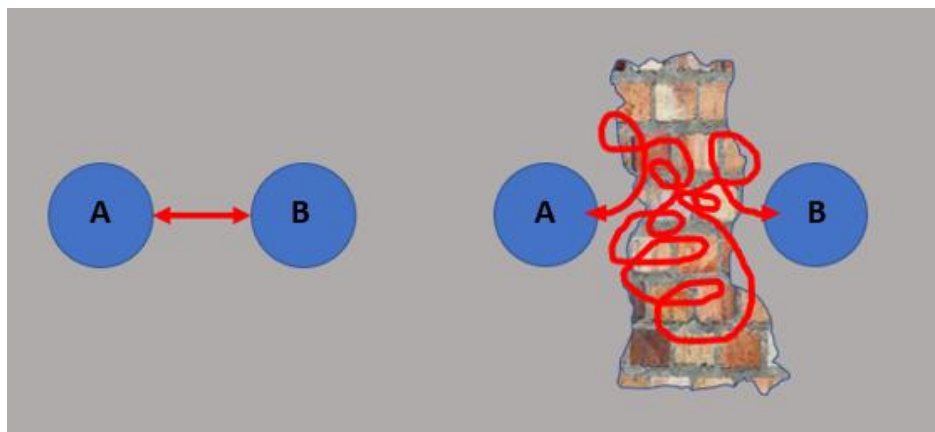
More chillingly, Adorno concludes his thoughts here with a dramatic 'scaling up' of what allies to this spatiality of straight/direct interactions, with its "pseudo-democratic dismantling of ceremony, of old-fashioned courtesy, of the useless conversation suspected [...] of bring idle gossip" (*MM*, 42). Such a 'dismantling', such an instrumentalism that underpins today's neoliberal orders, when it becomes wasteful to chat idly, to laugh or have fun in the office or

department common room,²⁴ is detected by Adorno as symptomatic of something far worse:

[...] behind the seeming clarification and transparency of human relations that no longer admit anything undefined, naked brutality is ushered in. The direct statement without divagations, hesitations or reflections, that gives the other the facts full in the face, already has the form and timbre of the command issues under Fascism by the dumb to the silent. Matter-of-factness between people, doing away with all ideological ornamentation between them, has already become an ideology for treating people as things. (*MM*, 42)

The last sentence of the above quote arguably suggests a fairly standard line of argument about the dangers inherent in ‘objectifying’ (‘thingifying’) humans, regarding people as objects/things, and such a critique – doubling with the forceful critiques of ‘instrumental reason’, the bending of reason’s powers in the service of instrumental ends – resounds throughout *MM* (and, in a more systematic guise, throughout *Dialectics of Enlightenment*: Adorno/Horkheimer 1991 [1947]). That said, though, the prime purpose of the present paper has been to unpack the multiple ways in which Adorno’s conceptualisation of objects – here in *MM*, then more fully developed in subsequent works, notably *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973 [1966]) – actually has rather more dimensions to it than just adding to a critique of objectifying instrumentalism (under fascism or, indeed, other social formations).

Figure 2: Contrasting pictures: immediate/direct/straightforward spatial relations between objects A and B (on the left) and Adorno’s distantly-near/indirect/spiralling spatial relations between objects A and B (on the right). (Source: author)



10. Conclusions: Adorno, Hegel and the dinos

²⁴ Time-space ‘atomisation’ of ourselves is continuing apace for ‘us’ both in the workplace and at leisure, claims Adorno, with the ostensible goal of maximising our focus and hence ‘efficiency’, whether working or playing: both are “being divided every more rigorously by invisible demarcation lines” (*MM*, 130), lines that may also, I would add, actually become material bricks-and-mortar. Adorno adds: “Joy and mind have been expelled equally from both. In each, blank-faced seriousness and pseudo-activity hold sway” (*MM*, 130-131).

Adorno's prose microwaves things like plastic dinosaurs. But he kept them on his desk at Columbia University. His wife called him Teodont, a mashup of *Theodor* and a dinosaur tooth (the *-dont* suffix).

[...]

The unofficial, cute-dinosaur-loving Adorno seems at odds, poor man, with the official Schoenberg-lionising one. [...] Literally: the empirical, phenomenological Adorno is a cute little Teodont with plastic dinosaurs – and the spectral Hegelain thought realm he inhabits encounters it [...] and spurns it as fascist or as commodity fetishist. (Morton 2017, 166)

These sparring remarks by Morton, from towards the close of his *Humankind* (Morton 2017), are part and parcel of how he composes his distinctive take on the planetary symbiosis of human and all other 'kinds' on this earth – his call for a solidary phenomenology of “the symbiotic real” (Morton 2017, 2) – with all manner of challenges from 'Communism' and Marxism. Here, Adorno is presented, on the one hand, as the happy-clappy phenomenologist who loves his tiny plastic dinosaurs, and, on the other, as the remorseless pursuer of Hegelian systems/totalities who can never quite escape from a deadening of such (and all) things, squeezing the shards of life and commonality out of them. For all that, Morton finds odd affinity with what he takes as Adorno's ultimate plumping for the objects, in their precious, delicate specificities and also in their simple being-ness – their “[b]eing, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment” (*MM*, 157; cited in Morton 2017, 171) – prior to, outside of and ever after the fuss, noise and (ab)use of human discourse and action.²⁵

Much the same interpretation of Adorno informs my paper here, but perhaps not quite. I too have sought after the Adorno who teeters on the edge of being that empirical phenomenologist naïvely romancing the fragmentary objects of the world – especially the small, the marginal, the unwanted, the unloved, and their nothing-much geographies – always struck by a melancholy wistfulness. Such an Adorno coheres with my own wish to throw in my lot with the 'enchanted geographers' and their affirmative stance before the world, their 'new positivism'. Yet, I cannot quite shake the other Adorno, the austere Adorno proceeding under a Hegelian sign, who himself cannot simply groove with the objects, but rather who hesitates about getting too close – resisting 'sham immediacy' – and who instead operates with a complex spatiality of relatedness (of not-too-nearness, of spiralling through the pebbly spaces-in-between). The same Adorno, moreover, who, just as we seem to be settling on a sensibility of loving everything, cannot avoid introducing a 'negative-dialectical' edge, carping

²⁵ This is the “eternal peace” (*MM*, 157) that Morton finds to be such a useful notion, “lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky” (*MM*, 157).

at any reductive equalising of difference, even in the name of lovelorn solidarities between objects and peoples. And it is the same Adorno who cannot but insist on setting these objects (and people) in a critical historical-materialist frame, attending to their exploitative, patriarchal, ethnocentric, class-ridden histories, lingering with the suffering, the torments, the badness, the negative. Personally, I might like my Adorno to be a ‘positive micrologist’, happily playing with his toy dinosaurs in Morton’s ‘eternal peace’ of human and non-humankind; but, in a critical-scholarly mode that continues to bother me, I have to accept him – and learn from him – as he is, a ‘negative micrologist’, forever ‘looking the negative in the face, dwelling on it’. Such a gloomy sensibility – a “disenchanted charm” (*MM*, 225) – does have a place, is urgently needed even, in contemporary human geography (and beyond).

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Bernd Belina and the editors of *Geographische Zeitschrift* for inviting me to submit this keynote paper for the journal, and to Bernd Belina and an anonymous referee for their generous and stimulating comments (if only I had the space to dialogue further with their insights). A version of this paper was presented to a session on ‘Negative Geographies’, organised by David Bissell and Mitch Rose at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Washington DC, in April 2019: many thanks to the organisers and participants at this event for their attendance and constructive feedback. Finally, thanks are also due to a very thorough copy-editor.

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