**Adorno and the Global Public Sphere: Rethinking Globalized Power and the Cosmopolitan Condition of Politics**

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*In contemporary political theory, the “global public sphere” mostly refers to an emerging horizontal globalization of public spaces, political agents, and normative discourses evolving towards a “global civil society.” Adorno’s theorizing offers an alternative account. His critical theory suggests a decentered logic of global integration and social domination shaping the contemporary global public sphere. The structural constraints and the dynamics thereby generated may undermine the very norms of cosmopolitan inclusion and the critical publicity globalized publics help to engender. Employing Adorno’s critical theory of global integration, the article theoretically illuminates negative effects on cultural diversity, progressive forces and democratic publics by examining the global public sphere’s structures and agency through Adorno’s theoretical lens—from transnational social media to INGOs. Challenging misperceptions about Adorno as a theorist of social closure, however, Adorno’s account of globalized conditions also points to new cosmopolitan opportunities ‘from below.’ While progressive accounts of the “global public sphere” and “global civil society” are neither entirely misleading nor without merit, turning to Adorno’s critical complicates this narrative in several ways and advances self-reflective theorizing of the global public sphere.*

**Keywords:** *Adorno, cosmopolitics, global public sphere, globalization, INGOs, power*

**Introduction**

In contemporary political theory, the “global public sphere” mostly refers to an emerging horizontal globalization of public spaces, political agents, and normative discourses evolving towards a “global civil society.” (Kaldor 2003) Engendered by new information technology and global media, the “global public sphere” is assumed to constitute a democratic corrective facing international institutions and global politics, while promoting critical universality and universalistic norms and rights claims. In its nascent stage it already serves, it is argued, critical functions of publicity and critique in a “partially globalized world.” (Keohane 2001) Even though it is still considered weak when compared to national democratic publics, several cosmopolitan theorists also attribute to the multifaceted “global public sphere” a key role legitimizing the “constitutionalization of international law.” (Habermas 2006; Archibugi 2008; Marchetti 2012) Others emphasize the potential progressive impact of the global public on ‘domestic’ politics, enabling and supporting cosmopolitan norms and democratic agents in local conflicts within nation states.

While this progressive account of the “global public sphere” is neither entirely misleading nor without merit, turning to Theodor Adorno’s critical theory may complicate such a narrative in several ways. First, he offers a critical understanding of the underlying structures and dynamics of global modernity and contemporary globalization that also structurally affect and shape the global public sphere. Those structural constraints and dynamics, it is argued, undermine the very norms of cosmopolitan inclusion and the critical publicity globalized publics may help to generate. The dominant global process of social integration, Adorno suggests, is first and foremost driven by a constitutive instrumental economic rationality that permeates global societal structures as well as an emerging global public sphere, its agents and cultural manifestations. Second, though far from simply rejecting the idea of global constitutionalism or the ideal of global public law based on a global public sphere and civil society, Adorno’s work complicates the Kantian presupposition of gradual progress through conflict and reason. Adorno challenges any unambiguous confidence in legal principles and international institutions in a world that is continuosly ruled by various forms of social domination guarded by those very principles.

In turn, Adorno’s alternative model has the potential to enhance critical, self-reflective political theorizing of the global public sphere in more ways than one.[[1]](#endnote--1) The relevance of Adorno’s work for a critical discussion of the global public sphere will be examined by reconstructing three related theoretical concepts and levels of analysis. First, I will lay the theoretical and sociological groundwork by reconstructing Adorno’s critical concept of global integration, which he situates in the context of social domination, instrumental rationality, and commodification across borders. Second, and more specifically, I will explore the possible negative effects of such global integration on cultural diversity and public spheres in an Adornian view, and illustrate how global market integration and commodification may affect even progressive forces and political agency in an emerging global public sphere by undermining conditions of critical publicity and self-reflection. Third, challenging common misperceptions about Adorno as an allegedly unambiguous theorist of political and social closure, I will briefly turn to Adorno’s engagement with alternative cosmopolitan directions and conditions for genuine cosmopolitan solidarity. They depend, Adorno’s theorizing indicates, on decentered forms of organization and dispersed global publics that help enable democratic politics by diverse agents critically appropriating public spaces. In Adorno’s view, I will argue, new possibilities are partly generated by the same decentered globalizing developments that he simultaneously problematizes. Globalized conditions of society may ultimately *also* give rise to new cosmopolitan and democratic opportunities ‘from below.’ These, however, will have to be seized by decentered subjects and democratic political agents.

**The Global Public Sphere and the Social Forces of Globalization**

To illuminate the potential theoretical payoff of Adorno’s work in our context, it is important to first turn to his key concept of universal or global social integration. From this, a critical analysis of the contemporary global public sphere proceeds. Adorno presents us with a seemingly counter-intuitive concept of global integration: it supposedly atomizes and fragments the members of global society in the very process it integrates them into a social totality.

According to Adorno, global integration is dominated by means of universal exchange across borders. The dominant mechanism of transnational social integration is neither primarily driven by progressive social values of global inclusion, nor by a powerful global elite and its sinister purposes. Rather, it is shaped by the decentered and decentering logic of global capitalist market integration. It may have changed in its *form* from industrial to post-industrial, global and “informational” (Castells 2002)[[2]](#endnote-0), but not in its essential mechanism. Global integration operates, Adorno suggests, first and foremost under the functional imperatives of an all-pervasive economic, “instrumental” or “technological” rationality. It creates social totalities, rendering antiquated and superfluous all that cannot be economically utilized. And it induces seemingly contradictory processes of integration and disintegration, of unification or homogenization and fragmentation.[[3]](#endnote-1)

Following Adorno’s claims about global social integration, what constitutes the global public sphere’s underlying constitutive mechanism is the universalization of an ‘exchange principle’ based on an exclusive instrumental rationality by which publics are increasingly shaped or, if you will, dominated. Such process has, as indicated, both integrating and disintegrating effects on all its agents. However, Adorno’s account decidedly departs from the globalists’ identification of globalization and global integration with social inclusion. Rather, the impact of global capitalist integration for an emerging ‘global public sphere’ is viewed as deeply problematic. Yet Adorno’s account can also be contrasted to claims by globalization skeptics that globalization is either nothing new under the sun or primarily deliberately politically manufactured. Instead, this instrumental or technological rationality *involuntarily* and often *unconsciously* affects global relations and interactions, and all groups and classes; it takes shape behind the back of the agents of globalization, and it is doing so in a decentered fashion.

*Adorno’s Model of Decentered Global Integration and Power*

Let us unpack Adorno’s model of decentered global integration that is said to follow a specific logic of social domination and affects all cultures and political agents and publics. In order to do so, it is necessary to explore the concept of “real abstraction” or “objective abstraction.” This concept is strongly indebted to Marx, and especially the fetishism chapter of Marx’s *Capital*, even though Adorno takes it a step further and applies it to the specific conditions of late modern society. Marx points out that in commodity-producing societies, the apparent mystical qualities of commodities stem not from their use value as particular objects but from their exchange value (or abstract value). Modern reification, then, is induced by the capitalist exchange principle and the universal equivalent, according to which the general/abstract is no longer only an aspect or nomer (signifier) of the particular (signified). Instead, the particular becomes merely an exchangeable *expression* of the general-abstract.[[4]](#endnote-2) Consequently, particular qualities and individual needs are subsumed to abstract demands, and living matters are accordingly identified, fixed, or excluded. It is part of this reification that the societal patterns of interaction between humans, and between humans and nature, *appear* as inescapable and unchangeable, quasi-natural.

Due to the presumed totalization and expansionism of this logic, then, the same rationalizing subjectivity which had initially been the apparition of the source of all freedom and emancipation reveals itself to be the origin of an objectification run wild. (Habermas 2001: 136) According to Adorno, modern society’s real abstraction expresses an identity principle that has more and more turned into global humanity’s second nature. In late modernity, the expansive dynamic of real abstraction completely merges with “the dominance of the general over the particular, society over its forced members, apart from all social or class differences.” (Adorno 1967: 13f) Thus Adorno criticizes a diagnosed “universal tendency” of an economic process “that reduces individual interests to the common denominator of a totality which remains negative because its constitutive abstraction removes it from those interests.” (Adorno 1966: 311) Through the mediations of “the total society,” Adorno claims, which tends to encompass all inter-subjective relationships and subjective impulses, “human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 29)

Adorno’s dialectical approach to global societal development hereby conceives social change both in the framework of historical continuity and qualitative steps or breaks. History has hereby “not known any linear progress.” (Adorno 1965: 212) This is exemplified in pre-modern, modern, and late modern periods of societal organization and socialization. In particular, Adorno interprets the structuring patterns of late modern society as both specifically modern *as well as* rooted in a long historical matrix of global history. In fact, the nucleus of the globalized reifying instrumental rationality—epitomized and promoted by the bourgeois subject—as well as the bourgeois subject’s decline and alienation in the global social totality can be traced back to ancient and pre-modern “preliminary” models that include the cosmopolitan “globetrotter Odysseus”: “The universal socialization for which the globetrotter Odysseus and the solo manufacturer Robinson Crusoe provide a preliminary sketch was attended from the first by the absolute loneliness at which the end of the bourgeois era is becoming overt. Radical socialization means radical alienation. Both Odysseus and Crusoe deal in totality: the former measures it out; the latter fabricates it.” Other beings appear to them “only in estranged forms, as enemies or allies, but always as instruments, things.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 49) As indicated, however, the late modern stage of global integration is by the same token particularly characterized by the universalization of a historically specific, and particularly shaped, abstract form of economic rationalization and domination: a ubiquitous, particularistically formed law of economic utility and valorization. It creates first and foremost social closure and cultural reification without necessarily involving any direct command or domination.

On the one hand, then, in Adorno’s account modern forms of socialization and interaction hereby reflect the historical legacy of instrumental societal subject-object relations, that is: patterns of domination and exploitation that have shaped global human history all along.[[5]](#endnote-3) Adorno finds the nucleus of modern socialization and rationalization in the patterns of early civil self-constitution. This is already mirrored in ancient images and narratives, and paradigmatically embodied in Odysseus. Its model is unreflective, mythical self-preservation that employs indiscriminate domination over external and inner nature, and of everything that is incommensurable, strange or heterogeneous (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969).[[6]](#endnote-4) The price the subject pays for its survival by means of this ‘rational’ appropriation and objectification of the other—a process which seemingly enables the subject’s freedom and autonomy from immediate external forces—is self-objectification and blind projection. The emerging rational subject immunizes itself against its own feelings and the heterogeneity of the object world; hence the subject reifies the other and, in this process, itself. In principle, Adorno’s theory suggests, society is continuously rationalizing according to the principle of objectification. In doing so, however, it is not yet emancipated from the matrix of mythical self-preservation, which entails the perpetuation of unreflective self-sacrifice according to societal demands.[[7]](#endnote-5) In spite of its progress in liberating humans from immediate nature, the history of civilization, then, unfolded predominantly as the ultimately irrational, unreflected “history of the introversion of sacrifice“ (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 43).

On the other hand, however, modern societies have witnessed dramatic changes in their social organization. In the late modern era, Adorno observes the increasing predominance of the abstract form of market exchange and individualistic claims on a global level. The historical dialectic of individual and societal modernization has hereby also enabled (indeed facilitated) spheres of subjective freedom, autonomy, and even the very cosmopolitan ideal of a global association of free and equals that transcends particular spheres. (Adorno 1966: 150; Adorno 1962: 145) The early societal rise of market mediation and competition, liberating from more immediate forms of coercion and oppression, required independent thinking, i.e. the relative autonomy of subjects. In fact, in a somewhat idealized account of early market capitalism and its colonial forces, Adorno argues that the early market economy allowed for a „free interplay of subjects” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 234; my translation) according to the ideal-type of the *homo oeconomicus*[[8]](#endnote-6) with which self-conscious claims to freedom and autonomy emerged. At the very latest, however, this free interplay had largely broken down with the monopolies of early 20th century’s organized capitalism, the increasing dependency and powerlessness of weakened individuals in the face of powerful organizations, and the rise of total states and the social control they exercised.[[9]](#endnote-7)

Adorno thus sees modern global society, or global modernity, increasingly subsumed and shaped by a specific “predominance of economics.” (Adorno 1966: 190) The principle of capitalist integration is based on a logic of universal functionality (namely, to be *for* something else) that involuntarily constitutes the decentralized yet omnipresent key mechanism which increasingly links different cultural histories, molding them into global society.[[10]](#endnote-8) He observes that economic rationalization according to the logic of exchange value and concomitant “identity thinking” (Adorno 1966: 287) has become more or less universal; under conditions of late modernity, this generalizing logic at least affects – if not permeates – even those societies and ‘distant places’ in which the modernization process is belated or has failed.

*The Social Forces of Globalization*

From this it follows that in Adorno’s view humanity’s “global societal constitution” (Adorno 1962: 144) is up until now first and foremost realized through the universalization of this economic rationality and through global markets. It is not, however, the evil master plan developed by capitalists and the powers that be but functions like a centrifugal force without a center, creating societal constraints, social pressures and networks of dependency even if they are immediate or conscious. The law of value and exchange, Adorno argues, is more vivid than any singular institution. It succeeds even in the minds of the formally free individuals in liberal-democratic modern societies. (Adorno 1966: 259)

The predominant social forces of globalization, then, are not primarily viewed as multi-national corporations or other global players and elites. Adorno does not point to any world conquest by ‘imperialist’ governments or suspects that any of the global developments he observes seeks to understand originate in any ‘evil plot’. Rather, it is the intrinsically expansive, powerful logic of capitalist social integration that progressively ‘colonizes’ all forms of human activity. It is modelled according to the instrumental principle of labor and modernity’s socially forceful imperatives of abstract valorization, which tends to objectify and eliminate the particular, i.e. contingency, difference, individual autonomy. This totalizing socioeconomic integration, as a powerful universal tendency, renders the individual superfluous; individuality is rationalized away just as social inequality is simultaneously reified. In this process of unreflective and merciless societal rationalization, humans, Adorno suggests, are subordinated to societal functions and turned into powerless appendixes of social mechanisms. In addition, this form of integration more and more appropriates spheres of democratic freedom by closing – respectively privatizing – public spaces according to the economic rationale of the abstract-general.

On a global scale, then, according to Adorno modern societies witness the uninhibited expansion of the “ruthless rationalization” (Adorno 1966: 286) according to all-permeating, all-objectifying and pervasive functional economic imperatives that function as an unquestioned, hardly ever reflected prerequisite of globalized society. For Adorno, these structural demands affect all societal interactions, both in the public and the private sphere; they also leave their mark on the most intimate human relations and aspects of subjectivity. In doing so, the universalized economic rationality and the imperatives it imposes on the members of global society increasingly eliminate the very space for individual and public freedom which the birth of reason and enlightenment helped to make possible and promised. Modern global society, in this model, tends to create a totality which exposes humans to new, ever denser webs of external dependencies and social constraints which follow “laws of universal functionality,” (Adorno 1967) overwhelming the individual and rendering him largely powerless in the face of powerful global social forces and dynamics. While potentially providing conditions to challenge the powers that be and the hegemony of capitalist integration, emerging global public spaces and their actors are, Adorno reminds us, also unwittingly embedded in and exposed to these global forces of social domination, commodification, integration, and convergence.

In this way, Adorno theorizes a powerful, decentered social process that simultaneously permeates and connects the very local levels and even private social interaction—a “global tendency” that befalls all culture, politics, and social interaction, as well as seemingly “free,” “democratic” and unregulated publics. This global tendency is so powerful because human cultures, including the most technologically advanced, have all failed to emancipate themselves from irrational power and surplus domination, even though the “objective” technological possibilities would allow them to. (Adorno 1969: 241) To be sure, it is not the case that for Adorno all societies and cultures have become identical. But they are all part, and affected, by the constitutive mechanism of the global market and the universal exchange principle which engenders a specific form of social domination, and which tends to transform and converge or homogenize cultural processes in a repressive, objectifying fashion. In his assessment of what he describes as the *actually existing* „cosmopolitan condition“ of late modernity (in contrast to the critical emancipatory ideal of cosmopolitan freedom), Adorno supports—and in fact pushes further—Marx’s perceptive argument that the world market has “given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” and created a “universal inter-dependence of nations.”[[11]](#endnote-9) In this sense Adorno advances a critical, but also ambiguous *convergence thesis* of global culture and thus of the global public.

For Adorno, this convergence is not the product of any “cultural imperialism” or “Americanization,” even though the products of globalized cultural convergence may follow “American models.” Rather, it is the product of the diagnosed universalized “real abstraction” and modernization pressures generated by global market imperatives modeled after ubiquitous, ever-expansive principle of the exchange and utilization of commodities. The “totalization” of this logic entails the universal subordination of the individual/particular to the general/abstract and its instrumental economic demands*.* This principle of mediated social domination, Adorno argues, links the general or global to the historical-particular and, in so doing, transforms both. Ultimately, no culture remains unaffected—a process that is ambivalent and can harbor both repressive and emancipatory potential:

The differences not only in living standards but also in the specific qualities of peoples and their forms of existence assume an anachronistic aspect. Admittedly it is uncertain whether in fact the similarities are decisive and qualitative differences merely antiquated and, above all, whether in a rationally organized world what is qualitatively diverse and today only oppressed by the unity of technological reason would again come into its own. (Adorno 1968: 241)

Contrary to Hegel’s rejection of cosmopolitanism as an abstraction (as opposed to the presumably concrete reality of the nation), Adorno therefore depicts a distinct, yet distinctly ambiguous if not problematic, modern cosmopolitanization of societies that replaces the national organization of society: „[A]ll over the world airports resemble one another, by which I mean the entire business of loudspeakers, hostesses and everything that goes with them.“ Thus you will „find it hard to resist the impression that other differences between national towns exist largely only to motivate passengers to travel from one to another, from Karachi to Naples or elsewhere.“ But these airports only symbolized what Adorno expects to happen, for marketing interests, to the cities they serve. They would „likewise be ruthlessly—I almost said buried beneath it. In that event, the forms of human existence which even now provide us with only an illusory sense of diversity would plainly exhibit the fundamental equality of the exchange principle which dominates our lives.“ (all quotes Adorno 1964/65: 109f) This process of convergence mirrors the dubious ideal of the „melting pot.“ (Adorno 1951: 100) In fact, the „modes of production“ following the principle of market exchange have come to prevail throughout the world and

whatever this principle obtains, both in practical terms and as far as its marketing value is concerned, these uniformities will emerge. In other words, and this is what we must say by way of criticism of Hegel, it is no longer the case that so-called cosmopolitanism is the more abstract thing in contrast to the individual nations; cosmopolitanism now posesses the greater reality. We can now see a convergence of countless spheres of life and forms of production, right down to clothing...This convergence points to the convergence of the fundamental processes of life....Compared with this, the differences between nations are merely rudimentary vestiges. (Adorno 1964/65: 110; see also Adorno 1966)

**Global Public Spaces between Culture Industry and Critical Publicity**

Taking Adorno’s claims about cultural convergence and the process of the universalization of economic power relations and its ‘colonization’ of public and the private spheres seriously, I will now, in a second step, discuss his theoretical model and its relvance for specifically thinking about the contemporary global public sphere and its underlying dynamics.

Among other things, Adorno argues, the globally integrating, all-subsuming and ever-expansive logic of the exchange principle and its underlying instrumental rationality today find expression in seemingly even the most diverse cultural products and artifacts, just as they shape public interactions. Adorno associates them with an increasingly ubiqutous “culture industry.” Adorno’s famous concept of ‘culture industry’ points to the standardized internal mechanisms of cultural production that dominate modern society (el-Ojeili/Hayden 2009). The concept, often misunderstood in its canonical reception, does not primarily refer to the cultural production process itself, that is: to the industry producing cultural goods for commercial purposes. Rather, the concept signifies the societal predispositions of production and consumption of private and public goods through which the heterogenous external world and subjects are commodified, and indeed tend to converge—making the dissimilar similar under internalized imperatives of eceonomic ‘necessity.’ For Adorno, every form of commodified culture is shaped by its constitutive social context and, specifically, by the requirements of exchange value and the social pressure it generates. It transforms all kinds of cultural goods, and even arguments and interests articulated in the public sphere, increasingly into standardized, commodified, exchangeable “tickets” and a “schematic nature” of public and cultural affairs: “Any trace of spontaneity in the audience of the official radio is steered and absorbed into a selection of specializations by talent-spotters, performance competitions, and sponsored events of every kind.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 96)

Understood in this way, the global culture industry and its logic create a public system reaching far beyond a specific cast of industrial agents or those commercialized products associated with the television or movie industry—that is, the specific industrial production of cultural media commodities, and film production in particular, to which the common lament about mass culture or the adopted critique of ‘culture industry’ is often confined today. Instead, global culture industry in critical theoretical perspective refers to a globalized, all-embracing general pattern or schematism of public exchange and cultural production that exerts pressure in a decentered way ‘from below’; as an ubiqutous mechanism, it is also “imposed on the industry by the inertia of a society irrational despite all its rationalizations.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 98; see also Cook 1996)Rather than simply ‘manipulating’ consent, an increasingly ubiquitous and today more and more digitalized culture industry only reinforces deep-seated sociocultural demands and dispositions and, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, employs “schematism as its first service to the customer.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 98) Culture, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, “is a paradoxical commodity.” It is “so completely subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged…For this reason it merges with the advertisement.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1961: 131)

Likewise, public agents are themselves often involuntarily subordinated to market mechanisms and the unreflected imperatives of market value. The latter engender, according to this argument, cultural convergence and public conformity instead of critical publicity and reflection. Subjected to those demands that they have internalized, agents and consumers in the public sphere—Adorno argues—tend to look for attention grabbing catchy phrases, glossy images and quick effects, including “calculated rudeness” for the sake of entertainment and immediate amusement. (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 102) What is on public display thus allegedly reinforces political resignation, “satiation and apathy” among consumers, undermining the critical faculties of reflection, spontaneity, and imagination—as well as the critical publicity that the public domain is supposed to engender (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: 131).

Under present conditions, the concept of a global culture industry generating cultural convergence may help illuminate problems of the dominant cultural and public *modi vivendi* of the globalized age. The pattern of global cultural industry, then, affects also the seemingly most progressive agents in the emerging global public sphere. With Adorno, it can be argued that new mass media have transformed, globalized and modernized ‘culture’ but also expanded their standardizing and reified patterns to both decentered global publics and the most intimate individual interactions. For Adorno, the standardized mechanisms and blindly accepted demands of global culture industry—now massively accelerated under present conditions economic globalization and global market capitalism—thereby also undermine the already precarious remnants of subjective imagination as well as the cognitive resources of autonomous subjects for self-reflection.

Adorno’s theory thus points beyond the common lament about the dissolution of the ‘autonomy of the aesthetic’ and of political subjectivity within a homogenized commercialized public sphere. It also adds a critical perspective on the homogenizing virtual “hyperreality” (Baudrillard) produced by the various forms of globalized cultural media and their impact on social interactions. Adorno’s culture industry model and his global cultural homogenization thesis resonates in Benjamin Barber’s thesis about the effects of the emergence of “McWorld” (Barber 1995)—admittedly itself a catchy phrase designed to seek attention.

Absorbing Adorno’s argument and extending the critical theory tradition to an analysis of the globalized condition and its implications for democracies and their publics, Barber depicts global cultural integration as increased uniformity of culture and politics, linked to commercial entertainment, information and communications. (Barber 1998) The problematic impact of this process is not primarily a loss of ‘culture’ or ‘authenticity’ but, Barber argues in tune with Adorno’s critique, the threat to civic commitments, public autonomy, and the very conditions enabling democracy itself—the colonization and commodification of multiple, even the most decentered and dispersed spheres of public freedom and the subjugation of critical individual faculties.

Although the culture industry paradigm alone may be too one-dimensional with regard to the diversity of present-day cultural production, hybridity and diversity— ironically, Adorno displays a rather over-generalizing insensitivity towards the particulars of late modern cultural artifacts—Adorno clearly is onto something. Let me provide two instantiations of this problem affecting global publics and their agents in an Adornian perspective.

*Web-based Publicity, Social Media and the Global Public Sphere*

The first theoretical application relates to the main medium of new global publics itself: the digital web and its new social media. The internet is often viewed as the key ‘game changer’ enabling the accelerated and intensified transnationalization and democratization of formerly territorially or socially restricted publics. It has certainly become an important—if sometime overrated—instrument to draw attention to critical issues, mobilize for progressive causes and help non-governmental advocay, and generate critical publicity at large. Yet seen through an Adornoian lens, it also carries multiple repressive features. In its current, commodified form and in the context of repressive societies, it can be argued in light of Adorno’s theorizing that the digital web is far from being a tool of public liberty and democratic emancipation.

The web is embedded in patterns of social domination, which it often reinforces. Its main platforms have not just challenged existing discursive boundaries, offering new entry points for marginalized voices, but also created new hierarchies of knowledge and exclusion. Most importantly, dominant sites and resources are linked to immediate commercial interests. Users are constantly bombarded with advertisements appealing to the unconscious. Under the ideological pretense of “free” and “unrestricted” communication, the evolution and streamlining of web-based communications and their platforms may now be even more immediately subjected to the—in Adorno’s words—omnipresent exchange principle that subsumes particulars under instrumental economic imperatives. In fact, the major sites dedicated to free access of information and/or claiming to be a resource of global communication—from Facebook to Twitter and Google—have themselves turned into global corporations driven by unquestioned commercial interest and rationality. Their primary interest, thus, is to maximize site visits and sell popular content as well as easily digestible, standardized “tickets” (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969) rather than facilitating critical debate and self-reflection. In so doing, they regulate and delimit global publics, information and communication in the direct service of generating surplus value and particular interests in global market competition. Where we expect critical debate, diversity, and engagement about important issues, we may consequently often find standardized claims creating immediate attention, if not political closure on some subjects, or mass hysteria on others.

In addition, empirical analyses indicate that the virtual commercially structured public and new social media have helped reinforce the individualizing and atomizing social trends observed by Adorno and more recently by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (2000). With new digital communication resources, human interaction has undoubtedly multiplied, accelerated and intensified across borders (Held/McGrew 2007 ). However, it also tends to become even more individualized in globalized network societies. And if human interaction shifts to digitally organized, commercialized and regulated publics shaped by culture industry mechanisms, this further reduces interpersonal interactions, public participation, and membership in collectively organized interest groups and civil society organizations. But in-person social intercourse and active civil engagement are arguably the very foundation of a vivid, critical democratic public sphere (Putnam 2000). The decline of the former may imply the decline of the latter, ultimately disempowering and atomizing individual citizens and rendering them especially powerless vis-à-vis the most powerful corporate organizations.

To be sure, critical content might time and again challenge or transgress the established boundaries of the digital web. Yet the main public venues and spheres the contemporary internet provides are both linked to, and dependent on, commercial interests and instrumental valorizations, i.e. the commodification of publicity that Adorno so eloquently criticized in his analysis of culture industry, and which Sheldon Wolin labels “democracy incorporated” (Wolin 2010). There is, in other words, very little communication and information left without being flanked by a sales pitch. Moreover, every step you take in the digital public world, every website you visit, is subjected to immediate social control; not just by governments and their agencies, but—as signalled by the individually taylored commercials on display—maybe more importantly by the corporations that ‘sell’ the public space users most frequently visit. This indicates the power of economic mechanisms over the global citizen as a socially controlled and constituted market subject whose actions are measured, incorporated, and re-valorized in the dynamics of commodity reproduction to which Adorno’s critical theory framework points.

From a critical theory view, the world wide web often hereby also serves as a medium of what Herbert Marcuse calls “repressive desublimation.” (Marcuse 1964) Adorno put this in similarly Freudian terms as “archaic regression,” namely the unmediated release of aggressive desires violating hitherto existing, thin civilizational boundaries and reinforcing forms of immediate domination that human progress should have rendered obsolete. Such repressive desublimation can take regulated, reified commercial forms, as epitomized in visually seducing and simultaneously overwhelming commodified images, if not outright objectifying pornography. Instead of engendering critical debate about key public issues of politics and culture and challenging domination and injustice, most global public content is designed to allow for immediate gratification, catering to targeted consumer groups and fulfilling their particular wishes, and employs simplifying devices in view of complex social realities. It may therefore have numbing effects on audiences and delimit rather than engender discussion, reflection, and individual human development.[[12]](#endnote-10)

Leading political communication researchers point to the often overlooked restrictive and exclusionary aspects of Internet-based forms of public deliberation and raise awareness about the negative impact on the public sphere’s civic culture—alongside its functions for transnational critical publicity (Dahlberg 2005). Cass Sunstein, for instance, explores several problematic implications of the relationship between democracy and the Internet that can be theorized with Adorno’s culture industry model; namely that Internet use hat limited, atomized and segregated the public sphere, affirming particular views rather than open up serious debates. Catering to specialized audiences, website assess preferences and encourage citizen-consumers to narrowly filter information they receive and speak only to the like-minded. (Sunstein 2009)

However, if we take Adorno’s critical analysis seriously, this is not (just) a matter of some evil plot by corporate engineers ‘manufacturing’ the global public. Rather, the logic of instrumental rationality, and the release of erotic or aggressive impulses in its service, are also internalized and adopted ‘from below’, by the multitude of internet users. The digital web consitutes a space where citizens and non-citizens can articulate their opinions and contribute on an unprecedented scale to public will formation. But it is also a public sphere where anonymous contributors can express and participate in immediately generating persecutory collectivities, the worst kind of spotaneous, hostile mass publics. This problem applies also specifically to new social media and the globalized publics and semi-publics they generate—even beyond obvious problems such as anonymous social pressure and mobbing exerted through new social media. In the transnational digital world, anonymous verbal aggressions and ‘desublimations’—for instance, the most horrendous racist, fascist, homophobic or antisemitic slander, even calls to genocide—still remain mostly immune to legal prosecution or other negative sanctions. Indeed, the digital world constitutes a new, less restrained market place for the intellectually limited ‘petty entrepeneur’ type of agitators, who puts his own pettiness on display and releases standardized aggressions against minorities while reinforcing the modern susceptibility to blind collectivism and particularism, and whose style and rhetoric Adorno aptly analyzes in “Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses.” (Adorno 1960)

This is not to say that the internet and its social media, an inevitable part of technological progress, do not serve as significant, indispensable and potentially critical and decentered communicative spaces engendering transnational “democratic” publicity from below that Adorno would have welcomed. Furthermore, throughout his writings, Adorno abstained from indeterminate, sweeping critiques of modern technology. Indeed, as will be indicated below, he believed in its progressive potential for organizational decentralization. However, there may also be deeply troubling aspects as tool of social domination, which Adorno may help analyze and theorize. In Adorno’s perspective, within its current context of global society the Internet may often rather undermine critical publicity and the subjective capacities for emancipatory democratic politics. Subsumed by instrumental rationality and serving global market imperatives, it is shaped by omnipresent commercials embedding global digital communications and social media, and by a constant flow of commercialized visual media undermining subjective imagination. It also often serves as a platform of desublimation, domination, exclusion and aggression. Seen in this way, the new commodified global publics may help deprive modern citizens of their already precarious critical autonomous cognitive and moral potential to challenge dominant power systems rather than primarily providing new venues for emancipatory transnational politics.

*INGOs and the Global Public Sphere*

A second field of inquiry where we can apply Adorno’s critical insights to enhance our understanding of the global public sphere and its agents are international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Not-for-profit INGOs are generally viewed as very important civil society organizations—as progressive and democratizing forces of civil society that engender critical publicity, address global injustices, and challenge dominant forms of global and national power politics. (Koenig-Archibugi 2012; Karns/Mingst 2009). In the Adornian interpretive lens, however, even INGOs are fundamentally—not just peripherally—affected by internalized forms of social domination and the societal imperatives of the universalized exchange principle of global market society. Indeed, they are also subjected to pressures to first and foremost ‘sell’ their products and care for their group’s or organizational survival and ‘surplus’—however noble their initial purpose—rather than fostering critical debate and social transformation ‘from below.’ Progressive politics by INGOs, too, are often forced to ‘personalize’, objectify and sell an image rather than making a differentiated, persuasive argument or engaging in critical self-reflection. INGOs seek attention and thus may help create new media hypes through reified images—what Leo Lowenthal described early on in his critical analysis of the “cult of biography” (Lowenthal 1985)—rather than engendering substantial, rational debates on particular subjects, however shallow these public images may appear.

In contrast to idealized accounts of INGOs still prevalent in political science and theory literature, Adorno’s account alerts us that in many cases, the professionalization of INGOs goes unwittingly hand in hand with partaking in a global power system and following the logic of economized imperatives. In this context, ‘successful’ INGOs need to compete on the global market place for resources, donations, attention and political leverage—and thus need to subject and adapt themselves to powerful societal demands and ‘the rules of the game.’ This process of adaptation, however, also implies forming instrumental relationships to the external world, if not even possibly losing sight of the political goals the organization was founded on. For instance, professional environmental international non-governmental organizations compete with others to be better, i.e. more successful and efficient, in acquiring resources for the sake of the survival of the organization and the professional careers of those involved in it. In the context in which they operate, INGOs may be forced to beat the competition, even if it shares a similar political mission or platform. While this does not mean, in Adorno’s view, that anyone should sacrifice herself for a ‘noble cause’, maneuvering through the organizational conditions, demands and imperatives which even non-governmental political agents face in global market society may lead them to poor choices and to actions in which instrumental rationality takes priority over political objectives.

Internally, even the most progressive INGOs are subjected to often unreflected formal and informal hierarchies, and hereby extend and exercise outside pressures to their members. INGOs often involuntarily accept and subject themselves to the dominance of a particular mode of economic thinking. Caught in the dominant competitive logic of instrumental rationality gone wild, the subsumtion under the principle of exchange value, and patterns of social domination, the INGOs’ object of attention—refugees, the global poor, victims of catastrophe, the environment—often appear not as subjects on their own but “only in estranged forms, as enemies or allies, but always as instruments, things.”

This, of course, may also call the role and the status in question that we can attribute to INGOs in transforming global publics, and ultimately global society—giving way to a more sober view of INGOs as agents of transnational democracy and social transformation that matches some of the findings of recent empirical research. As Jonas Tallberg and Anders Uhlin show, an empirical analysis of the democratic credentials of civil society organizations operating in global governance “generates mixed results.” (Tallberg & Uhlin 2012: 226) INGOs and other other civil society organizations tend to be more inclusive and less elitist than most governments, international institutions and corporations, while offering some new forms of accountability mechanisms. Yet, Tallberg and Uhlin argue, these innovative mechanisms are mostly “insignificant in practice.” In fact, when it comes to internal democracy, egalitarianism and inclusiveness, empirical assessments show that transnationally active NGOs are “typically run by economically well-off, Western-educated, white, heterosexual men, whereas participation by more marginalized groups is limited.” (Tallberg & Uhlin 2012: 222; Scholte 2011) Not only do many civil society organizations “fail to provide avenues for direct participation by the people they claim to represent; in some cases they may even have a disempowering impact on their beneficiaries.” (Tallberg & Uhlin 2012: 223) Membership NGOs, to be sure, tend to have a better record of representativeness and avenues for participation. Yet international civil society organizations ultimately suffer from “severe democratic deficits, including non-existent, poor or unequal participation and weak accountability mechanisms, especially when it comes to empowering the weakest stakeholders and beneficiaries of the actors.” (Tallberg & Uhlin 2012: 227) Likewise, if the analysis is expanded to transnational movements, generally claimed to be less elitist than most NGOs, often “social hierarchies and inequalities are reproduced rather than countered.” (Tallberg & Uhlin 2012: 222; Beauzamy 2010).

While these examples of conditions and agents associated with the global public sphere merit further systematic exploration, they indicate that Adorno may provide some intriguing theoretical interpretations for rethinking the links between global societal developments and economic imperatives, on the one hand, and transformations of global public spaces and cultures, on the other hand. Adorno’s understanding of global political modernity and its double-edged potential may not be a matter of the past but illuminating for the present, and possibly just about to fully unfold (Rensmann/Gandesha 2012; Rensmann 2011). At any rate, his theorizing displays a critical line of counter-arguments against accounts of the global public sphere and global civil society that neglect how much they are embedded in a deep-seated, ever expansive, constitutive economic rationality, and in structural patterns of social exclusion and mediated domination in the global and digital age. Self-reflectively disclosing these powerful, yet largely decentered social mechanisms, then, is part of the critical task to reconstruct and empower critical publicity and public freedom. Moreover, Adorno explicitly—even if rather in passing—points to the technological and organizational potential for cosmopolitan and democratic global public transformations alongside news forms of social domination. By way of conclusion, I will briefly turn to both and consider the relevance of Adorno’s theorizing in our context.

**Democratizing the Global Public Sphere: Adorno and Conditions of Cosmopolitan Politics**

As I have demonstrated, Adorno provides at least three important theoretical set of arguments that have critical purchase for the debate about global public spheres and their political impact—and for rethinking conditions of the global public sphere and cosmopolitan politics. First, his theoretical conceptualization of the dominant social forces of global integration in late capitalist modernity grounds a critical understanding of the global public sphere: shaped by conditions of globalized modernity, the emerging global public sphere is not just a new source of critical publicity but may also be the product and expression of powerful social mechanisms as well as forms of social domination and exclusion. The “administered world,” which Adorno finds embodied in advanced industrial societies including liberal democracies, should hereby not primarily be understood in terms of an absolute, omnipresent state power serving as the “socially controlling authority” (Adorno 1966). Rather, Adorno sees this world as constituted by an expansive *logic* and web of social demands and dependencies dominated by instrumental rationality and the internalized functional imperatives of the exchange principle. They integrate societies in a *decentered* fashion—beyond centralized rule systems and state authority or even the ‘economic sphere,’ strictly speaking, of the global market. In Adorno’s view, this specific underlying logic of integration, simultaneously atomizing its subjects while excluding and oppressing what deviates from its societal norm and, has permeated social and political life on an increasingly global scale. It deeply affects communication and structures both local and global public spheres: the spaces that supposedly help generate political freedom, critical publicity, and a self-conscious civil society. In so doing, universal capitalist integration has also created new social pressures, Adorno suggests, that shape individual socialization processes and weaken critical subjective resources.

Second, Adorno’s theorizing shifts the perspective of much of the current critical globalization debate and discussions about global power from the focus on specific terriorial agents acting ‘from above’—‘neo-imperialist’ states seeking world conquest (Callinicos 2009) or simply “American imperialism” (Barrow 2005),[[13]](#endnote-11) plots by a global ‘power elite’, and media allegedly deliberately manipulating news or, in the words of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988), ‘manufacturing consent’—to decentral structural transformations and *internalized demands ‘from below’* that also affect the dynamics and interactions of the emerging global public sphere. Such a theoretical shift of the interpretative lens does not eclipse the role and responsibility of governments, powerful corporate entities and networks—or other forms of centralized power exercising social domination and influencing discursive asymmetries in global public spaces. But it may engender a new emphasis on structural patterns and their reified logic that influence the social norms of all members of society on both global and local, microscopic levels. Re-reading Adorno hereby moves the debate even further beyond the conceptualizations of “empire” through which Hardt und Negri sought to overcome traditional Marxist and “anti-imperialist” shortcomings in understanding the current globalized age and its governing logic. In tune with Adorno, Hardt and Negri detect a new global logic and form of sovereignty without a territorial center of power and “fixed boundaries or barriers”—thus distinct from “imperialism,” which was an “extension” of sovereign nation-states—that manages “hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges.” (Hardt & Negri 2000) Yet from an Adornian perspective Hardt and Negri are still too entangled in the personifying image of deliberate managers of “empire” rather than sufficiently focusing on the complex, de-subjectified and decentered underlying material conditions under which global society operates.

Third, against this backdrop Adorno’s critical concept of culture industry helps us better understand profoundly problematic modes of cultural production and circumscribed conditions of communication in emerging global public spaces and their normative impact. Indeed, his is a powerful argument to conceptualize the dynamics of and underlying mechanisms of the new “structural transformations of the public sphere” (Habermas 1962; 1996)—even though Adorno developed this concept long before the advent of new digital technologies and social media. Far from simply offering new venues for democratic participation and empowering public freedom, the emergence of global public spaces engendered by new transnational digital media has also created new forms of dependency, subjugation, and social control that can be conceived in terms of a *global culture industry*. The globalized principles of culture industry, understood as a pattern of interaction rather than a specific branch or factory of entertainment culture, arguably resonate in the new digitalized media that build the backbone of today’s global publicity. Notwithstanding the emancipatory potential of technological progress—recognized by Adorno—in its present social form the world wide web, for instance, is largely dominated by patterns of commercialization and objectification which the culture industry paradigm can help theorize. While new media help engender transnational communication and increase transparency and public participation, much of this transnational critical publicity is suffocated by new informal organizational hierarchies and the subordination to the market-based exchange of cultural and political commodities. Likewise, even the most progressive agents of global civil society and critical publicity face structural challenges that Adorno’s theorizing addresses.

To be sure, Adorno’s concept of culture industry is not without problems. Adorno himself at times applies it all too broadly and sweepingly, obfuscating rather than shedding light on significant differences between mass entertainment and fascist propaganda (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969). More importantly in our context, Adorno’s view of cultural globalization as homogenization—that all cultures and localities will look the same—tends to be reductionist and one-dimensional. A product of its time, this understanding lack specificity and does not—possibly could not—fully conceive the complex processes and interactions of “glocalization” (Robertson 2000) which display new political/cultural forms of hybridity, diversity, and situated responses to globalization pressures. Globalization is not a one-way street (Markovits & Rensmann 2010), and it is more uneven and asymmetric than Adorno anticipated, including the realms of culture, politics and public spheres (James 2006). This complicates direct theoretical transfers and forces us to reflect over-generalizing tendencies in Adorno’s work.

In addition, Adorno’s insights into global economic and social integration that is predominantly based on the abstract exchange principle suggest early on that the territorial state increasingly loses the power to sovereign rule and also to regulate public life and publicity. Maybe prematurely at the time of his writings, Adorno diagnoses the global decline of the powerful modern state and its authority in the face of processes that affect world society as a whole, even if asymmetrically, uneven, and in an unjust way. Today many leading globalization scholars agree that the modern state’s organizational capacity to institutionally regulate social life and to come to terms with crises has partly disintegrated, in particular due to technological advances and global ‘economization’ pressures (Robertson; Scholte 2005; Sassen 2007; Rodrik 2007; Frieden 2007). Hence, while for Adorno the dominant logic of globalization and global capitalism undermine, or even severly threaten, territorially circumscribed democratic public spaces and also endanger private autonomy and self-reflection, the decline of the state in his view constitutes both predicament *and* opportunity. It is a predicament because it threatens the political conditions of freedom; it is a potential because sovereign domination, state authoritarianism and its underlying nationalism ultimately embody regressive forms of social organization in political modernity.[[14]](#endnote-12)

Against this backdrop, Adorno might help rethinking the global public sphere and the conditions of cosmopolitan politics in another way. Lambert Zuidervaart persuasively argues that Adorno insists on the necessity of social change. Politics with and after Adorno should therefore not be locked into, or reduced to, an individualistic, negative moral philosophy or ethics of resistance (Zuidervaart 2007; 2008). However, I disagree that “incompatible  with  a  transformative  global  politics.” (Zuidervaart 2008: 33) In my interpretative lens, Adorno may indeed provide significant resources for a “democratic  politics  of  global  transformation.” (Zuidervaart 2007: 162-75; Bronner 2004) Adorno is concerned, and reflects about, societal closure and exclusion anchored in “blind power.” (Adorno 1966: 33) But he is also interested, I argue, in material resources and conditions *enabling* critical global publicity and cosmopolitan engagement through decentered transnational publics and agency.

Abjecting prescribed choices, Adorno defends subjective and public freedom vis-à-vis external authority or arbitrary state surveillance, while he also supports institutionally established separations of power, checks and balances, and legal frameworks protecting rights and public freedom (Adorno 1951; 1969; Fine 2012; Jenemann 2007: 191). However, Adorno is a staunch supporter of substantive cosmopolitan democracy beyond the nation-state model. He is very critical of the closure and exclusion, i.e. the system of boundaries and borders, which is sustained by the nation-state order, which denies the political refugee asylum (Adorno 1951: 34). In the age of international communication and supranationalism, Adorno claims, the outdated „nationalism cannot really believe in itself anymore and must exaggerate itself to the extreme in order to persuade itself and others that it is still substantial.” (Adorno 1996a: 203) Against the background of cosmopolitan transformations outlined above, Adorno therefore engages with interventions for global public conditions enabling a “self-conscious global subject” and transcending “the idea of a political subject defined by the nation-state.” (Adorno 1962: 144; Adorno 1949: 454) Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, Adorno is acutely aware of the *emancipatory potential* of decentering developments as well as global organizational and technological advances: Pointing beyond their current social form, they may enable new forms of democratic cosmopolitan agency, cooperation, and solidarity (Rensmann 2010; 2012). Critical of any “abstract organization“ or centralized „gigantic blocs“ of superpowers that reinforce global heteronomy, he points out that new forms of decentered cosmopolitan agency and public organization is also enabled...It is by no means „as utopian as it sounds on first hearing, if only because modern technology already opens up the possibility of decentralization that actually makes it unneccessary to bring societies together in gigantic hierarchical entities....But, oddly enough, it is precisely the technical advances towards decentralization that have been neglected.“ (Adorno 1964/65: 111) Among other things, such possibility may be epitomized in the critical use of decentered technological resources by diverse agents who appropriate and generate new public spaces—challenging established boundaries and patterns of domination while being aware of structural limitations.

Rethinking the emerging globalized public sphere with and after Adorno, then, ultimately means being conscious of its economic conditions and repressive elements, which tend towards social closure and exclusion in a decentered fashion, instead of idealizing its inherent democratizing potential. However, such endeavor also entails the specific theoretical work to locate the contemporary potential for transnational democratization and critical publicity that are created by the increasingly cosmopolitan condition of our world, and by the very globalizing developments that Adorno simultaneously problematizes. Theorizing and politics that is reflective of both, constraints and possibilities, may hereby open new spaces for democratic cosmopolitanism ‘from below.’[[15]](#endnote-13)

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1. Although recently resonating in other areas of critical political theory, Adorno’s work has been largely ignored in the field of global political and social theory—a few exceptions to the rule notwithstanding. (Benhabib 2011; Wolin 2006; Zuidervaart 2007) This may in part be due, first, to the perception of Adorno as a ‘late modernist’ sociologist who could not anticipate the globalizing conditions of contemporary society, and second to a theorist of social closure rather than political transformation—an image that Adorno himself certainly helps entertain. Yet, I will indicate in the last section of this chapter that there is something crucial missing in the potrayal of Adorno’s supposedly “quietistic and defeatist political outlook” that Habermas seeks to combat (Wolin 1982: 271). [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. In contrast to Castells as well as schools of “varieties of capitalism,” which emphasize the role of—often cross-nationally—distinct policies and economic policy regimes, Adorno stresses that capitalist rationalities universally affect an increasingly integrated world society and socialization, and often unwittingly so. In cultural terms, for Adorno the fundamental equality of the exchange principle lurks behind the illusion of persistent cultural and political diversity. Adorno recognizes, to be sure, that the specific socioeconomic impact of global capitalist integration—advancing particularistic interests behind the abstractions of market exchanges—can be vastly different and may reproduce massive social inequalities. Adorno shares the “coarsest of demands,” namely that “no one shall be hungry.” (Adorno 1951) See on varieties of capitalism for instance Stiglitz 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. On a descriptive level, this process has been captured by international relations scholar and global governance theorist James Rosenau. He employs the term “fragmegration,” indicating the simultaneous process of integration and disintegration (or fragmentation) of global society (Rosenau 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Reification in Adorno’s lens, to be sure, is “the reflexive form of false objectivity”; centering theory around reification, a form of consciousness, Adorno argues, “makes the critical theory idealistically acceptable to the reigning consciousness and the collective unconscious.” (Adorno 1966: 190) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. As historical and changing forms, however, these interactions are also seen as contingent and, in principle, they can fully be transformed by human agency; this puts Adorno in contrast to more deterministic Marxist narratives of structural transformation and dialectics (Adorno 1966). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. In Adorno’s theory, this form of subjectivity is shaped by the instrumental model of labor. Axel Honneth has reconstructed this model as an interpretation that emphasizes the dominance of a particular mode of action and socialization oriented at the expansion of indiscriminate power over objects, hence the instrumentally rational appropriation of these objects (Honneth 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. For Adorno, to be sure, the rationalization process is a condition sine qua non for the very existence of reflective subjectivity and freedom. The very ideas of reason and freedom are tied to abstraction from the heterogeneous world. In opposition to various postcolonial critiques, Adorno does not reject Western reason and rational abstraction as such (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969: viii). Yet reason and the autonomous subject, entangled in the principles of domination over nature, have failed to emancipate themselves from being ruled by external powers and blind mechanisms of social organization. (Zuidervaart 2007) So far, thus, enlightenment, and modern reason have fallen short of fulfilling their promises and failed to truly realize subjective and collective autonomy. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. Adorno recognizes the freedom – and the claim to it – as well as intellectual production in advanced capitalist democracies in contrast to the submissive authority structures in societies still shaped by pre-modern forms of social integration. Germany’s model on the road to modernity, he argues, “was not the entrepreneur operating according to the laws of the market but rather the civil servant fulfilling his duty to the authorities.” (Adorno 1965: 207) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
9. Modern fascism, then, is seen as originating in this societal process of universalized objectification and dependencies - the triumph of the general over the particular – in form of state capitalism or integral etatism. Yet it also epitomizes a break with capitalist economic reasoning. It is *also* the blind authoritarian rebellion against capitalist modernity, as it seeks to replace abstract social relations by personifications of evil and immediate political terror against the individual and the ‘other.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. Locked in what turns out to be‘objectively superfluous’ domination in light of the possibilities created by modern technological progress allowing for freedom from necessity, modern society faces ever thicker networks of universal dependency which simultaneously isolate society’s members from each other. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
11. See Marx & Engels (1848). Some theoretical attempts to grasp the dynamics of globalization are reminiscient of Marx’s optimistic side, if not enthusiasm in light of the transformative power and revolutionary potential of capitalism: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away.” (for a contemporary reading also Isaac 2012) To be sure, Adorno, unlike Marx, is less a theorist of transformation and more a theorist of social dissolution. Yet, as will be shown, Adorno is aware of the multiple constraints and possibilities of the global or „cosmopolitan“ condition, and he is ultimately *also* a theorist of political transformation. See for a more optimistic take on global or second modernity Ulrich Beck (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
12. It is important to note that Adorno never took this argument anywhere near the radical political consequence that Marcuse seemed to suggest in his essay and critique of “repressive tolerance” that a principled stance on freedom of speech, initially liberating, now allegedly privileges hegemonic conservative voices over all others in the public sphere, and that therefore appeals to public tolerance are misguided and intolerance towards “the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination” justified (Marcuse 1965: 58). In fact, Adorno was very critical of Marcuse’s essay (see Wiggershaus 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
13. In contrast to Adorno’s lens according to Barrow , “global capitalism is nationally organized and irreducibly dependent on national states” while “globalization, in its current form, is actually a new form of American imperialism.” (Barrow 2005: 125) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
14. For Adorno, the ultimate primacy of politics and state power was recaptured in the 20th century: namely in the regimes of totalitarian fascism and Communism. It continues to be aspired by regressive, anti-modern nationalist and other collectivist movements. Hence for Adorno, the irrational indirect violence of economic exchange, which still allows for space and mediation, remains preferable to the relapse to barbarism embodied in the immediate violence of resurgent dictatorships (Adorno 1966: 301); though the former is linked to, and can turn into, the latter. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
15. I am grateful to my colleagues Jennet Kirkpatrick for multiple critical readings of this manuscript and to Lorenzo Coretti for discussing recent research on the internet, the public sphere, and political communication. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)