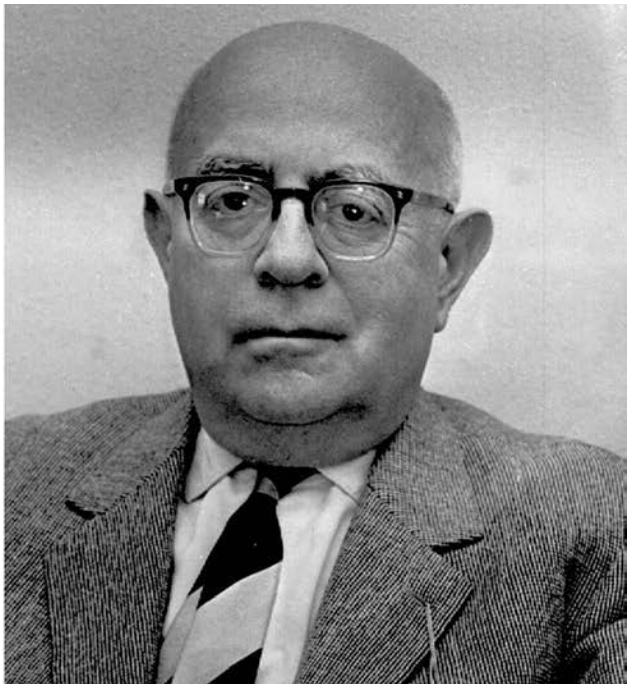


# ADORNO

AH 561 | Fall 2015 | Profs. Lisa Lee and Blake Stimson | Weds 9-12 | 303 Henry | CRN 33951



## Introduction

*For the intellectual, inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity. All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity.*

—Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

*My strongest memory of Adorno has remained the deep existential seriousness of his work—in stark contrast to the indifference with which so much social science is conducted today, after decades of professionalization.*

—Wolfgang Iser, *Buying Time*

Adorno routinely decried what he called the “abominable resignation of methodology” and pursued his work and way in the world with the existential seriousness that Wolfgang Iser honors. This seminar will consider the value of Adorno’s seriousness today in light of the “social mixing and participation” he rejected as inhumane and the indifferent professionalization that Iser scorns. There are many different contexts in which we might bring this critical scale to bear but one that will be near and dear to many of us involved with contemporary art is the overt communitarianism and covert managerialism of social practice art and its social, political and economic affiliates. Our aim in the end will be to try on Adorno’s now long-archaic seriousness and ask what it would mean to adopt it anew for the world we find ourselves in today.

## Requirements

The primary work of this seminar will be reading and discussion of the readings. Towards that end, you have two primary writing tasks.

The first is to choose one text each for two separate class meetings and prepare 4-5 page critical analyses that draw on at least two additional sources by the same author and two secondary sources but take the assigned readings themselves as the primary objects of analysis. *Please plan on assigning one short text to the class based on your research and interests.* You can sign up for any of the readings but we do not want to have more than two or three max presentations for any one class.

The second assignment is a 20pp term paper on a topic of your choice related to the class. Your approach should be historiographical rather than art-historical in character—that is, you should be studying and evaluating the work of a writer rather than an artist. Please come to talk to me about your topic by the fourth week of class.

Here is one set of criteria developed by a funding body that you might use to assess your own writerly engagement with the texts we'll be reading as well as that of the authors studied. Their goal, the funders say, is to “honor and encourage writing about art...”

- that is rigorous, passionate, eloquent, and precise;
- in which a keen engagement with the present is infused with an appreciation of the historical;
- that is neither afraid to take a stand, nor content to deliver authoritative pronouncements, but serves rather to pose questions and to generate new possibilities for thinking about, seeing, and making art;
- that is sensitive to both the importance and difficulty of situating aesthetic objects within their broader social and political contexts;
- that does not dilute or sidestep complex ideas but renders accessible their meaning and value;
- that creatively challenges the limits of existing conventions, without valorizing novelty as an end in itself.

Finally, you might also think of the writing assignments as opportunities to make some headway working through this experience described by Andrew Ross: “It took me many, many years to find my own voice, which I think is the most difficult thing for people to do with a standard academic training.” One is taught to “work with the voice of the disciplinary consensus or to ape some master thinker who has been influential in the discipline, and that's not unrelated to your choice of research topics.” Put differently, your task is one that is often more challenging than it would seem—to think for yourself.

## Evaluation

Your final grade will be calculated based on the following formula: 40% term paper + 40% presentations + 20% seminar participation. Participation will be evaluated based on your thoughtful engagement with the course readings and not on the quantity of your contributions. Unexcused absences will reduce your final grade by 5 points each. Work will be accepted late at the discretion of the professor.

## Schedule of reading assignments

### 1. FRENEMIES

REVIEW: Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (here is an overview:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schmitt/#ConPolCriLib>)

REVIEW: Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” and

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/may/07/how-friendship-became-tool-of-powerful>

READ: Adorno, “The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer”

READ: Johannes von Moltke, “Teddie and Friedel: Theodor W. Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and the Erotics of Friendship”

READ: Martin Jay, “Adorno and Kracauer: Notes on a Troubled Friendship”

READ: Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History*, chapters 2 and 3

Like many others, Wendy Brown has described our time as one marked by an ongoing confusion between a residual liberalism and a resurgent feudalism, between an older contract-based place in the world and another older still founded on codified identity roles defined in relation to power (with our contemporary overlords owning the debt and imageworld we till, say, rather than the land), or between an anomalous idealism and, following Adorno, an increasingly normative “curious realism”:

For most of the twentieth century, liberal legitimacy has been secured not only by various elements of social contract discourse but also by differentiation from the imagined opposites to liberalism. It has taken its identity in relation to the naturalized inequalities of feudalism at its historical rear, the intolerable repressions of state communism at its twentieth-century side, and even the utopian dream of a perfected liberal order ahead. In recent decades, however, the remnants of feudal order in the present have shown through more clearly: individual (and hence popular) sovereignty turns out to be a heady conceit; the contemporary state appears less and less autonomous of the market it claimed to set free; and perhaps most important, the ostensible universality of the state and of liberal civic-political culture has been exposed not only as bourgeois but as relentlessly raced, gendered, and sexed—as shot through with stratifying and subject-producing social powers. This exposure makes even liberalism’s promise of abstract personhood problematic, insofar as the aim of treating individuals in abstraction from their social attributes appears both ambiguous with regard to the powers constitutive of subordination and impossible to achieve. There is thus a blurring of the radical break that liberalism heralded between itself and feudalism, putatively achieved in the former’s abolition of ideologically naturalized stratifications among ideologically naturalized social groups. (*Politics Out of History*, 12-13)

For the purposes of discussion, we might cast our contemporary liberalism and feudalism as “frenemies” and consider their relation in light of the core distinction between amity and enmity from Carl Schmitt’s influential political theory. How Adorno brings such considerations to bear on his personal relationship with his lifelong friend Kracauer may help us put some historical flesh on this question’s philosophical bones.

### 2. COMMITMENT

REVIEW: Sartre, "What is Literature?" (overview:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What\\_Is\\_Literature%3F](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Is_Literature%3F))

READ: Adorno, "Commitment"

READ: Adorno, "Resignation"

READ: Adorno, "This side of the pleasure principle"

READ: Adorno, "Exhibitionist"

READ: Adorno, "Art-object"

READ: Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?"

READ: Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil"

BONUS: Alberto Toscano, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/logistics-and-opposition>

Committed works of art, "from "the day they are created," according to Adorno, "belong in the academic seminar where they will inevitably end." ("Commitment," 77) Commitment is self-righteous, self-serving, and self-abnegating in myriad ways and by definition runs roughshod over its object of commitment. For example, writes Adorno: "It is arrogant and almost contemptuous toward the victims to talk like them, as though one were one of them"—we might take Rachel Dolezal's statement "This is not some freak 'Birth of a Nation' mockery blackface performance—this is on a very real, connected level" to stand as a recent example of this impulse—"One may play at anything, but not at being a member of the proletariat." (87) Wendy Brown describes such identifications with characteristic sympathy this way:

suffering the injury required for and constitutive of identity on one's own body or psyche is explicitly and nonpleasurably painful. Who would intentionally seek such a thing, even if one's identity depended on it? To avoid this pain, one might locate that repetition outside oneself—but in those with whom one closely identifies. A certain nonsadistic gratification is thereby obtained through the specter of the victimization of "one's people." (Politics Out of History, 53)

Ultimately commitment's desublimated convictions are the opposite of thinking for Adorno and as such the opposite of "joy," "pleasure," and "happiness":

Whoever thinks is not enraged in all his critique: thinking has sublimated the rage. Because the thinking person does not need to inflict rage upon himself, he does not wish to inflict it on others. The happiness that dawns in the eye of the thinking person is the happiness of humanity. The universal tendency of oppression is opposed to thought as such. Thought is happiness, even where it defines unhappiness: by enunciating it. By this alone happiness reaches into the universal unhappiness. Whoever does not let it atrophy has not resigned. ("Resignation," 293)

For the purposes of discussion, we might consider the relationship of political sublimation and desublimation—for example, by comparing and contrasting the pull of form and that of rage in works such as those described here: <http://hyperallergic.com/216252/personal-but-highly-political-highlights-from-the-2015-venice-biennale/> and called for here: <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/on-direct-action-an-address-to-cultural-workers/> —and ask whether Adorno's approach is, as Lyotard argues, that of the devil because, in its sublimated formalism, it adheres to and endlessly reproduces the melancholic figure of loss.

### 3. THEORY

REVIEW: Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory"

READ: Adorno, "For Post-Socratics," "How sickly seem all growing things," "On the morality of thinking," and "De gustibus est disputandum"

READ: Adorno, "Picture-book without pictures"

READ: Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Concept of Enlightenment"

BONUS: Frank Wilderson, <https://vimeo.com/129677829>

Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer say at the beginning of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters" through reason's power to know itself and the world. That mastery comes with its own self-abnegation:

A consequence of the restriction of thought to organization and administration, rehearsed by the those in charge from artful Odysseus to artless chairmen of the board, is the stupidity which afflicts the great as soon as they have to perform tasks other than the manipulation of the small. Mind becomes in reality the instrument of power and self-mastery for which bourgeois philosophy has always mistaken it. (DoE, 28)

For the purposes of discussion, we might consider the place of administrative thinking as a lord/bondsman relation in our own theoretical understanding as it pursues pure understanding, on the one hand, and as it is exercised as both power and powerlessness in the everyday lives of ourselves and those immediately around us, as well as in the larger context of class, race, and other macro social relations that define our world.

#### **4. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: Translator's Introduction, xi-xxi, Editor's Afterward, 361-366, Draft Introduction, 332-359

#### **5. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: "Art, Society, Aesthetics," "Situation," 1-45

#### **6. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: "On the Categories of the Ugly, the Beautiful, and Technique," "Natural Beauty," 45-78

#### **7. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: "Art Beauty: Apparition, Spiritualization, Intuitability," "Semblance and Expression," 78-118

#### **8. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: "Enigmaticalness, Truth Content, Metaphysics," "Coherence and Meaning," 118-160

#### **9. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: "Subject-Object," "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," 163-199

## **10. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: “Universal and Particular,” “Society,” 199-261

## **11. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: “Paralipomena,” 262-324

## **12. AESTHETIC THEORY**

READ: “Theories on the Origin of Art,” 325-331

### **Office hours**

Stimson: Wednesday 1:00-2:30 and by appointment. 302A Henry Hall

Lee:

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