

HOW TO GET OVER “AMBIGUITY-INTOLERANT” APPROACHES TO SOCIAL THEORY? A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF ADORNO’S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE AS SOCIAL THEORY

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# How to Get Over “Ambiguity-Intolerant” Approaches to Social Theory? A Feminist Critique of Adorno’s Theory of Knowledge as Social Theory

## **Abstract**

This article analyzes Theodor Adorno’s empirical research on the authoritarian personality and its underlying theory of reification, in order to interrogate how Adorno produces a theory of society which can overcome “ambiguity-intolerant” approaches to social theory. It is based on three hypotheses. The first concerns the relationship between method and social diagnosis elaborated in *The Authoritarian Personality*; here, I focus on Adorno’s search for a method to examine the reification of the individual in late capitalist society without externalizing this reification. Adorno’s specific way of overcoming a positivistic approach towards society brings me to my second hypothesis, wherein I try to understand positivistic approaches to society as “ambiguity-intolerant” ways to understand society. I consider these “ambiguity intolerant” because their two main criteria, namely “axiological neutrality” and “objectivity” do not allow a dialectical and therefore ambiguity-tolerant understanding of society. My third hypothesis is based on the idea that Adorno is not alone in his project of a critique of positivistic approaches: since the 1970s, at least, feminist epistemologies have also sought to critique the positivistic idea of an axiological neutral and objective knowledge of society. I then show how a feminist critique of Adorno can criticize his theory of the knowing subject as not sufficiently precise. Using Sandra Harding’s idea of “new subjects of knowledge,” I demonstrate that a feminist critique of the knowing subject can produce an empirically more vivid knowledge about the reification and corporality of the knowing subject in late capitalism.

## **1 Introduction**

“Ambiguity intolerance” is one of the categories that Theodor Adorno uses in *The Authoritarian Personality* to measure different sorts of psycho-social reaction and their authoritarian potential, however, it is also more than this. An individual showing ambiguity intolerance manifests one “characteristic of the personality of the ethnically prejudiced [...]”<sup>1</sup> The category is thus best understood as term with which to describe a psycho-social reaction towards an apparently increasingly confusing and complex world.<sup>2</sup> Even though *The Authoritarian Personality* is not a theory of emancipation, one could understand Adorno’s later work on sociology and on the consequences of reification for the individual and theory as an attempt to react, on the level of a social theory, to the tendencies of authoritarian thought diagnosed in *The Authoritarian Personality*. An emancipatory social theory should therefore aim to integrate the social diagnosis of a general feeling of alienation.

I will show how Adorno tries to conceive such a theory while he elaborates a specific interconnection between social and psychic elements of the individual in late capitalist society. Closely analyzing this interconnection, I will demonstrate how the

authors of the study try to connect their empirical method with their social diagnosis of reification. In this first part of my article, I will elaborate how Adorno thinks the impacts of reification for society and individual psyche. This will bring me to Adorno's use of "psychic typology," a term which refers not to a "static biological" instrument but to a "dynamic and social" category.<sup>3</sup> This specific method takes reification as a fundamental social category. Adorno's socio-psychological studies and his later work on sociology always questions the consequences of reification. These consequences are not only psychic in the sense of the unconscious, but they also concern our conscious and theoretical ways of thinking. With Adorno, I will think of positivism as a form of reified thought. By describing society as it appears, these theories aim to produce an uncontradictory knowledge about society and are therefore intolerant towards the ambiguity and complexity of social phenomena. Therefore, in the second part of the article, I will suggest an understanding of positivistic social theory as a potentially "ambiguity-intolerant" approach to modern society.

Adorno's critique of positivism is also a critique of the positivist theory of knowledge. It is this that allows me to analyze the epistemological concepts of "objectivity" and "axiological neutrality" and connect them with feminist epistemology. I will compare both critiques of positivism. Despite the centrality of reification for Adorno's work, the precise ways in which people are reified stays strangely unexamined, however. This has consequences on how one could elaborate a different relationship between the knower and the known. Emancipatory theory is about believing a subject to be capable of acting and thinking critically. Considering this, I will show how Sandra Harding's concept of "new subjects of knowledge" proposes an effective way of developing a new relation between the knower and the known. In the third part of the article, I will confront Adorno with the assessment made by feminist epistemology that the knowing subject has a "sexed body" and that this fact impacts "upon the production [...] of knowledge."<sup>4</sup> I will stress that such feminist theories of knowledge offer a more precise analysis of how value neutrality and objectivity reproduce ambiguity intolerance on an epistemological level.

## **2\_Empirical Method and Reification**

The central focus of *The Authoritarian Personality* is the empirical study of the interconnection of social and psychological elements within the individual subject, as well

as the presentation of a diagnosis of 1950s society in the United States.<sup>5</sup> I show how Adorno develops a methodological approach capable of integrating the concept of reification into the method of these studies. This allows me to elaborate on the impact of reification on the study of the interconnection between society and psyche and to consider the methodological consequences of reification in late capitalist society for a critical social theory.

## **2.1\_Society and Psyche: Impacts of Reification**

The aim of the *Studies* is to find out what kind of social and psychological mechanisms “render [an individual] particularly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda.”<sup>6</sup> In order to study this “*potentially fascist* individual,”<sup>7</sup> one needs to consider the double dependency of the individual in late capitalist society. The authors of the *Authoritarian Personality* underline that the genesis of the individual depends on its direct education by its parents. However, in order to avoid an excessively Freudian interpretation of the genesis of the I, they highlight the dependency of parental education itself on “economic and social factors.”<sup>8</sup> In other words: personality is determined by education, which is itself a social product. The individual therefore cannot be thought without considering its own genesis, and the conditions of this genesis cannot be thought as free from the impact of social-historical conditions.<sup>9</sup>

In the chapter “Types and Syndromes” of the *Studies*, Adorno explains how the empirical methods used for the study account for the double bind of psyche and society by asking a fundamental epistemological question. How do we have to conceptualize our method in order to consider the reification of social life? Adorno’s concept of reification is strongly influenced by the marxist thinker Georg Lukács, but also differentiates from it.<sup>10</sup> In late capitalist society, where the exchange of goods is the predominant form of interacting, reification occurs when people start to relate to each other not as humans but as things. Axel Honneth carves out three characteristics of the exchange of goods, and two of them are important for our purposes. The first consists in relating to things as objects “that one can potentially make profit on.” The second consists in altering the relationship towards the other as considering the other simply as an “object” of “profitable transaction.”<sup>11</sup> Reification could therefore be defined as a type of social relation within capitalism where we relate to each other not as subjects but as objects and which means that human beings are treated as mere ob-

jects.<sup>12</sup> Reification also means that we recognize society not as human made, but as foreign and unchangeable. This way of relating to objects, to one another, and to society expresses a specific form of rationality. The reduced form of rationality finds an expression in methodological and scientific approaches, and therefore also in psychological approaches. In the chapter “Types and Syndromes,” Adorno proposes using psychic types in order to develop a methodological approach which — on a self-reflexive level — takes into account the reification of society and the individual. In this reification, states Adorno, lies a profoundly “inhuman” moment.<sup>13</sup>

What does it mean, methodologically, to live in a world which produces, via the massive atomization of individuals in the late capitalist society, certain types of individuals? How could one integrate the real existence of typologies in late capitalist society into the epistemological framework of social theory without eternalizing their existence?

Adorno recognizes that typologies, as forms of classification, are very likely to be understood as a positivistic method. Typologies, if thought of as a static method for classifying the behavior of people, transform socially determined, historically contingent content into something eternal.<sup>14</sup> The classification of individuals in terms of their likelihood of engaging in a variety of predetermined behaviors transforms the dynamic set of potentialities that define a person into a series of quasi-biological, falsely eternal possibilities. Any such process of classification forgets about “historical and social factors”<sup>15</sup> that demarcate the possible.

The question emerges now as to why, if psychological typology is a positivistic method for conducting psychology research, does Adorno give reasons *for* the “credibility of the typological method”? In order to justify this, Adorno transforms the very concept of “psychic types.” For him, these types are neither “biological” nor “static” but “dynamic and social.”<sup>16</sup> Adorno’s argument is concerned with the fundamental structure of society. Despite appearances, as Adorno highlights, late capitalism remains a class-based society. As a class-based society, capitalism’s social structures have an impact on the “external relations of men” as well as on the “individual soul” of every individual.<sup>17</sup> But something is added to that. Quoting Émile Durkheim’s concept of the individual, Adorno evokes the particularity of capitalist socialization as defined by the fact that every individual loses its individuality and becomes a “type.”<sup>18</sup>

The aim of Adorno's approach is to seek a method that is able to reveal yet does not reproduce the reification and "liquidation" of the subject in late capitalist society.<sup>19</sup> Put differently, Adorno wants a method which takes into account the specific ways in which the subjects start to relate to themselves and to others as objects and not as subjects anymore. This is where we find the connection between social diagnosis and its consequence for the individual and integration of the concept of reification into the method of the social sciences. The individual in modern society is, in Adorno's eyes, very similar to the one Durkheim conceptualizes in *The Division of Labor in Society*. This individual is increasingly isolated and atomized because the division of labor forces it to work in an increasingly specialized manner.<sup>20</sup> An individual within this society faces — and this is another point of agreement between Adorno and Durkheim — the problem that it does not recognize itself in society and that, as a result, society presents itself as obscure and alien.<sup>21</sup> Adorno and Durkheim's concept of the individual and of society is remarkably similar; however, for Adorno, Durkheim's judgment about the "opacity" of society as it *appears* to the subject is transfigured into the "essence" of the social itself.<sup>22</sup> In the 1969 article Adorno wrote as an introduction to the first German translation of Durkheim's *Sociology and Philosophy*, one reads that Durkheim does not recognize the relationship between reification and the "opacity" of the social within late capitalism. This "opacity" has its origin in the division of labor and the atomization of the individual who does not recognize itself in the social process.<sup>23</sup> Adorno highlights that Durkheim considers the relation between the individual and the society, between the particular and the general, as one which is defined by "suffering,"<sup>24</sup> by the "impenetrability of the norm" and the "relentlessness of the sanction."<sup>25</sup> Agreeing with Durkheim that society is repressive, Adorno nonetheless criticizes Durkheim's positivist approach in the same way that he criticizes the mistake made by positivist psychological typologies: instead of perceiving society as "dynamic," Durkheim's concept of society is "eternal" and "static" and therefore reproduces on a theoretical level what it suggests individuals do: adapt to the actual.<sup>26</sup>

After having analyzed the positions presented by Adorno in his socio-psychological Studies concerning the methodological implications of reification, I assess their implications on the level of the individual, as, in order to show how a socio-psychic analysis of society needs a critical social theory and theory of knowledge.

## **2.2 Individual Socio-Psychic Solutions of Reification**

In the chapter “Politics and Economy in the Interview Material of The Authoritarian Personality,” the new era of information and the exposure of the individual to this information will, claims Adorno, accentuate the feeling of powerlessness that people already experience in capitalist society. Facing global situations of objective uncertainty together with the experiences of one’s own powerlessness towards the world individuals will respond with a double psychological reaction. “Personification and stereotypical thinking” will become the “paradoxical solution” to the contemporary situation of the individual.<sup>27</sup>

This thought on powerlessness involves the confluence of a psychological and a sociological moment. The latter moment lies in the conception of society as coercion. As already stated, in Adorno’s (and Durkheim’s) view, society presents itself as “un-understandable” and as foreign to the individual.<sup>28</sup> The psychological moment is found in the solution that the individual finds for this experience of incomprehensibility, especially when this individual is a so-called “high-scorer” on the F-scale. “High-scorers” on the “F,” or “fascism-scale,” are those who have a high tendency to engage in authoritarian reflections.<sup>29</sup> “Stereotypes and personification” would help the individual to explain what it can’t explain and to get a grip on what is obscure and intangible.<sup>30</sup> The argument here is a psychological one: the uncertainty of the world and its omnipotence produce a fearful subject. In adulthood, this feeling of anxiety and the reaction with “stereotypy and personalization [...] are repetitions of infantile patterns.”<sup>31</sup> The individual therefore obtains and produces a way of acting which does not lead to a rational understanding of society and presents a serious “obstacle to the reality principle,” leading to “irrationality.”<sup>32</sup> This repressive reaction is dangerous because, as an “obstacle” for thought, it is potentially a form of “‘psychotic’ thinking.”<sup>33</sup> This thinking is potentially “psychotic” in the sense that it refuses reality. Crucially, such “irrationality” is not understood as “subjective failure” but as the expression of the structure of society itself

It is obvious, however, that this subjective failure to grasp reality is not primarily and exclusively a matter of the psychological dynamics of the individuals involved, but is in some part due to reality itself, to the relationship or lack of relationship between this reality and the individual.<sup>34</sup>

Adorno and the other authors of the study do not moralize the “subjective failure”; they do not consider this failure to result from the “psychic dynamics of the individ-

ual.” Rather, they refer us to the functioning of reality itself. The “lack of relationship” between the subject and the world is the result as well as the symptom of reification. Reification here means the subjective and objective atomization of the individual resulting from the division of labor in modern society.<sup>35</sup> The individual does not recognize itself in its own product and individuals do not relate to each other as subjects but necessarily objectify the other and themselves. Using the concept of reification Adorno overcomes the Durkheimian positivistic approach to society while describing social reality. Adorno can therefore maintain a critical method that is not an affirmation of the state of society. So, it is the concept of reification that allows Adorno to examine the impacts of social domination on a psychic, social, and theoretical level. But, and this is the important point, Adorno thinks reification as having consequences on our consciousness, therefore “social critique is a critique of knowledge, and vice versa.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, social domination expresses itself also as the reduction of thought; critical social theory needs a critical theory of knowledge. This “critique of knowledge,” in sociology as well as in philosophy, was one of Adorno’s most consistent philosophical concerns. This was especially the case in the 1960s, a period in which Adorno elaborated a very clear critique of positivist epistemologies.

If “intolerance of ambiguity” is one of the epistemological categories with which Adorno tries to elaborate the characteristics of an authoritarian personality as he suggests in the *Studies*, then I will try in the following to construct an analogy to understand positivist science as a reified analysis of society. The analogy I am proposing is a conceptual construction which is not directly found in Adorno. But because Adorno and Max Horkheimer did defend the idea of an indissoluble relation between critique of society and critique of knowledge, I will carve out Adorno’s critique of positivism as being a theoretical and methodological approach which reifies the social, in order to conclude that positivism can therefore be understood as a potentially ambiguity-intolerant approach towards social theory. I suggest that positivism manifests this intolerance by reducing the aim of knowledge about society to the values of “objectivity” and “neutrality.” In the last section, I will connect different approaches. While interrogating the general framework of the initial program of Critical Theory, I highlight several points of commonality between Adorno’s critique of positivism and that proposed by certain feminist epistemologies. This will eventually allow me to carve out a

“blind spot” in Adorno’s theory of knowledge and to ask about a specific form of female reification.

### **3\_Ambiguity Intolerance in Positivism**

Adorno’s confrontation with positivism mainly takes place from the 1950s on, a period from which the best-known debate might be the famous *Dispute Over Positivism* with Karl Popper. I have shown how Adorno and his co-workers on the *Studies* use the concept of ambiguity tolerance or intolerance to describe the authoritarian personality. Of course, there is a gap between the socio-psychic or psychoanalytical analysis of ambiguity intolerance as a category in order to analyze an authoritarian personality and the epistemological and social critique of positivism. But in the following, I will show how one could understand Adorno’s critique of positivism as a critique of an ambiguity-intolerant theory of knowledge and society.

Nancy Fraser writes in her famous article “What’s Critical about Critical Theory” that “a critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification.”<sup>37</sup> Fraser paraphrases here the research project announced in Horkheimer’s famous article “Traditional and Critical Theory.”<sup>38</sup> If one of the characteristics of Critical Theory is to create a theory “with an eye to the aims of [...] oppositional social movements,” then feminist theory is part of that project. The “conceptual framework” of a critical theory aims toward a theoretical understanding of domination. The first generation of the Frankfurt School is of course not alone in this project to study social domination also in terms of theory of knowledge. Feminist epistemologies have some aspects in common when it comes to the idea that a Critical Theory of society needs to be a critique of knowledge and of reason. Each approach makes the critique of the Western tradition its starting point from which to elaborate a theory of knowledge, but as I demonstrate, each does it in a different way. Comparing the two helps me to demarcate a “blind spot” in Adorno’s conception of reification, and how, by asking the question of specific “female” reification, feminist epistemology can answer this difficulty.

#### **3.1\_Positivism and the Production of Neutrality and Objectivity**

In order to compare these approaches, I will start by highlighting the two aspects of Adorno’s critique of positivism that manifest commonalities between feminist episte-

mology and Critical Theory. I will focus on their critique of (a) neutrality and (b) objectivity.

Adorno uses the term “positivism” to describe the historical form of positivism (Comte, Durkheim) as well as more contemporary approaches in social theory. There are two points that present the link between a feminist critique of reason and knowledge in general, and the critique of positivism important to the Frankfurt School. Whenever Adorno speaks about his critique of positivism, it is with the aim of elaborating a critical social theory. Positivism, according to Adorno, represents a tendency inherent to sociology whereby what may have been a critical theory is transformed into an “affirmative” theory.<sup>39</sup> I would like to suggest that positivist thought, because it reproduces on a theoretical level the reification of society, could be read an “ambiguity-intolerant” approach to society, as thinking in this way precludes reflexivity and self-reflexivity from its theoretical framework. This precluding of reflection becomes particularly clear if one focuses on the so-called “neutrality” and “objectivity” that positivism cleaves. The so-called “objectivity” and “neutrality” are ambiguity intolerant in at least two aspects. First, the concept of objectivity, especially in historical positivism, is linked to an idea of objective knowledge modeled on the ideal of natural science. A knowledge is objective, if it produces an unambiguous truth.<sup>40</sup> Second, this objectivity implies the epistemological premises of neutrality. Objectivity can only be guaranteed if the truth produced can be considered free of perspective, “seen from nowhere.” This freedom of perspective or neutrality is reached, in historical positivism, by wiping out the knowing subject.<sup>41</sup> The knowledge that positivist approaches is supposed to produce is ambiguity intolerant in the sense that these positivist approaches have a rigid separation between truth and falsity as well as in the conceptualization of knowledge itself. Adorno’s argument, making reference to Karl Marx, would be: Capitalist society is constituted by social contradictions. A critical knowledge about society must be able to think these contradictions and is therefore fundamentally different from a knowledge that natural science can produce, because a knowledge of society cannot be defined by a static distinction between wrongness and truth. Social knowledge with a natural science ideal is considered by Adorno as “reified knowledge” about society because it relates to society not as a historically determined social relation but as a fixed yet eternally defined object.<sup>42</sup>

In his lectures on sociology,<sup>43</sup> mainly held in the 1960s, Adorno refers to historical positivism as well as to its contemporary instantiations. In order to demonstrate the foundational role that positivism played in the history of sociology, he often refers back to Comte, the founder of sociology as a positivist science. Comte's thinking is, for Adorno, the prototype of a "scientistic" version of sociology. For Comte, sociology has the task of elaborating the laws of society in the same way that natural sciences elaborate the law of nature. Any such description of society and its laws must therefore be as "objective" and "neutral" as natural science.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1960s, Adorno focused on elaborating the inherent tendency of positivist thought: the fact that the epistemological categories and theoretical premises used to 'know' a social phenomenon are not deduced dialectically from their object of study, but have their genesis in a predetermined understanding of the social, and are then imposed on reality. This "schema of ordination" is supposed to be axiological neutral: the aim of positivism is to produce neutral knowledge about society. In his *Introduction to Sociology*, Adorno claims that the neutral knowledge that a positivist sociology tries to produce presupposes an idea of objectivity that is itself highly contentious:

I am pointing out to you, therefore, that the supposed neutrality of the formalizing tendency towards value is anything but neutral, and that by appearing to be impartial it is in fact taking sides. Indeed, this seems to me to be the decisive feature of a certain kind of scientistic sociology, in which the mechanism of abstraction, operating seamlessly in the Cartesian manner, supplants the concrete engagement with reality which constitutes the real interest of sociology.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of a "concrete engagement" with reality, these approaches make do with a "schema of ordination:" the legitimation of the use of their system of classification becomes their primary aim and this has decisive epistemological consequences.<sup>46</sup> This dynamic is very similar to the mechanism Adorno describes in *The Authoritarian Personality* concerning "stereotypical thinking." Instead of producing actual knowledge of society, this kind of investigation actually becomes an "obstacle" to reality. It is neither neutral nor objective. It is not neutral because it considers the knower as a "neutral subject" and assumes that knowledge is immediately given to the knower through observation. It is not objective for the same reason. Only if there is a possibility to reflect on the knower-knowing relation can one talk about a form of situated objectivity, as Sandra Harding seems to propose with her concept of "strong objectiv-

ity.”<sup>47</sup> In both cases, self-reflexivity of knowledge is supposed to avoid a relativistic approach towards knowledge while maintaining the idea of a (historically) situated objectivity (or “truth”).<sup>48</sup>

Feminist epistemology highlights similar features of traditional Western systems of reason and knowledge. In her article “Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason,” Elisabeth Grosz goes even further. For her, it is not positivism but the very structure of “knowledge” itself that defends “neutrality” and “objectivity.” She writes, “what is in question here is [...] the presumption of transparent neutrality of ways of knowing to the objects known.”<sup>49</sup> Feminist epistemological thought in this way begins from the same points of critique as Adorno’s critique of sociology and puts into question any argument that “knowledge is considered perspectiveless.”<sup>50</sup>

Of course, debates around feminist epistemology cover a huge variety of positions. For my purpose, it is necessary to focus on two different approaches. I will mainly refer to texts about feminist epistemology by Elisabeth Grosz and Sandra Harding because I think they allow the most instructive comparison with Adorno’s critique of positivism. What brings both approaches together, are, on the one hand, the general critique of Western reason and, on the other hand — but intrinsically linked — the critique of a knowledge pretending to be without perspective. Adorno’s confrontation with positivism tries to find social theory that does not reproduce the reification of capitalist society. Grosz’s analysis of the crisis of reason and the exclusion of the knowing subject, aims also to produce a knowledge (about society or science) that does not reproduce male domination. Grosz not only criticizes systems of knowledge and their presumption towards neutrality and objectivity, but she also highlights the fact that these assumptions come with the necessary denial of the empirical subject for the sake of the abstract, knowing subject. Therefore, Grosz’s critique of “neutrality” and “objectivity” are akin to the critique that Adorno proposes, or the idea that the knowing subject exists within specific social and historical conditions.

Adorno’s critique of epistemology is centered on the question of how to reflect upon the strict separation between the subject (the knower) and the object (of knowledge), while maintaining both in their particularity. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer state two things that are of importance for us here. First of all, they describe — in a manner very similar to Grosz — the exclusion of women, children, and slaves as the constitutive moment for the genesis of philosophical

thought.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the “equality of freeborn citizens” comes along with the exclusion of women, children, and slaves not only on a political level but also, and mainly, in the constitution of Western reason: the exclusion of women is the condition for the development of the philosophical tradition.<sup>52</sup> The second point in common concerns the constitution of the knowing subject itself. Horkheimer and Adorno do indeed see what Grosz defines as the “blind spot” of the subject. They write:

The self which, after the methodical extirpation of all natural traces as mythological, was no longer supposed to be either a body or blood or a soul or even a natural ego but was sublimated into a transcendental or logical subject, formed the reference point of reason, the legislating authority of action.<sup>53</sup>

The birth of the “transcendental or logical subject,” the subject of a theory of knowledge, comes on the scene because of the “liquidation” of the “empirical” subject, of its “body or blood or a soul.” Western theories of knowledge have their foundation in the evacuation of the corporality of the knowing subject. The “neutrality” and “objectivity” these theories produce achieve their neutral objectivity by means of the exclusion of the corporality of the subject. This exclusion is itself a precondition for the ‘universal’ validity of such knowledge. Western reason is grounded on a transcendental subject whose body has been destroyed in order to make way for a legitimate, knowing subject. Grosz writes that, “the subject of knowledge is a ‘blind spot’ in knowledge production and assessment [...]”<sup>54</sup> Thinking about the universality of knowledge brings Grosz as well as Adorno and Horkheimer to think about the way the “knowing subject” has been constituted. Adorno and Horkheimer’s “blind spot” in all this is not so much the analysis of the “knowing subject” but rather their incapacity to name precisely what kind of “corporality” the knowing subject has. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is infused with the idea that the exclusion of women in the self-definition of reason is linked to the way in which social domination has been established in the Western world. Their “blind spot” therefore rather consists in making of the concept of reification a general social phenomenon. Even though it might be a general social phenomenon, the way it functions also depends on gender (and other forms of marginalization). In the next section, I will show how feminist epistemology can provide an answer to this problem. In other words, I will show how Adorno’s hope of a “better state as one in which people could be different without fear”<sup>55</sup> neglects to ask in a precise way about our “differences,” and how we can analyse them instead.

#### **4 Subject and Knowledge: The Universal and the Particular**

Indubitably, Adorno's references to women are "ambivalent," as Eva Geulen writes in her article, "Toward a Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin."<sup>56</sup> Highlighting positively "Adorno's relentless critique of any gender essentialism," she then draws attention to the author's "tendency to associate the utopian moment of nameless bliss with the feminine as nature."<sup>57</sup> Particularly striking is that Adorno indeed thinks about the particularity of female reification in capitalist society.<sup>58</sup> A variety of passages in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but also in the *Minima Moralia* suggest that the specific form of rationality advocating a domination of nature has very specific consequences on the female body.<sup>59</sup> Thinking about women's emancipation, Adorno highlights in the *Minima Moralia* the reification of women and states a continuity between the family and the fabric. He writes "In big business they [the women, L.G.] remain what they were in the family, objects."<sup>60</sup> It becomes clear that even though, in our standardized world, the "liquidation" of the individual and its reification is general and is equivalent to the abolition of the particular, it is a burden even more heavy on women. Adorno and Horkheimer elaborate this point namely in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* when they write "Man as ruler refuses to do woman the honor of individualizing her. Socially, the individual woman is an example of the species, a representative of her sex [...]."<sup>61</sup> It is not only capitalist society as such which refuses the individualization of women (as it would be the case for men) but it is patriarchal capitalist society that refuses in a specific way the individualization of women. And here, Adorno's blind spot appears, even though he underlines the specific form of reification when it comes to his analysis of the connection between the "liquidation" of the subject in late capitalist society and its consequences for thought. Horkheimer and Adorno speak about modern science and its general "subjecting everything particular to its discipline"<sup>62</sup> but are not more precise about the different "kind of particulars" that might exist. Domination of the particular thus becomes the necessary condition of taking possession of nature, on an epistemological level as well as on a social one. This reified thought has consequences for how we understand our own self; it means we reify ourselves as well as others. In objectifying ourselves, we exclude difference and particularity. This is why we read in the *Negative Dialectics* that the philosophical goal must be to "reconcile the universal and the particular." This is Adorno's motor, where his critique of knowledge connects the possible reconciliation between the

universal and the particular without subsuming the latter under the former. One reads: “If the particular is not to evaporate philosophically, into universality, it must not seclude itself in the defiance of chance. It is a reflection on the difference, not its extirpation, that would help to reconcile the universal and the particular.”<sup>63</sup>

Giving the existence back to the singular, the particular also means to think the particularity of the one who is non-existing, whose individuality has been taken away. The feminist objection I would like to highlight operates on a double level. The first concerns the reification of the subject within capitalist society and states that we are not all reified in the same way. The reification under late capitalist society might be general but it functions in different ways according to one’s gender. The second is the epistemological consequence of the first. If critical epistemologies aim to consider reification, then feminist epistemology needs to take into account the specific way that reification of women has consequences on the construction of the knowing subject.

One might formulate the paradox I am trying to point out as the following: Adorno seems to be very aware of the different kinds of reification<sup>64</sup> to which human beings are exposed depending on their gender and race, but he subsumes all those differences under the general concept of the “different.” This is even more of a challenge if one considers that, for Adorno, emancipatory potential lies in the subject as a particular individual.<sup>65</sup> Put differently: If “the subject is the only potential by which it [the society, LG] can change”<sup>66</sup> and if the aim of a critical theory is to produce a “conceptual framework” able to produce a non-reified knowledge, then it would be absolutely necessary, as Harding states, to think “new subjects of knowledges” in order to present an empirically more precise definition of the “different.” Giving particular experience and reification its due requires us to ask why this idea of the “different,” the “other,” the “particular” remains bizarrely unexamined in Adorno’s work. The emancipatory aim of a theory of the subject seeks to make the individuals understand that they themselves create society. If they are to recognize themselves as producing the social world, these individuals need to be addressed in their particularity. Thinking more precisely about how women are reified in late capitalist society would allow us to address not only how an economic system creates reification but also how patriarchy creates a specific kind of reification and which analyzes the specific transformation of women into objects by the male gaze.<sup>67</sup>

Adorno doesn't omit the specific ways in which women are reified in late capitalist society but he does omit thinking about the consequence of this reification for the subject of knowledge when he speaks about the subject in general.<sup>68</sup> Feminist theory has shown how female corporality has been objectified as being the "other" of reason and therefore excluded of reason. Women are excluded and objectified because of specific characteristics. Then, recognizing the corporality of the knowing subject would change the knowledge it produces, because it would revitalize, against reification, its specificity. In other words, thinking new subjects of knowledge would give back, at least on an epistemological level, the corporality of the knowing subject, and therefore go against the mechanisms of reification which are reproduced (and not produced) by (positivist) theories of knowledge. Conceptualizing "new subjects of knowledges," as Sandra Harding proposes, could be *one* way to address the exclusion of reason and to avoid reification of women:

First, they are embodied and visible, because the lives from which thought has started are always present and visible in the results of that thought. [...] Second, the fact that subjects of knowledge are embodied and socially located has the consequence that they are not fundamentally different from objects of knowledge. [...] Third, consequently, communities and not primarily individuals produce knowledge. [...] Fourth, the subjects/agents of knowledge for feminist standpoint theory are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent, not unitary, homogenous, and coherent as they are for empiricist epistemology.<sup>69</sup>

Harding insists that we have to recognize the gendered determination of thought. This doesn't mean a necessarily individual, empirical gendered determination, but rather that masculinity is synonymous with the so called "neutral standpoint."<sup>70</sup> Here, one can make a precise intervention on the part of feminist theory, especially with regard to Harding's argument concerning the reconfiguration of the knowing subject, a point that remains underestimated in Adorno's thought. Even though he states that the "liquidation" of the corporeality of the knowing subject is the necessary condition for modern thought, Adorno's reevaluation of the "different" remains too unclear and too vague to be useful in the elaboration of a new subject of knowledge.<sup>71</sup> In other words, stating the specific form of reification within capitalist society, is, in Adorno, not accompanied by a questioning of the specific corporeality of the knowing subject and its social significance. Such a subject would be necessary in order to implement a critical theory of society opposed to an "ambiguity-intolerant" theory of society, one

that integrates a multiplicity of experiences within its thinking of the relationship between knowledge and the knowing subject.

## **5 Conclusion**

Beginning from Adorno's empirical research published as *The Authoritarian Personality*, I have tried to relate actual empirical studies with the concept of "ambiguity intolerance" viewed as fundamental for a certain kind of knowledge. I have shown how Adorno attempts to escape, on a methodological as well as on a theoretical level, different modes of the rigidity of thought. In the second part of the article, I have focused on two forms of such "ambiguity intolerance" as expressed in the positivist values of "objectivity" and "neutrality." Studying Adorno's critique of positivism has allowed me to underline the extent to which feminist epistemology and Adorno's critique of knowledge both point out that a social critique always requires a critique of knowledge. Through drawing attention to the "liquidation of the individual" under late capitalism alongside the negation of the empirical subject for modern theories of knowledge, I have formulated a critique that can then be turned back on Adorno's own critical project. I have demonstrated how the social category of reification allows Adorno to overcome theoretically and methodologically the positivistic approach to society and theory. The concept of reification also allowed me to define my critique of Adorno by showing how his approach can be criticized by feminist epistemologies.

If Critical Theory wants to achieve its objective of creating the "conceptual framework" for critical social thought, then Adorno's theory of knowledge needs to be criticized for its lack of specificity in terms of the way in which one can think "new subjects of knowledge." Although Adorno proposes a radical transformation of the subject-object relation, he does specify the way in which the knowing subject is constituted. I have tried to stress that this presents a problem for the goal of an emancipatory theory of society. In particular, I have argued this to the extent that the goal of such a theory is to render possible a recognition of oneself within social processes. If the "subject is the only potential to change society," then we will need to specify the different ways in which society produces subjectivities.

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, (New York: Norton Library, 1969), 464.

- <sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2009), 337.
- <sup>3</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 458.
- <sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 187–216, here: 187.
- <sup>5</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 153.
- <sup>6</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 149.
- <sup>7</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 149.
- <sup>8</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 155.
- <sup>9</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 155.
- <sup>10</sup> Dirk Schuck, *Das Phänomen der Verdinglichung bei Georg Lukács und Theodor W. Adorno: Einführung für Einsteiger mit ausführlichen Darlegungen zu Weber, Marx, Simmel und Freud* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2011), 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22.
- <sup>12</sup> Honneth, *Reification*, 22.
- <sup>13</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 459.
- <sup>14</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 458.
- <sup>15</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 454.
- <sup>16</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 458.
- <sup>17</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 458.
- <sup>18</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 459.
- <sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 129.
- <sup>20</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 23.
- <sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 240.
- <sup>22</sup> Julia Christ, “Critique of Politics: Adorno on Durkheim,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 17, no. 4 (2017): 331–341, here: 334–45. Doi: <[10.1177/1468795X17736127](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X17736127)>.
- <sup>23</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 240.
- <sup>24</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 250. For a more precise analysis of the relation between suffering and knowledge in Adorno cf. Raymond Geuss, “Suffering and Knowledge in Adorno,” *Constellations* 12, no. 3 (2005): 3–20. Doi: <[10.1111/j.1351-0487.2005.00399.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1351-0487.2005.00399.x)>
- <sup>25</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 240; my translations.
- <sup>26</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 242.
- <sup>27</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 345.
- <sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 345.
- <sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 187.

- 30 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 345.
- 31 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 345.
- 32 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 346.
- 33 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 347.
- 34 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 9.1. Soziologische Schriften II.1*, 347–48.
- 35 Concerning social coercion and atomization see Theodor W. Adorno, “Band 6: Philosophie und Soziologie,” in *Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen*, ed. Dirk Braunstein, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 105.
- 36 Theodor W. Adorno, “Subject and Object,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 497–511, here: 503.
- 37 Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender,” *New German Critique*, no. 35 (1985), 97–131, here: 97.
- 38 Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1982).
- 39 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 227.
- 40 Speaking about the historical forms of positivism, namely of Auguste Comte, Adorno highlights that Comte develops an idea of knowledge of society as having the same “coherence [as a] mathematical proof.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 8.
- 41 Adorno, “Band 6: Philosophie und Soziologie,” in *Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen*, ed. Dirk Braunstein, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 45.
- 42 Concerning his conception of society and social theory, for example: Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 13.
- 43 Theodor W. Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen, Band 6: Philosophie und Soziologie*, ed. Dirk Braunstein (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011); Theodor W. Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen, Band 12: Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft*, ed. Tobias ten Brink and Marc Phillip Nogueira (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2008); Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie* (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).
- 44 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 227 and 238.
- 45 Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 68.
- 46 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 8. Soziologische Schriften 1*, 220; my translation of the term “Ordnungsschema.”
- 47 Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 49–82, here: 69.
- 48 Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 69; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2010), 31 and 34.
- 49 Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges,” 190.
- 50 Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges,” 191.
- 51 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 16.
- 52 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 16.

- 53 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 22.
- 54 Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges,” 192.
- 55 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 103.
- 56 Eva Geulen, “Toward a Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin’s Writing,” *The German Quarterly* 69, no. 2, (1996), 161–80. Doi: <[10.2307/408339](https://doi.org/10.2307/408339)>.
- 57 Geulen, “Toward a Genealogy of Gender,” 161.
- 58 For a precise analysis of the way Adorno thinks about reification of women in capitalist society see Eva-Maria Ziege, “La critique du ‘féminin’ chez T. W. Adorno et dans la première théorie critique,” *Tumultes* 23, no. 2, (2004): 1–32. Doi: <[10.3917/tumu.023.0029](https://doi.org/10.3917/tumu.023.0029)>.
- 59 See for example Excursus I and II of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where Adorno and Horkheimer elaborate on the relation between domination of nature and women. In various aphorisms in the *Minima Moralia*, Adorno seeks to understand female reification and the social role of women in late capitalism.
- 60 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 92.
- 61 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 87.
- 62 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 33.
- 63 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 347.
- 64 Ziege, “La critique du ‘féminin’,” 8.
- 65 Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 152.
- 66 Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 152.
- 67 Salima Naït Ahmed highlights the insufficiency of Adorno’s analysis of female subjectivity and even shows how Adorno reintroduces a reified conception of female forms of lives. Salima Naït Ahmed, “Adorno und die Kritik der weiblichen Lebensformen,” *Recherches Germaniques*, no. 49 (2019): 151–161, here: 161. Doi: <[10.4000/rg.2748](https://doi.org/10.4000/rg.2748)>.
- 68 Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 152. Adorno speaks about the capacities of the subject in general, not in particular.
- 69 Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 63–65.
- 70 Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges,” 191–192.
- 71 For a more precise analysis of the non-identical in Adorno, see Estelle Ferrarese et al., ed., “Politique de La Non-Identité,” *Trajectoires*, no. 4 (2020). Doi: <[10.4000/trajectoires.3660](https://doi.org/10.4000/trajectoires.3660)>.