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Adorno's Razor: The Taxonomy of Time

Martin Young

Theodor Adorno didn't have hobbies. He was fortunate that his job (teaching and the production of critical thought) tessellated neatly with his interests and served as a vehicle for the satisfaction of his desires. The portion of his life not accounted for by his employment was dedicated to the same intellectual projects and, as such, his work time could not 'be defined in terms of that strict opposition to free time, which is demanded by the current razor-sharp division of the two'.⁶ This division is evidently one which Adorno regards with a degree of scepticism. Although in bourgeois society 'the difference between work time and free time has been branded as a norm in the minds of people, at both the conscious and unconscious level', this purported distinction serves to obscure a real continuity between these two spheres of life.⁷ Rather than being the simple absence of work, free time is conditioned by work, its function is to inculcate a disciplined work ethic and reproduce labour power, and it is the time in which workers' wages are exchanged for the products of work. In Adorno's neat expression, 'free time is shackled to its opposite'.⁸ It is to disguise this dialectic of work and leisure in bourgeois society that the imperative emerges that 'free time must not resemble work in any way whatsoever, in order, presumably, that one can work all the more effectively afterward'.⁹ The razor cuts decisively through life, leaving two unambiguously delineated purposes of time.

I have alighted on Adorno's casual metaphor of a razor because the motivation to separate social experience into precisely taxonomised temporal categories seems so ubiquitous. Colloquially, time outside of formal work hours may be 'free', 'spare', 'discretionary', or 'unobligated'. The cannon of critical theory in the Marxist tradition

⁶ Theodor W Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein. (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 189.

⁷ Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 189.

⁸ Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 187.

⁹ Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 190.

throws up a dense taxonomy of forms of time. ‘Dead time’ captures the alienated experience of work, the hours spent toiling to secure the means of life during which life itself is seemingly put on hold.¹⁰ Outside the workplace, the hours required to secure the necessary conditions of capitalist employment are ‘reproductive time’. Activity which resists bourgeois normativity in the reproduction of social life renders its time queer. Herbert Marcuse, like Adorno, marks hours outside of work as nonetheless ‘unfree’ owing to their administration by business and politics.¹¹ In a similar mode, the artist Pierre Huyge seeks to actively cultivate ‘freed’ time, time that authentically refuses participation in the capitalist administration of leisure,¹² and Antonio Negri proposes the still more radical ‘liberated time’, not as the ‘residue of exploited time’, but as the complete negation not only of temporal domination but of time itself as an ordering social logic.¹³ Whichever way you slice it, it seems, temporal experience is formed from the oppositional relationship between work and its absence. Within contemporary discourses of art, work, and exploitation, Adorno’s perspective is all but unrecognisable. Rather than a suspicion of the artificial demarcation of work and leisure, capital’s domination over time is experienced as the impossibility of any such demarcation. Work bleeds into life, it refuses to be contained within the hours for which it is contracted and, as Jen Harvie has noted of recent trends in artistic production, risks ‘saturating all time with work time; eroding private life’.¹⁴ Activity which commercially benefits arts institutions is undertaken by people giving up their discretionary time unpaid, motivated by enthusiasm, ambition, or the need for a foot-in-the-door. This work forms what Gregory Sholette calls the ‘dark matter’ of the art world, invisible to critical and institutional discourse

¹⁰ For example, see Charles Thorpe, *Necroculture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 19.

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics 2002), 52.

¹² Lauren Rotenberg, “The Prospects of ‘Freed’ Time: Pierre Huyge and *L’association Des Temps Libérés*,” *Public Art Dialogue* 3, no. 2 (2013). My thanks to Rebecca Starr who presented a critique of Huyge’s work at the LCCT stream from which this collection emerged.

¹³ Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution* trans. Matteo Mandarini (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2013), 121-124.

¹⁴ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 55.

but comprising 'the bulk of artistic activity' through 'makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, [and] self-organized practices'.¹⁵ A perpetual blurring of work and freedom takes place through such mundane and concrete mechanisms as voluntary positions, internships, work for exposure, commissions, the freelance economy, delegated performance, and passion projects. In the figure of the artist, the imperatives of work and the imperatives of personal enthusiasm are inextricable.

Though it is sometimes naively romanticised as the transcendence of capital's logic, this situation has seldom been advantageous to the artist. As Andrew Ross frames it, 'artists in general are expected, and are therefore inclined, to put in time gratis for love of their art in contexts that would require overtime pay for most other workers'.¹⁶ This, and the low rates of remuneration for the time that is paid, produce the too infrequently acknowledged situation that 'the largest subsidy to the arts has always come from workers themselves'.¹⁷ And yet this state of affairs is not enough to dissuade artists (and others who work in the arts) from treating their time in such a disadvantageous way:

The cruel indifference of the marketplace does not seem to deter the chronically discounted. Indeed, and largely because of artists' traditions of sacrifice, it often appears to spur them on in ways that would be regarded as self-destructive in any other economic sector.¹⁸

Against this pervasive self-exploitation, there is a long tradition of critique and resistance within the arts. To take one recent example, the Precarious Workers Brigade's pedagogic resource pack *Training for Exploitation* features an exercise to prompt students to visually map paid and unpaid work time in their lives, a simple graph to render the distinction between opportunities for remuneration and requirements

¹⁵ Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 1.

¹⁶ Andrew Ross, "The Mental Labour Problem," *Social Text* 1, no. 2 (2000): 15.

¹⁷ Ross, "The Mental Labour Problem," 6.

¹⁸ Ross, "The Mental Labour Problem," 6.

for voluntarism starkly clear.¹⁹ Though it may seem vulgar and antithetical to some of the art world's loftier ideals (and disruptive to those institutions which rely on volunteers, interns, and unpaid overtime), insisting on the clarity of this delineation has regularly been of supreme strategic importance both for the wellbeing of the individual and as a focal point for collective action. Despite Ross's suggestion of exceptionalism, this strategic response is not a peculiarity of the art world.

The apparent contradiction between Adorno's account of a strict division between work and leisure in bourgeois society and an art world which thrives on the violation of that distinction can be illuminated by placing them in the context of labour history. The political utility of a strict apportionment of time, of a clear line between time that is the boss's and time that is one's own, has deep roots in the labour movement, finding concrete expression in the demand for 'eight hours work, eight hours rest, and eight hours for what we will'.²⁰ 'Indeed', writes Susan Ferguson, 'the history of class struggle can be seen as a history of contestations over the ... work/leisure divide'.²¹ In these contestations, however, workers frequently, and to their detriment, conceded the fact of that divide; the nineteenth and twentieth century struggle over work hours was not only predicated on but actively reified a division of work and leisure.²² This process, as much as any other, produced the dialectical shackling of the two which Adorno critiques, but it was a response to conditions of work inflicted by the capitalist organisation of society's productive forces. In the course of codifying and elaborating a concept of time-discipline, E.P. Thompson narrates the capitalist subsumption of labour processes in early modern England through the shift from 'task-oriented' work to work regulated by the clock:

¹⁹ Precarious Workers Brigade, *Training for Exploitation?: Politicising Employability and Reclaiming Education*, 2016, 37,

http://joaap.org/press/pwb/PWB_Text_FINAL.pdf.

²⁰ Roy Rozenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

²¹ Susan Ferguson, "Children, Childhood and Capitalism: A Social Reproduction Perspective," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 120.

²² See for example Philip S. Foner and David R. Roediger, *Our Own Time: The History of American Labor and the Working Day* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

a community in which task-orientation is common appears to show least demarcation between "work" and "life". Social intercourse and labour are intermingled - the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task - and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and "passing the time of day".²³

From this perspective, the razor-sharp division between work and the time which surrounds it is more than a bourgeois obfuscation; it is a real condition imposed by proletarianisation.

Since Thompson, and occasionally responding to his influence, this account has been more substantively developed by theorists of domestic labour and social reproduction. While there is still an active debate within this body of thought as to whether reproductive labour is productive of value (as is claimed by some of the most significant figures in the field, including Selma James, Mariosa Dalla Costa, and Silvia Federici), I am here drawing on the analysis of scholars who maintain that it is not (including Tithi Bhattacharya, Lise Vogel, Nancy Fraser, and Carmen Teeple Hopkins). While Hopkins notes that this disagreement has 'generalized the inability to distinguish neatly between temporal and spatial categories of productive and unproductive work', requiring further thought that moves beyond this binary, it is precisely because this (increasingly influential) branch of social reproduction theory consciously concerns itself with activity that falls outside of the industrial production of surplus value that it is useful here.²⁴ The razor-sharp division between work and life takes the form here of the real historical separation of social activity into the distinct spheres of production and reproduction. As Hopkins dryly remarks of reproduction, 'this sphere is not one of leisure'.²⁵

²³ E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 no. 1 (1967): 60.

²⁴ Carmen Teeple Hopkins, "Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration, and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 134.

²⁵ Hopkins, "Mostly Work, Little Play," 134. This is most clearly communicated by Arlie Hochschild's designation of domestic work as a 'second shift', a set of

This view, along with the different coinages in the taxonomy of temporal categories indicated above, each with their own particular critical emphases, converges around a certain foundational conception that is ultimately rooted in the division of productive and unproductive time. Properly speaking, to be productive is to produce something which the rest of society acknowledges as having economic value (an acknowledgement which is signalled through market demand).²⁶ This distinction is as real as the capitalist distinction between work and life and is at the root of the antagonism between those who sell their labour by the hour and those who buy it; the calculation of time that yields profit and time that is wasted is the basis of workplace discipline. The troublesome category of free time, to which critical theorists and artists constantly return, emerges from this real distinction, though often conceals a misapprehension of it. If, in capitalist employment, to be productive is to be exploited, unproductive time is marked in the consciousness of those habituated to work by a sense of relief or respite. Whether motivated by a theoretical understanding that expanding productive time is the central mechanism for profitable exploitation, or by an intuitive sense that the pain of work must be alleviated through not working, unproductive time, its utility, and its expansion, are of crucial importance. A kind of romantic hope for the possibilities of unproductive time motivates puckish essays like Bertrand Russell's 'In Praise of Idleness' and Roland Barthes' 'Dare to be Lazy'.²⁷ Adorno denigrates hobbies, a necessarily unproductive use of time, as offering the false appearance of being an 'oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system'.²⁸ This idea has run, overtly or subtextually, through attempts to politicise art's relationship to time. Dave Beech has demonstrated that an art object is a commodity in the broad sense of being produced for exchange but does not conform to

obligations to labour that fall outside of codified work hours. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

²⁶ Within capitalist production, for which labour-power must be purchased, labour must produce more than it costs to meaningfully be considered productive.

²⁷ Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004); Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).

²⁸ Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 189.

capitalist laws of value, and the labour that produced it therefore does not 'count' as productive in the political-economic terms I have outlined. Beech echoes Ian Burn's conclusion that 'artists' time has never been commodified'.²⁹ The idea of unproductivity is seldom discussed with this degree of technical political-economic precision but it continues to haunt attempts to think about time, work, art, and capital. Art is a repository for optimism over the political potential of unproductive time. Because the time in which art is both produced and consumed is unproductive, art is seen as a disruptive weapon against capital. However, it is a mistake to think that being unproductive is necessarily resistant - much of our time is spent in quite innocuously unproductive activity which does very little damage to capital. Moreover, as social reproduction theory has made clear, the unproductive use of time can be an essential condition on which capitalist accumulation rests (though whether or not art also fills this social role is less obvious). What art seems to promise is a more fundamental break, not only from economic productivity as such but from the reach of capital entirely. Much of this fantasy seems to recoup the nineteenth century Aesthetics Movement, and echoes Oscar Wilde's infamous boast that 'all art is quite useless', albeit in a more overtly politicised light.³⁰ The implication is that there is something useful about being useless, that to dedicate time to the production or consumption of a useless thing is to have gained back some ground from capital. It is this hope of some purposefully useless time, external to capital, which Adorno is resisting. The razor-sharp division of work and leisure, and their corresponding interdependence, is an attempt to render these temporal relationships legible in critical theoretical terms. This legibility can also be achieved in far more immediate terms through Lefebvre's suggestion that 'everyone look at the space around them' in order that they 'see *time*'

²⁹ Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical, and Marxist Economics* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 4. It should be made explicit that being artists does not immunise people from the commodification of time; their labour-power is still available for purchase by the hour as baristas, cold callers, teachers, etc. See Sophie Coudray's contribution to this collection for a discussion of how artists time can be productive under conditions of commercial performance such as theatre.

³⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2000), 4.

and identify its operations in a built environment in which ‘this most essential part of lived experience, this greatest good of all goods, is no longer visible to us, no longer intelligible’.³¹ He continues, ‘Economic space subordinates time to itself; political space expels it as threatening and dangerous (to power)’. To this we might add that artistic space aestheticises time, treating it as a raw material for creation, as a thing to be played with and troubled, and as a medium for reception.³² But because art and its spaces are both economic and political they are still marked by the subordination and expulsion of time. The aestheticisation of time is in tension with a counter tendency to obscure and conceal the temporality of production. Adorno critiques the ‘phantasmagoric’ nature of artworks as reproducing the logic of the capitalist commodity by disguising the labour and the productive processes which created them: ‘Time is the all-important element of production that phantasmagoria, the mirage of eternity, obscures’.³³ Even as artworks operate at one level to aestheticise time, they nonetheless remain complicit in the elimination of time from conscious apprehension.

Because the observer of the work of art is encouraged to adopt a passive role, is relieved of the burden of labour and hence reduced to the mere object of the artistic effect, [they are] thereby prevented from perceiving the labour that is contained in the work.³⁴

While this obfuscation of productive labour seems to undermine the political efficacy of the creation and reception of individual artworks, it has a significant general implication. It is, for Adorno, a kind of tacit admission of bourgeois society’s dirty secret: ‘The work

³¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell 1991 [1974]), 95.

³² As in, for example, Nicholas Bourriaud’s widely cited claim that the contemporary artwork is ‘a period of time to be lived through’. *Relational Aesthetics* trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Les presses du réel, 2002), 15.

³³ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* trans. Rodney Livingston (London: Verso, 2009 [1952]) 76.

³⁴ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 72.

of art endorses the sentiment normally denied by ideology: work is degrading.³⁵

It is easy to be pessimistic. To see time in Lefebvre's sense, to bear witness to the hours upon hours of human labour on which our lives are built, is potentially overwhelming. It becomes apparent that it is impossible to occupy a temporal vantage point outside the flow of capitalist time while we remain spatially trapped within its physical residue. The material world within which we exist is the dead embodiment of work that has been done, of time that has been exploited; to imagine a world free of temporal domination is to imagine a world devoid of all familiar manufactured things. It is difficult to think what difference time spent in the studio or gallery might make either to this situation or to our understanding of it. Whether through the mutual dependence of productive and reproductive labour, or the shackling of work and leisure, this line of thought leads us to apprehend capitalism as a totality; the razor-sharp division is a clean cut, leaving two neat edges that tessellate seamlessly. This mode of analysis reifies the atemporal logic of the 'always-already'; all activity is recuperated as a matter of course, as a condition of its existence. As Panos Kompatsiaris suggests elsewhere in this collection, this view, while premised on an absolutely radical critique, effectively forecloses radical action. Critical thought must navigate a fraught negotiation between, on the one hand, the naive belief that through art time can be reclaimed and help to liberate us as subjects from capital, and on the other the incapacitating conviction that all activity, real or imagined, is already inescapably captured within and purposed towards the needs of capitalist accumulation. This confrontation between naivety and incapacitation is the starting point for conceiving of any meaningful action towards the reconception, repurposing, reclamation, or liberation of time, even on such immediate terrains as industrial organising, embracing inefficiency, or producing works of art. This leaves us somewhere very like where we started...

Roland Barthes had hobbies. He was, like Adorno, confronted by the fact that the most obvious uses of his free time, reading and writing, would simply replicate the activity of his working life. Unlike Adorno,

³⁵ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 72.

he did not feel the compulsion to dispose of his time in serious activity (a commitment which looks today suspiciously symptomatic of a disciplined bourgeois work ethic) and instead sought out idleness. Barthes, therefore, took up painting, the appeal of which lay precisely in the fact that it was ‘an absolutely gratuitous activity’.³⁶ The restful satisfaction he found in it as a use of idle time was predicated on his disregard for the quality of the work he produced; ‘there's no pride or narcissism involved,’ he wrote, ‘since I'm just an amateur. It's all the same to me whether I paint well or badly’.³⁷ Adorno rejected this reduction of artistic activity to the status of hobby by amateurs whose work is merely ‘the imitation of poems or pictures’ which ‘others [that is, specialists] could do better’.³⁸ Adorno’s complaint is that under current conditions people have been denied the opportunity to be meaningfully productive in their free time; productivity is the sole preserve of work, where it is undertaken in the interests of the employer.³⁹ While Barthes took pleasure in the gratuitousness of his painting - its disconnection from any productive imperative - Adorno writes of amateur artists:

What they create has something superfluous about it. This superfluosity makes known the inferior quality of the product, which in turn vitiates any pleasure taken in its production.⁴⁰

Though his tone is snobbish, there is an underlying sympathy with those who are not afforded the opportunity to become artists and so remain amateurs, producing work that, because it is bad, is a testament to the curtailment of their achievement through the social domination of their time. The disagreement between these two theorists about the nature of amateur art cannot adequately capture the whole breadth of

³⁶ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, 340.

³⁷ Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, 340.

³⁸ Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 193.

³⁹ Adorno’s definition of productive is to ‘bring forth something that was not already there’; this is slightly broader than the definition I gave above, which is more narrowly grounded in Marx’s political-economic account of the production of value.

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 193.

problems exposed in this article, but it does bring a certain dispute into focus. Either the repressive conditions of capitalist society have lead Barthes to idly pass the time in painting, inducing him to deny himself the possibility of producing meaningfully and seriously, or, alternatively, by wilfully cultivating his idle hours he has carved out a reprieve from the demands of capitalist productivity, taking pleasure in the process, rather than the product, of his activity. I do not believe that this antagonism is resolvable through critical thought while the real conditions that produce it remain in place. Confronting it, however, seems a necessary step towards changing them.