

Adorno's Theses Against Occultism

Response paper by Wendy Liu

If one can imagine a text as a political regime, then Adorno's "Theses Against Occultism" can be thought of as the textual equivalent of the Soviet Union: authoritarian, hermetic, difficult to pin down. There are no easy answers here, and it would be ill-advised to go in looking for them.

On the other hand, that doesn't necessarily mean there is no way in. If we accept Derrida's proposition that the best translation of *perestroika* is deconstruction¹, then perhaps that offers a model for engaging with the text. Perhaps our best hope is to read it on multiple levels, by interpreting Adorno's words at face value while at the same time finding the flashes of uneasiness, the *aporiae*, that hint at a deeper, unresolved truth.

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We start with the first level: the obvious meaning of the text, as indicated by the title.

It's telling that in these nine theses on occultism, the term itself is never specifically defined. We can only assume the standard meaning, based on the word's linguistic roots: belief in that which is hidden, *occluded*. And we can further understand it by the examples and ascribed characteristics peppered throughout the text, even if Adorno never really draws borders around what it is.

Besides the obvious value judgment implicit in the title (these are theses *against* occultism, after all), the negative character ascribed to occultism is made evident through the language used. Occultism is a "symptom of *regression* in consciousness"²; it is devolved state, a shadow of what the human mind is capable of. There are strong Nietzschean undertones in this, particularly when Adorno says, later on in the same thesis, that "reason, that had elevated itself to the notion of one God, seems ensnared in his fall": the rise of occultism is entwined with the decomposition of monotheism, i.e., the death of God.

This sets the stage for Adorno's post-religious conceptualisation of occultism. If religion was about trying to understand the natural world—a systematic attempt at comprehending and making sense of its vastness—then occultism is about throwing that all away, in a panic, due to an inability to cope with the consequences of that understanding: "a humanity whose control of nature as control of men far exceeds in horror anything men ever had to fear from nature"³. Unable to accept that something so vast could be controlled by something as small as man, the occultist rebels by reasserting the supremacy of that which is physically immense. The planets and the stars—the astral bodies that feature as the main actors in the world of the occult—become symbols for nature, which is itself synonymous with the idea of a higher power, manifesting itself through the glory of the cosmos.

¹ (Derrida, 2006, p.111)

² Thesis I. Emphasis added. All citations of the form "Thesis ?" are from "Theses Against Occultism" (Adorno, 2001, pp.172-180)

³ Thesis I.

This is a higher power that has, at least in name, transcended religion. Looked at another way, the impulses behind occultism are the same as those behind religion, but merely channeled into a different set of rituals and paraphernalia: astrology columns and crystal balls instead of holy texts and crucifixes. The impulses stem from the loss of the ability to “endure the conditional”⁴—that is, to cope with the misery of everyday life—and manifest as a desire to give oneself away to a higher power, to abdicate one’s own agency in favour of feeling connected to a larger whole.

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The question, then, is what gives rise to this need in the first place. Here, Adorno takes us to familiar (Marxist) ground. Theses II to IV suggest that the tendency to occultism is rooted in the particular form of societal configuration specific to late capitalism. In this light, occultism is merely the logical extension of commodity fetishism, whereby the reflexive tendency to imbue commodities—“menacingly objectified labour”⁵—with spiritual qualities is transferred onto the natural world. Alienated from the products of human labour, which now only appear in commodity form, and forced to live a “world congealed into [those] products”⁶, the response is to turn the natural into the supernatural. Such, it appears, is the escape mechanism, the search for an “outside” to the present state of reified commodification.

Once this is understood, it becomes clear that occultism is not merely the description of an individual’s personal choices; it is a *system*. When Adorno says that the “bent little fortune-tellers terrorizing their clients with crystal balls are toy models of the great ones who hold the fate of mankind in their hands”⁷, he is connecting the role of the producers in the occultism industry to those in the culture industry. The implication is that the tendency to occultism is not so outlandish after all—it’s just another part of the capitalist system, almost as mundane as double-entry bookkeeping.

In other words, occultism is not simply being dismissed as irrational or silly. Instead, Adorno sees occultism as core to society. It is a “reflex-action to the subjectification of all meaning, the complement of reification”⁸; the other side of the coin as alienation, it represents a desperate yearning for meaning in a world that has been deliberately stripped of all meaning. Thought itself, which has “assimilated to late capitalist forms”⁹, has been coerced by late capitalism into fulfilling a crucial role in the system: that of promising an escape. And yet, this putative escape is nothing more than “pathetic attempts to squint through the chinks in its walls, while revealing nothing of what is outside”¹⁰. It is an ideological tool, a false escape absorbed by a totalising capitalism that is capable of subsuming any attempts to escape. It cannot reach the outside, if there is an outside to be reached at all.

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The word fascism appears only once in the entire text. And yet its presence is felt throughout, hovering just beyond the end of each sentence, casting a shadow over each thesis. This is partly

⁴ Thesis I.

⁵ Thesis II.

⁶ Thesis II.

⁷ Thesis III.

⁸ Thesis IV

⁹ Thesis III.

¹⁰ Thesis III.

an anticipatory response on the part of a reader who has read anything by Adorno, given how much of his work is preoccupied with the subject of fascism. The build-up of theses from I-IV, whereby the criticism of occultism becomes increasingly bleak and harsh, leaves the informed reader convinced of its eventual emergence.

When it arrives suddenly in thesis V, in an indirect comparison to occultism, the implications are clear: the road to occultism is also the road to fascism. Fascism, too, is premised on finding hidden meanings, whereby a “consciousness famished for truth imagines it is grasping a dimly present knowledge”¹¹, some sort of cosmic higher power to fill in the blanks in one’s cognitive map. Those seduced by fascism see themselves as “prospective victims of a whole made up solely of themselves”¹², and are then only able to bear this possibility by “transferring that whole to something similar but external”¹³, inventing an “other” that can be blamed for the ills of the world. Anti-semitism, mentioned immediately in the first sentence of thesis V, is the most conspicuous manifestation, and when entwined with the tendency to occultism, its rational culmination is a belief that a higher power requires the extermination of the Jewish race.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the link between rationality and occultism, and especially the rationality implicit in Marx’s critique of capital. There is a strange dance between the idea of rational thought and occultism here, where occultism can be simultaneously conceived as not enough reason and *too much*—that is, rationality, specifically instrumental rationality, applied to its logical conclusion. For Adorno (and Horkheimer), instrumental reason is a “tool, blindly applied without any real capacity [...] to reflect on the ends to which it is applied”¹⁴. In a capitalist system, instrumental reason drives one to occultism, which is itself deeply entwined with fascism. As a result, Adorno can be said to break with Marx’s embrace of rationality, and it is in recognition of this that a more substantial understanding of “occultism” can be found.

We now return to the fact that occultism is never really defined in the text. Why is this? Perhaps it’s because Adorno does not wish to draw borders around it, in order to show that one *can’t* draw borders around it, to highlight occultism as a *tendency* rather than as a rigid ontological framing. Because occultism is not merely crystal balls, abracadabra, and hopping tables. Nor is it limited to astrology, even though that is the subject of the rest of the book in which this text was originally published¹⁵. Rather, the concept of occultism serves as a stand-in for a particular kind of thinking which underpins human society, in which the presence of rationality is limited to the instrumental. In this text, it represents the larger horizon of dangerous tendencies to search for hidden meanings in the wrong places.

For Adorno, the apotheosis of this form of rationality is the Holocaust. Rationality and genocide are not incompatible; they are imbricated, and once we see the Holocaust as not an aberration, but instead as the aborted promise of the Enlightenment—a miscarriage, perhaps—the dangers behind something as seemingly innocuous as astrology become clear. It is the manifestation of a deeper need and perhaps even Freudian need for authority, out of a desire to surrender what

¹¹ Thesis V.

¹² Thesis V.

¹³ Thesis V.

¹⁴ Jarvis, 1998, p.14.

¹⁵ An example of socially-mediated epistemology—horoscopes seem an unlikely area of study for a sociologist, but Adorno was living in LA at the time that he wrote *The Stars Down To Earth*, and one can imagine him being incensed at the horoscopes that he would come across in *The Los Angeles Times*.

remains of one's alienated self to a larger whole, in order to more easily endure the sheer horror of a life surrounded by "demonically grimacing objects"¹⁶.

Perhaps now it is time for *perestroika*. Or, in this case, deconstruction, which entails the uneasy process of teasing out the ways in which the text has to acknowledge its own partial complicity with that which it denounces¹⁷. The very title of the text makes clear what is being denounced: occultism, not as a standalone phenomenon but as an ontological shorthand for a specific type of (ir)rational or even hyperrational thought whose existence is both sustained and made necessary by capitalism. It is, once again, a "reflex-action"¹⁸, in which a "consciousness famished for truth imagines it is grasping a dimly present knowledge"¹⁹.

And this is where the unease sets in. For what is the text itself if not an attempt to grasp a "dimly present knowledge"? Is it not itself an attempt to "squint through the chinks"²⁰ in the walls of the system, to see through the socially mediated nature of reality and discover what is truly the case? Is that not the whole aim of the entire critical theory project?

This is not an attempt to "gotcha" Adorno, or to critique him as such. This is an attempt to excavate the underpinnings of critical theory in order to better understand the foundations of which the entire project rests, through the lens of the concept of occultism.

If occultism is an effort to understand the world that has become co-opted by capitalism, where, then, does that leave critical theory? Can it escape the totalising power of late capitalism to subsume anything that purports to resist it? At what point do the crystal balls and Los Angeles Times horoscope columns and quasi-scientific charts cease to be categorically distinct from Verso's most recent Radical Thinkers set (50% off until February 25!) or the latest issue of Semiotext(e)? What is the ultimate difference between saying "abracadabra" and saying "hypostatization" or "immanent" or "false consciousness"?

The immediate response is fairly straightforward: critical theory is unique by virtue of its very criticality, and for Adorno in particular, the key concept is that of the negative dialectic. But this very compulsion to go relentlessly and inwardly negative—whence does it originate? To what extent is it not itself merely an axiomatic and blind faith in what is essentially instrumental reason? If the brunt of Adorno's criticism in this text is borne by the tendency to search for easy answers, to find comfort in a system of truth that appears to be larger than the self, then how are we to defend critical theory itself? When the very possibility of recognising "occultism" as a concept, using a set of theoretical tools provided, offers a way toward a larger system of meaning that differs from the occult only through a value judgment in which the clearly discredited notion of astrology²¹ is contrasted with the clearly superior framework of materialism:

¹⁶ Thesis II

¹⁷ "Deconstruction is therefore an activity performed by texts which in the end have to acknowledge their own partial complicity with what they denounce." (Morris, 1982, p.48)

¹⁸ Thesis IV.

¹⁹ Thesis V.

²⁰ Thesis III.

²¹ This is meant as a description of what occurs in the text, not as a personal value judgment.

“They inveigh against materialism. But they want to weigh the astral body.”²²

Because what, in the end, is critical theory really *for*? To what extent has it become a means of placating an “enlightened” few, sheltering them from the endless depths of despair normally engendered by late capitalism by comforting them with the idea that at least they can see the hidden meanings behind their circumstances? Not by reading astrology columns—surely that is irrational—but by reading *The Stars Down To Earth* instead.

Throughout the text, throughout Adorno’s critique of and explanation for the phenomenon occultism, there are flashes of occultism itself, glimpses of a more profound kind of occultism underneath. It’s not clear how that should be resolved. Certainly it does not negate the critique in the text, but it does hint at a kernel of necessity in occultism that can never be truly avoided, no matter how much you know about the futility of crystal balls. “Reified consciousness does not end where the concept of reification has a place of honour”²³, and neither does the tendency to occultism end when occultism itself is named and critiqued.

And if that is the case, then how can anyone avoid the search for meaning implicit in critical theory becoming indistinguishable from just another form of occultism, another false escape, another commodified component of an alienating system that has been chewed up and neatly parcelled into congealed products? If critical theory is an attempt to expand the lacuna between reality and appearance, to expose the mechanisms beneath the surface, then at what point does it become part of the very surface that it is critiquing?

Nowhere is this more evident than in the academic treatment of critical theory, which goes beyond irony and becomes something much more bitter. There is something quietly disturbing about a process whereby critical discussion of commodification and the latent fascism inherent in sorting something fluid into categories all culminate in a 5,000 word essay to be submitted to the academic grading machine, first processed by the opaque bureaucracy of Turnitin before being presented to another human being for a straightforward triage into discrete categories ranging from Distinction to Bad Fail. Where both the writer and the evaluator have been reduced to mere instruments in this machine, both dominated by a system to which they have apparently voluntarily subscribed. Where even the choice to take risks and pose questions about the nature of critical theory itself, and ask what it has become in the grip of the engine of an increasingly commodified higher education, is still no escape. Perhaps there is never any escape.

Adorno himself certainly never made any claim to the contrary. His writing is bleak, and you are left with the sinking feeling that there is no way out, no chinks in the walls through which to peer. Critical theory that trades too freely in hope is surely no critical theory at all, and the fault—if it can be pinned on anyone—lies not in the theorists, but in the system itself, the one that is capable of commodifying and typifying even critical theory, turning it into just another ideological tool for subduing its increasingly restless members.

And so I—let’s drop the pretense, the subject is clear—will accede to the demands of academic performativity, dropping the requisite vocabulary in an attempt to achieve an “incisive critical analysis of salient issues” in the hopes that my essay, as a perverse metonym for my own understanding of critical theory, will attract a label that feels fitting since I know it will meld indelibly

²² Thesis VIII.

²³ Adorno, 1987 [1969], on the Soviet Union, fittingly enough for this *perestroika* metaphor.

with my identity, as labels tend to do. I will attempt to pin down my most confused and uncertain doubts about critical theory in order to transform it into a set of words whose arrangement is awarded an acceptable label. Such is the cognitive violence of the system that knowing the futility of external labels is not enough to dissipate their power.

Beneath it all is a longing for something more, for access to a deeper system of truth that *cannot* be commodified or typified, that is too monumental and mighty to be subject to the man-made forces that are in the process of destroying everything else. But I have read too much Adorno to be able to place my faith in the objects of the cosmos. And despite wielding deconstruction as a shield, I suspect that there is inherently something more real, more legitimate about critical theory. Because in a commodified world in which the mind has no choice but to rebel by searching for something larger, the only answer that I can bear is in the critical, and even if this is itself a form of occultism I would rather flee inward than either look to the stars or—harder yet—come to terms with the possibility that there are no stars at all. I would rather seek refuge in materialism even if it means drowning in a deluge of the dialectic if I can cling to the possibility that recognising alienation is a way to overcome it.

References

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2. Adorno, Theodor W. 2001. *The Stars Down to Earth*. Routledge.
3. Derrida, Jacques. 2006. *Specters of Marx*. Routledge.
4. Jarvis, Simon. 1998. *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*. Polity.
5. Morris, Christopher. 1982. *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*. Methuen.

Feedback

This is a terrific piece of writing – clear, engaged and reflexive. I like the way you turn in on your own position at the end, and although this move is hardly original, you do it very well, and (above all) avoid cliché! The rest of the piece is excellent throughout – you find a good balance between puzzlement and clarity, and make some good points about, for example, the importance of seeing Adorno's arguments about occultism at the systemic level, and occultism itself as a stand-in for something much bigger. A couple of critical points. First, he would surely not agree with your description of his writing as authoritarian, certainly he would argue that he is trying to resist fixed meanings, imposed conclusions, hierarchical claims, etc. When he published his Kierkegaard book he imagined a perfectly 'egalitarian' text in which every sentence had an equal claim to being read, understood, and prioritised. So there is some substance to be argued about here. Second, you seem to slide between arguing that critical theory risks becoming formulaic and standardized - he writes about all culture this way, for example when he argues that 'serial' composers in the 1950s such as Carter had nothing like the critical power of Schoenberg 40 years earlier because they were merely carrying out a technique whereas he was engaging in a situated and relevant critical response to his social context – to suggesting that critical theory is comparable to the occultism. I

get the first point but not the second – i.e. in what sense exactly is critical theory comparable to occultism? Overall, excellent work! 77%

