

«NEGATIVE UNIVERSAL HISTORY» IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: THE NOTION OF NEGATIVE IN CHAKRABARTY'S REVISION OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY AND ADORNO'S DIALECTICS

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Abstract. *The essay compares Dipesh Chakrabarty's and Theodor Adorno's understandings of a «negative universal history» in the context of the Anthropocene. While Chakrabarty's concept emphasizes radical alterity, Adorno's notion is dialectically mediated. By reconstructing Chakrabarty's critique of historicism and Adorno's critique of Hegelian universal history, the contribution highlights the divergent ways in which the two thinkers conceptualize the concept of 'negative'. The article argues that a dialectical and determinate understanding of the concept of 'negative' is necessary to adequately grasp the complex intertwinement between different historical and natural dimensions in the context of the Anthropocene.*

Keywords. *Theodor W. Adorno; Dipesh Chakrabarty; Negative Universal History; Dialectics*

1. Introduction

In this essay I will offer some insights about the possible contribution of Adorno's 'negative' interpretation of Hegel's universal history to Chakrabarty's reassessment of this concept in the context of the so called 'anthropocenic regime of historicity'. According to Chakrabarty, in facing the planetary dimension of climate change, we are faced with a new «figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the World [...] a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe» and that «unlike a Hegelian universal, [...] cannot subsume particularities»: now, «borrowing from Adorno», Chakrabarty calls this new figure of the

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universal a «negative universal history»¹. In this contribution I will offer a critical analysis of Chakrabarty's understanding of the notion of «negative» and clarify how it is not fully compatible with Adorno's conceptual framework and with his critique to Hegel's universal history. Moreover, I will try to show how only a dialectical reading of this notion may be able to deliver a determinate and concrete analysis of the relationship between different temporal and historical dimensions.

In order to reconstruct the epistemological and methodological premisses of Chakrabarty's borrowing, I will first outline the conceptual framework of his post-colonial critique to universal history and show that the fundamental conceptual pillars of this critique are essentially maintained in his interpretation of the Anthropocenic regime of historicity. Accordingly, I will briefly reconstruct Chakrabarty's conceptual framework from the point of view of two distinct and yet interrelated theoretical demands he claims to offer an answer to: a.) to construct an interpretative framework for historical research that overcomes «historicism», thus being able to grasp the alterity of subaltern historical dimensions and b.) to assume a non-anthropocentric point of view in facing the historical dimension of the current ecological planetary crisis. Both exigencies share the theoretical opponent: namely the idea of universal history, interpreted as the fundamental conceptual framework that has guided the historical self-understanding of modern expansion. With regard to the need of a non-Eurocentric post-historicist standpoint, universal history is traced back to its intertwinement with colonial expansion, thus showing the function that modern universalism has played in both making possible and justifying the subsumption of other historical alternatives: according to Chakrabarty, this process of subjugation was possible on the basis of a conception of historical time that interprets it as an empty, abstract and teleologically oriented universal chronology. This conception of historical time places alternative histories within a general framework, to which they must conform according to a predetermined and unilateral process. Thus, universal history fails not only to recognize the concrete

¹ D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 45.

histories of subaltern subjectivities but is fundamentally unable to provide an account of them.

Climate change presents us with an analogous challenge. Western universal history, which fails to account for alternative histories, also proves inadequate when confronted with the emergence of nature as an essential actor for human history. A post-anthropocentric standpoint on history should thus overcome modern historical thought and break the distinction between historical and natural, human and non-human etc. According to the modern 'humanist' approach, only the human has an history, whereas nature is considered as a non-historical entity². This conception of universal history, by excluding nature's agency from historical purview, is thus fully unable to face the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. I have chosen to focus on Chakrabarty's critical work, since it serves as a representative and influential contribution in showing the crucial impact of the traditional concept of universal history on colonial expansion and exploitation of nature: in both cases, modern universality, rather than recognizing alterity and reconciling particularity, integrates the otherness by means of abstraction and subsumption³. Universal history stands here as one of the fundamental conceptual pillars of western capitalistic self-affirmation over non-identical alterities, whether they be other cultures or natural elements.

In the second part, I will then take into account Adorno's critique of Hegel's universal history as well as his notion of «negative universal history», borrowed by Chakrabarty. I will show how Adorno's concept of «negative» cannot be assumed separately from

² Overcoming the nature-culture dichotomy as well as the conception of nature as something ahistorical, is a theoretical imperative shared by all leading contemporary thinkers confronting the Anthropocene and the global climate emergency. See among others: P. Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013; B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1993; D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

³ On the relation between post-colonial approaches and anthropocenic challenges to modern humanism see D. Chakrabarty, *Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change*, «New Literary History», XL (1), 2012, pp. 1-18.

a dialectical approach that, far from unilaterally refusing Hegel's universal history as epistemologically false or as inadequate in relation to the more recent historical developments, offers an immanent critique of it. In dialectically 'constructing' and 'denying' the idea of universal history⁴, Adorno's critique offers an original approach with regard to how to conceive the concept of negative. Adorno's dialectical understanding of the 'negative' is at odds with some aspects of Chakrabarty's reading that, instead, relies heavily on a speculative-realist conceptual framework that interpret it as an ontological 'radical otherness'. The clarification of the dialectical nature of Adorno's concept of negative will also shed light on the reason why only a dialectical approach is able to articulate the concrete relationship between universality and particularity, thus consolidating the conceptual foundation of post-colonial and post-anthropocentric interpretations of universal history⁵. Finally, I will hint at Jason Moore's notion of «double internality» as a possible concrete example of a dialectical reading of «negative universal history».

2. *Chakrabarty's Critique to Historicism*

Chakrabarty's critique to universal history calls into question the «idea of a general historical movement from a premodern stage to that of modernity», however this idea may be interpreted – for instance in the Marxist tradition as «uneven development» or as «structural causality»: in fact, all these «strategies [...] retain elements of historicism»⁶. With this term Chakrabarty refers not exclusively to Hegel and to the conventional historicist tradition that follows from him, but rather to a general «model of thinking»,

⁴ See B. Sandkaulen, *Weltgeist und Naturgeschichte. Exkurs zu Hegel. Adornos Geschichtsphilosophie mit und gegen Hegel*, in *Theodor W. Adorno: Negative Dialektik*, ed. by A. Honneth and C. Menke, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2006, pp. 169-187.

⁵ On the contribution of dialectical critical theory to post-colonial studies see: A.Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, *Universal history disavowed: on critical theory and postcolonialism*, «Postcolonial Studies», XI (4), 2008, pp. 451-473.

⁶ D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 12.

according to which, «in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as a historically developing entity, that is, first, as an individual and unique whole – some kind of unity at least in *potential* – and, second, as something that develops over time»⁷. According to Chakrabarty, this model of thinking implies the assumption of a «secular, empty, and homogenous time of history», insofar as «it still takes its object of investigation to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time»⁸ in a more or less teleologically determined direction. In contrast to this approach, Chakrabarty starts from the assumption that «one cannot think of this plural history of power and provide accounts of the modern political subject in India» – as well as in other non-European contexts – «without at the same time radically questioning the nature of historical time»; that is to say, without assuming «that historical time is not integral, that it is out of joint with itself»⁹. Only a radical questioning of the homogeneous historical time would be able to «release into the space occupied by particular European histories sedimented in them other normative and theoretical thought» and «create plural normative horizons specific to our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities»¹⁰. In order to theoretically ground this pluralization of the historical time, Chakrabarty criticizes also the «‘Marxist’ historical narratives» – on which, in other respect, his interpretation is heavily reliant – which he interprets as the most mature and advanced variants of the historicist tradition: in fact, according to Chakrabarty, most Marxist interpretations «share a tendency to think of capital in the image of a unity that arises in one part of the world at a particular period and then develops globally over historical time, encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process»¹¹. Against this history

⁷ Ivi, p. 23.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 20.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 47. For a critique of Chakrabarty's subaltern history from a Marxist perspective see: V. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, London-New York, Verso, 2013.

(called «History 1»), which points at «the universal and necessary history we associate with capital», Chakrabarty opposes another «kind of past» (called «History 2») that includes «not only the relationships that constitute History 1 but also other relationships that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of capital»¹², but that are nonetheless interconnected with it. History 1 represents the unitary historical process of capitalist integration: just as capital transforms living labour in abstract value by transforming the qualitatively determined time into abstract labour time, so History 1 imposes an empty, abstract temporality over other temporalities. History 1 «is the universal and necessary history» of the self-affirming identity of capital: a «capital's antecedent 'posited by itself'»¹³. According to Chakrabarty, in addition to this history Marx envisions also another historical dimension («History 2») that includes the historical temporalities that «does not belong to capital's life process»: these are defined as the plural and living temporalities «that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of capital» but that are «intimately intertwined with the relations that do»¹⁴. According to Chakrabarty, History 2 accounts for the fact that the «universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital»: these historical antecedents «are thus not pasts separate from capital; they inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital's own logic»¹⁵. This model may recall the dialectical movement as it is described by the dialectical tradition inaugurated by Hegel, who «conceived universal history as unified merely on account of its contradictions», as a «unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases»¹⁶. And yet Chakrabarty explicitly stresses that History 2 does «not constitute a dialectical Other of the necessary logic of History 1. To think thus would be to subsume History 2 to

¹² Ivi, pp. 63-64.

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, New York, Continuum, 1973, p. 319.

History 1. History 2 is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1»¹⁷. This clarification raises the question of how to concretely grasp these subaltern historical dimensions represented by History 2 and, more crucially, to determine their relationship to the ‘universal’ History 1: the subaltern chronologies are namely not «separate from» universal history but, at the same time, they also «interrupts» the course of it. How should this interruption be conceived in non-dialectical way?

To clarify this point Chakrabarty offers an original interpretation of the dual character of «labour power», insisting on the irreducible difference between the two distinct dimensions it entails: on the one hand, the «worker» is the embodiment of the «historical separation between his/her capacity to labour and the necessary tools of production»; on the other, as a human being he is also the embodiment of «other kinds of past», other «ways of being in the world»¹⁸. The first dimension represents a «logical precondition for capital», thus pertaining to History 1, while the second refers to a dimension that is at the same time external and pre-existent to capital abstraction, thus belonging to History 2. Now, even if the «disciplinary process in the factory is in part meant to accomplish the subjugation/destruction of History 2», «History 2 cannot sublate itself into History 1»¹⁹: in other words, the process of abstraction within the homogeneous, linear and empty time imposed by capitalist expansion cannot achieve the full subsumption of the non-identical heterogeneous. «No historical form of capital, however global its reach, can ever be a universal. No global (or even local, for that matter) capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital»²⁰, since the process of historical affirmation of capital’s universality is always «translated» through life forms that cannot be fully appropriated and that «interrupt and defer capital’s self-realization»²¹.

¹⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 66.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 67-68.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 70.

²¹ Ivi, p. 71.

Yet this clarification does not fully explain why the relation between History 1 and History 2, embodied respectively by living labour (as non-identical) and by labour force (as logical precondition of capital), should *not* be interpreted dialectically. In fact, the unitary process of capitalist abstraction of labour can be interpreted as the unity of different moment in contradiction with each other. A dialectical reading of capital abstraction is also suggested by Chakrabarty himself, where he clarifies that Marx is «referring to a *process of deferral internal* to the very being (that is, *logic*) of capital»²². This reference to a ‘deferral’ internal to the ‘logic’ of capital seems to fit well with a dialectical reading of capital: that is to say with a contradictory, internally fractured and yet unified process of abstraction. Chakrabarty also points out that the «difference» represented by History 2, «is not something external to capital», «nor is it something subsumed into capital», but rather «lives in intimate and plural relationships to capital»²³ itself. And yet, in Chakrabarty’s reading, such ‘plural relationship’ is defined as being incompatible with dialectical process of «subsumption» of History 2 within History 1. In contrast to a dialectical interpretation, Chakrabarty chooses to frame the relationship between different historical dimensions as a process of *translation*. In fact, unlike the notion of dialectical mediation, the idea of translation starts from recognizing the incommensurability, the impossibility of mediation between differences. The translator does not proceed by subsuming one language to another, nor by mediating dialectically between different terms, but rather strives to establish the conditions for their communication on the basis of their radical otherness. The very act of translation is based on the impossibility of fully converting one language into another, making it inherently paradoxical. Accordingly, the dialectical «problem of historical transition» is reframed by Chakrabarty «as a problem of translation»²⁴: «the transition from ‘real’ to ‘abstract’ is thus also a question of transition/translation from many and possibly incommensurable temporalities to the

²² Ivi, p. 65 my emphasis.

²³ Ivi, p. 66.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 17.

homogeneous time of abstract labour, the transition from nonhistory to history»²⁵. With regard to the different historical dimensions implicated within the universal history of capital abstraction, the idea of translation maintains «the possibility that these temporal horizons are mutually incommensurable»²⁶. The subaltern historian works out «the ways these immiscible forms of recalling the past are juxtaposed», since their mediation cannot be achieved, insofar as these histories, these memories are «strictly speaking, unassimilable»²⁷. The result of this translation process is the emergence of the specific, determinate *difference* of different historical dimension, rather than their identity:

what translation produces out of seeming ‘incommensurabilities’ is neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference’²⁸.

And yet, even though subaltern historicity remains constitutively incommensurable and unassimilable with universal history, Chakrabarty insists that this «outside» only becomes visible within the process of incorporation with the universal history: «The resistance it speaks of is something that can happen only *within* the time horizon of capital, and yet it has to be thought of as something that disrupts the unity of that time»²⁹.

In Chakrabarty’s analysis we can thus distinguish two argumentative points: on the one hand, a refusal of a dialectical interpretation of History 2 as the «Other of the necessary logic of History 1», which would imply the subsumption of History 2 to History 1; on the other, an acknowledgement of this subsumption: in fact, the otherness of History 2 emerges «only *within* time horizon of capital», whose logical primacy is thus implicitly recognized. According

²⁵ Ivi, p. 92.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 94.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 17.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 95.

to Chakrabarty, a dialectical reading would imply not simply «the preponderance of anything objective over individuals»³⁰ but also the full subsumption of the latter under the former: this is why different historical dimensions are to be paradoxically described as «incommensurabilities», as alternative chronologies that run parallel on different levels, as well as emergences «*within* the time horizon of capital». Yet, the process of translation seems to address only the first kind of relationship, namely the one based on irreducible juxtaposition, whereas the specific relation of ‘reciprocal internality’ between different historical dimensions remains unclear.

3. *The Otherness of the Planet*

The same approach, based on the incommensurability of different temporal orders, is employed by Chakrabarty to explain the emergence of natural agency in the context of the Anthropocene. According to Chakrabarty, in facing what he calls the «anthropogenic regime of historicity»³¹, we are confronted with two historical realms incommensurable with one another: the «global» and the «planetary». Whereas the «global» has the «human at its centre» and deals with the political, social and economic aspects of human life, the «planetary» discloses a «vast process of unhuman dimensions», that «cannot be grasped by recourse to any ideal form»³². Just as subaltern history does, the planetary dimension of climate change confronts us with a «radical otherness»: that «of the planet»³³ that «sets humans against a background of relationships and time that necessarily cannot be addressed [...] from within the global regime of historicity»³⁴. If, on the one hand, «anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old

³⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 300.

³¹ D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 68.

³² Ivi, pp. 86-87.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 89.

humanist distinction [...] between natural history and human history»³⁵, on the other, the emergence of the planetary dimension inaugurates a novel «distinction between the recorded history of human beings and their deep history»³⁶. The relationship between these two historical dimensions remains – just as the one between universal and subaltern history – unmediated and unmediable: even though «the crisis of climate change calls for thinking simultaneously on both registers, to mix together the immiscible chronologies of capital and species history»³⁷, they represent «two different kinds of knowledge»³⁸, where the planetary one cannot be placed «in a communicative relationship with humans»³⁹.

Compared with the relationship between subaltern history and universal history, in this case the relationship between the universal and the particular is reversed. In the case of subaltern history, it is the ‘otherness’ of the particular that remains opaque, whereas in the case of the planetary dimension, it is the universal itself that appears incommensurable with our particular categories of understanding. In this regard, the planetary dimension of deep natural history reintroduces, in different terms, the idea of a universal history, insofar as it urges us to reframe our ‘human’ history within a broader, all-encompassing natural-historical dimension. The planetary represents, just as universal history, a universal temporal framework within which our particular, human temporalities – including the History 1 of capitalist accumulation – can exist and that guarantees their conditions of possibility. «The Anthropocene challenges us to decipher a new universal history because we encounter a set of planetary forces and temporal scales that could not be a direct object of experience in our lives yet will be a determining factor for them»⁴⁰. But according to Chakrabarty, this planetary universal history differs in the most radical way from Hegel’s idea of universal history: far from being the

³⁵ Ivi, p. 26.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 36.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 42.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 86.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 70.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 47.

rational self-understanding of a self-realizing reason, this «emergent, new universal history of humans» cannot be positively grasped, nor conceptually ‘understood’: «it is not a Hegelian universal arising dialectically out of the movement of history or a universal of capital brought forth by the present crisis», but rather a «figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world»⁴¹. This is why *the concrete relation* between human history – including the socio-political dimension of the global history – and the unconscious, underling deep natural history of the planet remains (and *should* remain) indeterminate: the specific relation between these different chronologies is incommensurable, even though they are, at the same time, ontologically incorporated into one another. In order to define this new universal natural-historical framework, Chakrabarty defines it as a «‘negative universal history’», explicitly drawing on Adorno’s negative reading of Hegel’s universal history. In order to clarify this concept, Chakrabarty stresses the fact that the planetary dimension of deep universal history should have «no ‘concrete’ positive content», but is to be considered as an «empty» and «emergent concept with no particular, concrete content yet»⁴². This is due to the fact that, according to Chakrabarty’s reading of Adorno, we cannot posit any positive as the «subject» of this «totality», «of this ‘we’ that is larger than human»⁴³. As happened in the case of Hegel’s universal history, «positing any positive content for ‘all’ of humanity would in fact lead to one particular section of humanity oppressing another particular section in the name of the universal or the whole»⁴⁴. Even more so when constructing a model of universal history that must encompass the radical otherness of natural agency, which, by definition, precedes and transcends the human dimension. «Just as in human history, here too, that which is nonidentical to totality has to be able to express itself through resisting its complete incorporation into the totality»⁴⁵. But as we shall

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 45.

⁴² Ivi, p. 46.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 47.

see, according to Adorno, ‘non-identical’ and ‘negative’ are dialectical concepts that must be approached accordingly, namely in a *determinate* relation to identity and positivity. On the contrary, in Chakrabarty’s reading, the non-human element remains indeterminate both in itself and for itself: that is, both in its ontological and epistemological constitution as such, as well as in its relation to human history. In fact, «the nonhuman should be able to make itself heard without having to be anthropomorphized or without having to speak the language of humans»⁴⁶, that is to say, with no reference to conceptual identity. It is particularly significant that, in order to explain the specific nature of the planetary dimension, Chakrabarty draws on authors like Quentin Meillassoux and Timothy Morton, who propose different forms of speculative realism that aims at describing objective reality as what exceeds human capacity of experiencing it⁴⁷. According to Chakrabarty the planetary dimension of the Anthropocene «is both withdrawn from and inaccessible to earthlings like humans», thus being conceivable only as a series of «hyperobject»⁴⁸: ‘objects’ whose constitution exceeds the spatio-temporal conditions of human experience, thus withdrawing from the grasp of human knowledge. For this reason, in reference to Meillassoux’s non-correlationist ontology, the planetary dimension should be thought of «*as anterior to every form of human relation to the world*»⁴⁹. Within this speculative realist conceptual framework, the ‘negative’ is not only beyond human language but also lies outside the realm of human experience itself. Therefore, the historical-natural dimension of the ‘planet’ is not only incommensurable with the socio-political one of the ‘humanist’ globe, but it is to be

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 48.

⁴⁷ On the notion of Anthropocene as an hyperobject see D. Rueda, *The Anthropocene as a historical hyperobject*, «Rethinking History», XXVI (3), 2022, pp. 371-391.

⁴⁸ See T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

⁴⁹ Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, New York, Continuum, 2009, p. 10. Quoted in Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, p. 87.

defined as a 'negative' (hyper)object that resists dialectical analysis and eludes human language. Both its relation to human dimension, as well as its ontological constitution remain (and *should* remain) conceptually indeterminate. Yet, as we shall see, in Adorno's conceptual framework, as well as in his critique to Hegel, negativity is to be assumed always as a *determinate* negation.

4. *Adorno's Negative Universal History*

We have briefly seen how, according to Chakrabarty's argument, the Anthropocene confront us with a new notion of «negative universal history». Moreover, we have outlined Chakrabarty's proposal on how to think the negative moment implied within it. In this section we will clarify Adorno's engagement with Hegel's notion of universal history. In fact, a dialectical understanding of the 'negative' may help us in further developing Chakrabarty's approach and in providing a conceptual framework able to grasp the concrete relationship between different historical dimensions.

A simple glance at the opening lines of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is sufficient to grasp the crucial role played by the philosophy of history within his revision of dialectics. In fact, here we read: «philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed»⁵⁰. This assertion seems to imply that, according to Adorno, the historical movement of reason's self-realization has been either incomplete or has failed altogether. In other words, Adorno's statement seems to put into question Hegel's conceptual framework in its essence: that is, to simply dismiss the identity of idea and actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) and, consequently, the historical self-realization of reason in history. Adorno's critique, however, operates in a more subtle way. It does not deny that reason has been concretely realized in history, but rather it challenges the constitution of reason itself; in other words, it does not aim at demonstrating that reality is still not coincident with a reason already reconciled in itself, but rather that reason is non-identical,

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 3.

non-reconciled with itself; not that reality is irrational but, more radically, that reason itself is irrational. Thus, the missing realization of reason does not depend on a failed ‘externalization’ of reason in history, as if a fully reconciled reason would be waiting to be made effectual in a reality still inadequate to it. Rather, reason’s self-realization is inadequate in relation to reason itself, not in relation to its historical manifestation. It is on this basis that Adorno claims that the truth of Hegel’s system, that is, the identity of concept and reality, paradoxically implies its being both true and untrue: not the reconciliation with reality is missing, but the reconciliation of reason itself with its own concept.

Adorno, in fact, begins his critique to Hegel by acknowledging the *adequacy* of his notion of absolute spirit in relation to historical reality. Our present «society is essentially concept, just as spirit is», insofar as «all the isolated individual moments of empirical reality [...] are mediated by society, constituted the way things are constituted by spirit»⁵¹. Similarly to Chakrabarty, who – as we have seen – defines «History 1» as the history internal to the logic of capital expansion, Adorno traces the universality of spirit back to the process of capitalist abstraction of labour, interpreting the notion of spirit as «social labour»: «The reference of the productive moment of spirit back to a universal subject rather than to an individual who labours is what defines labour as something organized, something social»⁵². And insofar as the capitalist mode of production has virtually absorbed all forms of human (and non-human) production, the systematic, closed, and totalizing nature of Hegelian reason is thus proven to be adequate to the present configuration of the historical world: «To the extent to which the world forms a system, it becomes one precisely through the closed universality of social labour; social labour is in fact radical mediation, both between man and nature and also within spirit»⁵³. The absoluteness and systematic character, proper to Hegel’s concept of spirit, correctly represent our actual historical reality, both in expressing the concrete supremacy of

⁵¹ T.W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1993, p. 20.

⁵² Ivi, p. 18.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 25.

the abstract reflected by the primacy of the «spirit», as well as in representing this primacy as a self-enclosed absoluteness, «which tolerates nothing outside itself and forbids remembrance of anything outside it»⁵⁴. As Adorno emphatically puts it, «satanically, the world as grasped by the Hegelian system has only now, a hundred and fifty years later, proved itself to be a system in the literal sense, namely that of a radically socialized society»⁵⁵ integrally mediated by abstract labour.

Hence, Adorno's critique starts from the recognition of *both* the real and effectual character of reason – that is, the coincidence between concept and reality – *and* the historical adequacy of this effectuality to the world in its present historical configuration. From where, then, does the critique arise? How can the truth of this actualized reason also lead to its confutation? We must pay close attention here. In Adorno's reading, the inadequacy of Hegel's system and universal history does not stem from the presence of a radical alterity – external or internal to it – incommensurable and irresolvable within its framework. Such a reading would fall back from the inner structure of Hegel's concept of absolute and, thus, miss the point. In fact, Hegel «never finds the absolute except in the totality of disunity, in unity with its other»⁵⁶. Therefore, no claim for a 'radical otherness' that cannot be assimilated can affect the dialectically constructed absolute, whose identity consists only in its being non-identical with itself and in the movement set in motion by this internal mismatch. The notion of negative should thus be thought as mediated with identity. In fact, according to Adorno, even pure nature cannot be experienced or expressed except as mediated: just as according to Hegel «*there is nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation*»⁵⁷, so in Adorno's reading «there is nothing in the world that shall not

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 26.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 19.

⁵⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Teil: Die objective Logik. Erster Band: Die Lehre vom Sein*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 21, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 1985, p. 54; trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 46.

manifest itself to human beings solely through social labour. Even where labour has no power over it, pure nature is defined through its relationship to labour, even if that relationship is a negative one»⁵⁸.

Adorno's strategy to criticize Hegel is, therefore, to follow Hegel's own argument: in fact, Adorno argues that Hegel's concept of totality is inadequate to its own dialectical claim, as Hegel's idealism ends up prioritizing identity over non-identity, thus failing to fully develop the simultaneous and '*unaufhebare*' dialectics of immediacy and mediation. According to Adorno, in the Hegelian idealistic dialectic, the memory of the mediated immediacy, or what Adorno calls the 'anamnesis' of the natural moment, is fundamentally lost. Instead, the true and unabridged «awareness of all that could lead the Hegelian dialectics beyond itself»⁵⁹, namely to a materialistic, negative dialectics: the «remembrance of the simultaneously mediated and irrevocably natural moment in labour» would namely «reveal»⁶⁰ the concrete, material moment that is both mediated by the spirit and yet irreducible to its identity. On the contrary, in the framework of Hegel's «metaphysics of spirit», labour is sublated into a «metaphysical principle pure and simple», from which follows «the consistent elimination of the 'material' to which all labour feels itself tied, the material that defines its boundary for it, reminds it of what is below it, and relativizes its sovereignty»⁶¹. Accordingly, the Hegelian spirit is defined as «essentially active, productive» in itself, capable of «creating its 'object'»⁶² on its own:

idealism becomes false when it mistakenly turns the totality of labour into something existing in itself, when it sublimates its principle into a metaphysical one, into the *actus purus* of spirit, and tendentially transfigures something produced by human beings, something fallible and conditioned, along with labour itself, which is the suffering of human beings, into something eternal⁶³.

⁵⁸ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 25.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 26.

⁶² Ivi, p. 17.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 23.

In Adorno's reading, just as labour cannot be abstracted from the natural and material moment implied in it, so too «the absolute subject has to acknowledge the indissolubility, of an empirical, non-identical moment in it»⁶⁴. In other words, «if Hegel had carried the doctrine of the identity of universal and particular farther, to a dialectic in the particular itself, the particular – which according to him is simply the mediated universal – would have been granted the same right as the universal»⁶⁵. Adorno argues that instead Hegel eventually brought the dialectic, which his own system had set in motion, to a standstill and, by unilaterally hypostatizing the relationship between universal and particular as a primacy of the universal, he paradoxically ended by detemporalizing time itself: in fact, the idealistic hypostatization of identity ends up conceiving «the relation as well as the mediation between individual and world spirit as invariant»⁶⁶. The «transition into untruth»⁶⁷ of Hegelian idealism lies in its hypostatization of identity, which interrupts the dialectical movement and turns the dynamic relationship between the universal and the particular, between spirit and nature, and between abstract and living labour into a formal, non-dialectical and thus atemporal subordination. Subsequently, Hegel's philosophy of history, by removing the remembrance of the natural, material moment, becomes equal to a pure atemporal logic, that is to say to «an a priori doctrine of general structures» that does not deal «with the particular as a particular at all» but «deals only with particularity, which is already conceptual»⁶⁸ category. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in this blindness and this primacy of the abstract that Hegel's philosophy of history most accurately reveals the *Verblendungs-zusammenhang* (context of delusion) of the «abstracting operation which it [i.e. our society] performs in complete reality»⁶⁹: thus, «Hegel's undialectical constants [...] are as true as history is immutable, a bad infinity of guilt

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 17.

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 329.

⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 342.

⁶⁷ Adorno, *Hegel: Three studies*, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 328.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 316.

and atonement»⁷⁰. If then «in the last analysis Hegel's system makes the transition into untruth by following its own logic, this is a judgment not simply on Hegel [...] but rather a judgment on reality»⁷¹.

This critique, which immanently challenges and further develops the dialectical structure of Hegel's reason, allows for a more effective and determinate understanding of the relationship between totality and non-identity. The non-coincidence of these two poles should not be hypostatized as a pre-condition but should be instead concretely and immanently articulated through the simultaneous construction and denial of the universal historical process. In Chakrabarty's terminology, History 1 and History 2 – as well as global history and planetary deep natural history – are reciprocally mediated and dialectically imbricated with one another. If Chakrabarty rightly rejects the primacy of one historical level over the other, Adorno's dialectical understanding of the notion of 'negative' may contribute to clarify their concrete relation, by determining conceptually the 'objective preponderance'⁷² of universal history over particularity without falling into a formal subordination of one of the two poles over the other. If in Chakrabarty's reading the relation between different historical dimensions is one of incommensurability, thus requiring multiple forms of translation, for Adorno the question is not how to '*translate*' one dimension in the other, but rather how to *grasp conceptually* their determinate articulation in a *logical-historical dynamic*. As Adorno explains, his «specific approach» to the problem of universal history is a «dialectical *and* logical approach» that «is almost more important than the direct discussion of the structural problems of history»⁷³. Whereas against Hegel's idealism Adorno stresses the material and natural moment (i.e., the particular

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 339.

⁷¹ Adorno, *Hegel: Three studies*, pp. 30-31.

⁷² This term translates the Adorno's expression «Vorrang des Objektes». On this crucial concept see M. Berger and P. Hogg, *Der Vorrang Des Objekts Negative Dialektik Heute*, Berlin, Springer, 2023.

⁷³ T.W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, p. 70 (my emphasis).

individual) as irreducible to conceptual mediation – thus maintaining a dynamic interplay between immediacy and mediation – we may say that, against Chakrabarty, he would reassert the mediated character of particular, natural immediacy. In fact, «a true preponderance of the particular would not be attainable except by changing the universal. Installing it as purely and simply extant is a complementary ideology»⁷⁴. Yet this is precisely what happens when the concepts of negativity and non-identity are conceived as non-determinate: namely as an ontological dimension unreachable by human language, beyond the conceptual and dialectical movement that determines and mediates it with the totality and with our understanding. As Adorno stresses in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, «negativity *in itself* is not a good to be defended», since «if it were, it would be transformed into bad positivity»⁷⁵. We have seen in the former paragraph that Chakrabarty correctly points out that ‘negative universal history’ allows «the particular to express its resistance to its imbrication in the totality without denying being so imbricated»⁷⁶, but then he assumes that «the nonhuman», in the context of anthropocenic negative universal history, «should be able to make itself heard without having to be anthropomorphized or without having to speak the language of humans»⁷⁷. Placing the ‘nonhuman’ beyond human language means that it *cannot* and *should not* be mediated by thought or concept: thus, not only the «empirical content» of this negative universal history should «remain necessarily empty»⁷⁸, but also this negativity *should remain* indeterminate both in itself and in relation to us. This emptiness and indeterminateness also affect the unclear relationship between global and planetary history: as we have already seen, in order to explain the conceptual determination of the planetary, Chakrabarty resorts to Meillassoux’s speculative ontology, and defines it «as

⁷⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 313.

⁷⁵ T.W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, p. 25.

⁷⁶ Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 47.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 48.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

*anterior to every form of human relation to the world'»⁷⁹. This «radical otherness of the planet»⁸⁰ is thus conceptualized as both an abstract and immediate negativity – as an incommensurable that lies beyond the reach of thought and experience – and, at the same time, as «imbricated» with the process of universal history. On the one hand, as Chakrabarty correctly points out in another context, «nothing exists out there as a 'singular-in-itself'», but on the contrary, singularity «comes into being as that which resists our attempt to see something as a particular instance of a general idea or category»⁸¹; consequently, the different historical dimensions, as well as the relation between negative particularity and universality, remain incommensurable and not mediated through each other. From a theoretical point of view, Chakrabarty's approach, by resorting to speculative realism's ontology, upholds a radical distinction between epistemological and ontological levels which is at odds with a dialectical interpretation of the negative: in fact, on the one hand, he distinguishes between multiple historical dimensions, each grounded in distinct and incompatible epistemological frameworks and yet, on the other, he assumes them as part of a common ontological background, which in turn is determined as an empty and indeterminate universal beyond any conceptual determination; on the one hand, he assumes the incommensurability between «different kinds of knowledge»⁸² and, on the other, he defines the planetary dimension as both «the condition of human existence» and yet as «profoundly indifferent to that existence»⁸³. The planetary could be thus be defined as the epistemologically indeterminable ontological pre-condition of global history. Whereas the transition from one epistemological dimension to another is granted in Chakrabarty's reading by a process of «translation» between incommensurable dimension, whose «*obscurity* [...] *allows the**

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ Ivi, p. 82.

⁸² Ivi, p. 86.

⁸³ Ivi, p. 70.

incorporation of that which remains untranslatable»⁸⁴, the ontological dimension of these histories rest in itself beyond conceptual determination.

Adorno's dialectical approach instead integrates epistemological and ontological dimensions and assert the objective and dialectical «preponderance of the universal»⁸⁵: «for the abstract universal of the whole, which applies the coercion, is akin to the universality of thought, the spirit»⁸⁶. The negative universal does not constitute an «overarching censoring/limiting/defining systems of thought that neutralize and relegate differences to the margins, nothing like an overarching category»⁸⁷, but rather «the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history – the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men's inner nature», which integrates concretely both knowledge and ontological effectiveness⁸⁸. The unity of universal history and its objective preponderance over the particular do not stem from the epistemological assumption of a universal category, but rather from the real, concrete dominion of the abstract over the concrete. What Adorno calls the «preponderance of the object», in fact, is not grounded «on the subject's side», «as the subject's datum or affection»⁸⁹ – in this sense, it is *not* an epistemological deduction; rather it results from the material and historical determination of the non-identical individual itself: the «immanent generality of something individual is objective as sedimented history. This history is in the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 86, my emphasis.

⁸⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 316. The notion of objectivity as both ontological and epistemological is rooted in the dialectical tradition and represents the theoretical core of the Hegelian dialectics. See L. Illetterati, *The Semantics of Objectivity in Hegel's Science of Logic*, in *Logik / Logic*, ed. by S. Sedgwick and D. Emundts, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 139-164.

⁸⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 316.

⁸⁷ Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 86.

⁸⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 320.

⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 186.

individual has its place»⁹⁰. This real, material primacy of objectivity cannot be overturned or contested by simply rejecting the epistemological fallacy of universality and identity, but only by insisting on the internal contradiction within its historical concretion. Just as «the idealistic magic circle», universal history too «can be transcended only in thoughts still circumscribed by its figure, in thoughts that follow its own deductive procedure, call it by name, and demonstrate the disjointness, the untruth, of totality by unfolding its epitome»⁹¹. Instead, to grasp the natural moment as radical otherness irreducible to linguistic and conceptual mediation would mean to «merely positing another downright ‘first’ – not absolute identity, this time, not the concept, not Being, but nonidentity, facticity, entity. We would be hypostatizing the concept of nonconceptuality and thus acting counter to its meaning»⁹². Against this ontological turn, Adorno proposes a dialectical understanding of the nature-history relation, which aims at grasping «historic being in its utmost historic definition, in the place where it is most historic, as natural being» and «nature, in the place where it seems most deeply, inertly natural, as historic being»⁹³.

5. Conclusions

From Chakrabarty’s reference to Adorno’s program for a negative universal history should follow the adoption of a dialectical understanding of negativity: yet, as we have seen, such a notion is incompatible with any interpretation of negativity as a non-mediated ‘radical otherness’. We have also seen that only a dialectical reading of the ‘planetary or anthropocenic regime of historicity’,

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 163.

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 151.

⁹² Ivi, p. 136.

⁹³ Ivi, p. 359. We cannot elaborate further on this concept. For a clear and deep overview of Adorno’s idea of ‘natural history’, see M. Farina, *Adorno e l’idea della storia naturale*, «Intersezioni. Rivista di storia delle idee», XXXVIII (2), 2018, pp. 239-264.

based on Adorno's immanent critique to universal history, can articulate the concrete and determinate interplay between particular and universal, historical and natural dimensions, thus contributing to both 'constructing' and 'denying' universal history. A push towards a dialectical interpretation of negative universal history could be found, for instance, in Jason Moore's work, which emphasizes the «double internality»⁹⁴ that defines the relationship between society and nature. Starting from what is somehow a «commonplace»⁹⁵, namely the already mentioned urge to overcome the division between the human and the natural, Moore develops an interpretation of capitalist modernity and of its historical dynamics that situates it within a dialectical totality where history and nature mutually constitute each other. The critical focus lies in determining

Two *simultaneous* movements. The first is capitalism's internalization of planetary life and processes, through which new life activity is continually brought into the orbit of capital and capitalist power. The second is the biosphere's internalization of capitalism, through which human-initiated processes influence and shape the web of life.⁹⁶

Moore's concept of 'double internality' thus aims to determine the specific relationship between universal history and natural history, assuming them not as distinct and incommensurable dimensions but rather as dialectically interconnected moments within a comprehensive dynamic that Moore calls *world-ecology*, according to which «the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature» are considered «in dialectical unity»⁹⁷. Such dialectical approach complements Chakrabarty's diagnosis by offering a more specific analysis of the dialectical dynamics that interconnect the different historical dimensions imbricated in the present anthropocenic age. A dialectical conceptual framework

⁹⁴ J.W. Moore, *Capitalism in the web of life: ecology and the accumulation of capital*, London, Verso Press, 2015, pp. 1-30.

⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 5.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 3.

would also allow for a both plural and determinate understanding of universal history, moving beyond a conception of ‘universality’ as epistemological category, but rather considering it as the epistemological infrastructure of a real and historical process of abstraction. Keeping together ontology and epistemology would mean, in historical terms, that «universality is maintained only through the medium of the spirit», that is to say «through the abstracting operation which it performs in complete reality»⁹⁸. In this sense, the universality of universal history should be considered as real as is real the coercion it performs, and effective as effective is the abstraction procedures it exerts. The preponderance of its objectivity is thus both ontological and epistemological.

⁹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 316.