

Response to “Critical Commodities: Adorno on Beethoven and Jazz”

Michael Portal

Texas A&M University

Andrew Burnside (2022) argues persuasively that Theodor W. Adorno’s critique of jazz contains an “internal contradiction” (2022, p. 219) and serious “inconsistency” (2022, p. 223) because “certain forms of jazz can be critical, following Adorno’s own criteria” (2022, p. 220). Jazz, as Burnside continues, “possessed a subversive element” which Adorno neglected, and which persists through its commodification and “despite the objective social conditions in which it developed” (2022, p. 220). Central to Burnside’s argument, then, is that “jazz’s subversive elements are genuine, and therefore qualify it as critical, on Adorno’s criteria” (2022, p. 224). Jazz’s sometimes “easy” commodification is just “evidence of the culture industry’s effectiveness, not something counter-revolutionary within the genre itself” (2022, p. 224). Thus, what is missing from Adorno’s account is a more “comprehensive” historical analysis that recognizes how “Beethoven’s work and jazz’s dialectical origins both contain subversive elements that were present *before* they became commodified” (2022, p. 225).

Burnside seems to uncritically adopt Adorno’s general framework for viewing art (and jazz), concluding that “we should consider the roots of jazz similarly to the way Horkheimer and Adorno understand Beethoven’s role within bourgeois art and culture” (2022, p. 225). This is concerning. Consider, for example, Burnside’s emphasis on (and contribution to the importance of) the distinction between “the artwork and its mode of production” (2022, p. 224) or “a thing and the mode of production in which a thing is developed” (2022, p. 225). Why does this distinction produce (or invite) a more “comprehensive” historical analysis than the one proposed by Adorno? How is the distinction between “thing” and “process” meaningfully different from Adorno’s own concern with “deconcentration” where, “when listening to jazz, we are made to focus less on the actual qualities of the music and more on the activity of listening” (2022, p. 220)? Adorno could simply accept the distinction as articulated and come to a different conclusion, suggesting instead that there is no genuine “thing” in jazz and only its “process” (a type of listening). Would this be a “consistent” (2022, p. 219) application of the thing-process distinction?

I am not convinced (and I doubt Burnside would be either) that my imagined Adorno is “consistent” in the sense outlined in Burnside’s article—however, the distinction between “thing” and “process” will always complicate the sense in which jazz can be “genuinely” subversive (or, for that matter, how anything can be “genuine” at all). An important articulation of this problem can be found in Walter Benjamin’s famous “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). Many read Benjamin as raising an entirely negative point: that the rise of mechanical reproduction (a correlate to the dangers of commodification and dispersion found in the article to which I am responding) only works to estrange us from an artworks’ authentic “aura” and meaning (which we might read in Burnside’s renewed interest in what is “genuine”). However, such a reading fails to recognize how mechanical reproduction can also disrupt the fetishization of the origin (the original, the more “natural,” the most “genuine,” etc.). As Benjamin writes, mechanical reproduction “*detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition*” and thus helps “shatter” tradition and usher in “the renewal of humanity” (2008, p. 22). Where fascism’s traditionalism bears on the “*aestheticizing of politics*”, Benjamin proposes a communism that “*replies by politicizing art*” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 42).

What, then, are the politics of jazz? I think it might be a mistake to believe that jazz is critical only (or primarily) in virtue of its being “genuine” in some way or another. I think it might also be a mistake to accept (or negotiate) an internal or imminent contradiction in Adorno’s argument without looking elsewhere and for other resources, settling instead to moderate and make more acceptable what is (potentially) inextricably defined by some (maybe even, vicious) contradiction. What are we to do with such contradiction? Or, even with contradiction as such? Consider how Karl Marx’s early *Grundrisse* (1857-8) raises the alarm on how capitalism is defined by its own immanent contradiction and crisis: an “endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting factor” (Marx, 1993, p. 334). Capital is fundamentally restless such that “every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome” (Marx, 1993, p. 408). Up against its limits, capital produces “new needs” and new markets, producing just enough difference to sell product. However, endless (but, ultimately, meaningless) differentiation and modulation is futile and frustrating—in similar ways maybe to saving Adorno from himself.

Capital is unable, argues Marx, to really overcome its ontological limits and, instead, “moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome but just as constantly posited” (Marx, 1993, p. 410). Capitalism is, on Marx’s account, “the living contradiction” (Marx, 1993, p. 421). So, how might

we rethink jazz, art, work, etc. without appealing to binaries (“thing” and “process,” the “genuine” and its opposite, etc.) meant to be managed and, maybe eventually, to be overcome? How might we find new ways of organizing life outside of (perpetually negating) contradiction? I think Burnside is right to emphasize (like Adorno) that there is no “unmediated” outside or other position where we can disentangle ourselves from our real social conditions (2022, p. 225). From this, however, I believe the article might benefit from more attention to why “this distinction [between artwork and its mode of production] is not always clean or easy to draw” (2022, p. 224) and how further differentiation and distinctions may undermine revolutionary action—and impede truly great jazz.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. (2008) *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (eds.). Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (trans.). Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Burnside, Andrew. (2022) Critical Commodities: Adorno on Beethoven and Jazz. *Southwest Philosophy Review* 38(1): 219-226.
- Marx, Karl. (1993) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*. Martin Nicolaus (ed.). Penguin Classics.