

rical phenomena under investigation which then somehow *transforms* into the idea that is constitutive of the latter; a human idea becomes a divine one. “Hypotheses are scaffoldings erected in front of a building and then dismantled when the building is finished,” Goethe notes in a posthumously published aphorism (1998a: §1222). Once the researcher has finally completed their ideal construction, it is “possible for us to descend, just as we ascended, by going step by step from the *Urphänomen* to the most mundane occurrences of our daily experience” (1988: 195). This—to mix metaphors from Goethe’s letter to Herder and Adorno’s inaugural lecture—is the natural-scientific “key” that springs open the door to the concealed heart of reality.

My hasty presentation of Goethe’s scientific method will not assuage the reader’s well-founded reluctance to take Goethe’s speculative enterprise seriously. But it is in any case hard to miss what is so captivating about Goethe’s mission and why it has remained a constant source of fascination for maverick minds: it attempts to reveal the eternal idea lodged in the transitory manifestations of life; to raze the walls of the subjective constitution of reality in order to come face to face with its underlying structure; to abnegate hypothetical systematizations of reality—the divorce of ideas from reality—under the guiding principle that “everything factual is already theory” (1998a: §575). I have tried to distill some of Goethe’s conceptual promiscuity, his wide diversity of interests, and the tremendous adaptability of his research program into a relatively simple and schematic project that is only problematic at one specific juncture, which is this: how does the regulative idea or hypothesis that the scientist employs at the outset of their investigation transform into the inner “idea” of the phenomenon without exposing itself to the accusation of what Kant calls “transcendental illusion,” or the confusion of appearances with the autonomous constitution of the thing itself? For Goethe, the answer is to be found in an “exact imagination,” but it sounds like sorcery.

Goethe did not think there was anything implausible about his scientific method—*so long as it confines itself to the study of nature*. Other problems lie in wait for the Goethean theorist of culture and history. Are there ideas at work in the world of human affairs, as the nineteenth-century idealist philosophers of history and romantic historiographers suggested? Goethe demonstrated an ability to be titillated by this question but remained for the most part unwilling to answer in the affirmative. Imagine, now, a seventy-eight-year-old Goethe and a Hegel twenty

years his junior discoursing about the “dialectical method” over a cup of tea in the fall of 1827.

“If only,” Goethe chimed in, “these intellectual arts and dexterities were not so frequently misused and employed to make the false true and the true false!”

“That certainly happens,” responded Hegel, “but only with people who are mentally ill.”

“I therefore congratulate myself,” said Goethe, “upon the study of nature, which preserves me from such sickness. For here we have to deal with the infinitely and eternally true, which throws off as incapable everyone who does not proceed purely and honestly with the treatment and observation of his subject. I am also certain that many a dialectical sickness would find a wholesome remedy in the study of nature.” (Goethe, 1998b: 244, translation amended)

4 URPHÄNOMENE IN MODERN LIFE: BENJAMIN AND SPENGLER

Goethe’s theory of ideas (*Ideenlehre*) and his intuitive power of judgement were repeatedly held up as a battle cry against Newtonian mechanism and Kantian formalism throughout the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ironically, this was not the case among errant natural scientists, but rather in the effort to provide the *cultural sciences*—*pace* Goethe!—with an autonomous methodological foundation. Wilhelm Windelband provides one of the most schematic and well-known distinctions between these two approaches in his inaugural address at the University of Strasbourg in 1894, titled “History and Natural Science.”

“In natural-scientific thought, the inclination toward abstraction predominates; in historical thought, by contrast, the inclination toward intuitiveness (*Anschaulichkeit*). This claim will be surprising only to those who are accustomed to limit the concept of intuition in a materialistic manner to the reception of what is sensuously present, and who have forgotten that there is likewise an intuitiveness, or an individual vitality of an ideal present, before the eye of the mind (*Auge des Geistes*) just as much as the eye of the body.” (Windelband, 2015: 293-294).

The distinction at play here is not one between the intrinsic structure of natural and historical phenomena, but rather between two different modes of *observation*, which Windelband famously calls “nomothetic” and “idiographic” respectively.

The natural scientist calculates lawful regularities; the historian makes “historical individuals” come to life before the mind’s eye.

Spengler and Benjamin arrive on the scene at the tail end of this historiographic tradition.⁹ In a certain sense, the Goethean conception of the “idea,” and the demand for “intuitive” representations of ideal forms, which proved so productive in the work of nineteenth-century German anthropologists and historians like Wilhelm von Humboldt and Leopold von Ranke, had been largely discredited at the start of the twentieth century by neo-Kantian tendencies in the academic study of history and culture. Weber, for example, is critical of the naivety of traditional German historiography when he notes that “in the historian’s representation (*Darstellung*) everything is supposed to depend completely on ‘sensitivity’ (*Takt*), on the suggestive intuitiveness (*Anschaulichkeit*) of his report, which allows the reader to ‘relive’ the represented content.” Weber rightly notes that this historiographic truism confuses “the psychological processes by which a piece of scientific knowledge is *constituted*, and the ‘artistic’ form in which this piece of knowledge is *presented* with the purpose of influencing the reader ‘psychologically’” (Weber, 2012: 176). In other words, the historian *claims* that they are enabling the reader to experience something essential about reality even though this essential content is fact one of the historian’s tacit principles of content selection; the *Anschaulichkeit* of idealistic historiography is a cunning trick that “makes the false true,” to borrow Goethe’s suggestive warning.

Spengler and Benjamin are aware of these methodological considerations and make desperate efforts to overcome them, most notably by doubling down on the most questionable aspects of Goethean science—such as the theory of the archetype—and applying them unceremoniously to the domain of historical inquiry.¹⁰

⁹ I do not mean to suggest that Spengler and Benjamin were inspired by Windelband’s somewhat problematic distinction between the idiographic and nomothetic method, but I *am* claiming that they are both influenced by the opposition of natural-scientific and historical modes of analysis espoused by the “historicist” current of German historiography. Spengler, despite his eccentricity, was always recognized as an heir to the Rankean tradition (Meinecke, 1959). Benjamin’s frequent critique of what he calls ‘historicism’ is hopelessly confused, and I remain thoroughly convinced by H.D. Kittsteiner’s description of Benjamin as a “materialist historicist” (1986).

¹⁰ Spengler convincingly quotes Goethe throughout his career, especially in the first volume of *Decline*, but his Goetheanism is almost entirely absent from English-language secondary literature. The best essay on Spengler’s reception of Goethe is a relatively recent study by Gilbert Merlio (2014). Benjamin’s reception of Goethe has been the subject of much attention over the years (Steiner, 1986; Pizer 1989; Charles, 2019).

Consider one of Spengler's many Goethean methodological statements from the first volume of *Decline of the West*:

"It is thoroughly possible, given a physiognomic sensitivity (*Takt*), to recover the essential organic features of whole centuries of history out of the scattered particulars of ornamentation, architecture, and writing, or out of isolated data of a political, economic, or religious nature; to read the form of the state out of the contemporaneous formal elements of artistic expression, the character of the economy out of corresponding mathematical forms. A genuinely Goethean method, leading back to Goethe's idea of the *Urphänomen*, which is already to a limited extent common in contemporary zoology, but which *can be extended over the whole domain of history* to an unanticipated degree." (Spengler 1926: 113, translation amended, italics added)

Compare this with a frequently discussed handwritten note by Benjamin, discovered after his death and incorporated into his posthumously edited *Arcades Project*:

"In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin [*Ursprung*] in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept *from the domain of nature to that of history*. Origin—it is, in effect, the concept of *Urphänomen* extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, these facts would not be *Urphänomene*; they become such only insofar as in their own individual development—"unfolding" might be a better term—they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants." (Benjamin, 1999: 462, italics added)¹¹

¹¹ Adorno draws special attention to this passage in his preface to Rolf Tiedemann's *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (1965). It is possible that Adorno was not entirely aware of the extent of Benjamin's interest in Goethe's botanical studies until the *Arcades* were reconstructed by Tiedemann, well after Benjamin's death. In any case, I must disagree with the recently published hyperbolic claim that "Adorno would have considered it a disgrace that there was ever a serious debate whether history consisted of Spengler's self-enclosed and plant-like cultures" (Immanen, 2021: 184-5). While it is true that Adorno disliked organic metaphors and criticized some of the

Spengler and Benjamin wish make use of their unrestricted sensitivity to “scattered particulars” in order to assemble a constellation of intrinsically related phenomena that then reveals an “origin” or “idea”—an *Urphänomen*—of modern life, just as Goethe came face to face with the idea of the plant. Basic familiarity with Goethe’s project should render the proceeding passages largely comprehensible, but some additional references to Goethean themes in the work of Spengler and Benjamin will make their shared intention even clearer. Spengler and Benjamin argue that the emergent methods of formalist (neo-Kantian) historiography are unable to appreciate the living dynamic at work in culture, which develops “with the same superb aimlessness of the flowers of the field” and belongs “to the living nature of Goethe, not the dead nature of Newton” (Spengler, 1926: 21). The properly materialist historiographic technique, as Benjamin describes it, is one of “construction out of facts. Construction with the complete elimination of theory. What only Goethe in his morphological writings has attempted” (Benjamin, 1999: 864). Benjamin demands, quoting Borchardt, that we cultivate the “image-making medium within us” (1999: 458) and thus break with the practice of “vulgar historical naturalism” (1999: 461). Likewise, Spengler distinguishes “the method of Goethe’s much-discussed exact sensuous imagination, which leaves the living undisturbed,” from the “exact murderous method of modern physics” (Spengler, 1926: 97). For Spengler, the professional historian mistakenly understands historical continuity additively, “as a sort of tapeworm industriously adding on to itself one epoch after another” (1926: 22). For Benjamin, the same historian “recounts the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary”; institutionalized historiography “musters a mass of data to fill the empty, homogeneous time” (2003: 396-397). In somewhat more precise philosophical language, they are both concerned with transcending the deceptive veneer of efficient causes, or what they both call “causal relations” (*Kausalzusammenhänge*), in order to reveal the formal cause—the “destiny” (Spengler) or the “nexus of expression” (*Ausdruckszusammenhang*) (Benjamin)—operative in the metamorphoses of modernity that unfolds behind the screen of consciousness.

But the remarkable similarities end at these meta-theoretical reflections, for Spengler and Benjamin have completely different “ideas.” For Spengler, “culture is the *Urphänomen*” (Spengler, 1926: 105). Just as Goethe’s *Urpflanze* logically metamorphoses from leaf to calyx to petal to pistil to fruit, so does Spengler’s notion of

organicist features of Spengler’s work, he certainly would not find this entire intellectual tradition “disgraceful.”

“culture” develop in a predictable manner: it blossoms out of nothing in a spring-time of creative passion and religious feeling; matures in a summer of rationalist metaphysics and mathematics; ages through an autumn of enlightened urban intelligence; and senesces in a winter of megalopolitan utilitarianism. All of the philosophical currents, economic systems, political forms, architectural styles, and artistic movements of human history can be explained according to this rigid schema of the inexorable destiny of the eight great cultures, each of which, curiously, has a lifespan of one thousand years. The task of the modern historian is to make sense of our contemporary cultural situation through the representational strategy of “comparative cultural morphology,” or a literary juxtaposition the winter of “Faus-tian culture” (i.e. modern Western culture) with the decline of the other seven great cultures. These historiographic constellations are clumsy, forced, and yet strangely compelling:

“Now the old evolved cities, with their Gothic nucleus of cathedral, townhall, and high-gabled alleys, around whose towers and gates the Baroque period had made a ring of brighter and more elegant patrician houses, palaces, and hall churches, begin to overflow in all directions into a formless mass, to eat into the decaying countryside with their heaps of rental barracks and commercial buildings, and to destroy the venerable face of olden times through reconstruction and alteration. Looking down from one of the old towers upon the sea of houses, one perceives in this ossifying historical development precisely the epoch that marks the end of organic growth and the beginning of an inorganic and thus unlimited agglomeration that transgresses all horizons. And now appears that artificial, mathematical, utterly foreign product of a purely intellectual satisfaction in the utilitarian: the city of the city planner, which in all civilizations aims at the same chessboard form, the symbol of soullessness. These regular rectangle blocks astounded Herodotus in Babylon and the Spaniards in Tenochtitlan. In the ancient world, the series of “abstract” cities begins with Thurii, which was “planned” by Hippodamus of Melitus in 441. Priene, whose chessboard scheme entirely ignores the changing elevation of the earth, Rhodes, and Alexandria follow as models for innumerable provincial cities of the Imperial Age. The Islamic city planners laid out Baghdad in 762, and the giant city of Samarra on the Tigris a century later, according to a plan. In the Western world the layout of Washington in 1791 is the first major example. There can be no doubt that the world-cities of the Han period in China and the Mauryan Empire in India

possessed this same geometric pattern. Even now the world-cities of Western Civilization are far from having reached the peak of their development. I see—long after the year 2000—cities laid out for ten to twenty million inhabitants, spread over enormous areas of countryside, with buildings that will dwarf the biggest of the present and notions of traffic and communication that would appear to us today as madness.” (Spengler, 1928: 100, translation modified)¹²

Spengler’s literary constructions of the *Urpänomen* are comparable to an art installation of eight contiguous video screens each displaying a time-lapse film of the rise and fall of a particular culture from a bird’s eye perspective. Buildings are erected and then crumble in so few sentences that the reader feels that they are witnessing a purely natural-historical development. It is, to be sure, a logically motivated kind of natural history. The eight moving images are perfectly synchronized; a single glance shifts from a view of modern European apartment buildings to the fall of the Roman Empire. The cunning juxtapositions of the unique cultures at their “contemporaneous” stage of transition into a “late” phase of civilization creates an impression of pre-destined lawfulness; the medieval city begins to sprawl beyond its outer limits until it refashions itself as a rectangular grid, just like Baghdad during the decline of “Magian culture,” just like Alexandria during the decline of “Apollonian culture.” There is no contingency in this developmental pattern, no “men who make their own history,” no priority given to modes of production, no room for revolutionary interruptions of divine fate; every deliberate action, economic transformation, or spontaneous revolution is simply a functionary of the ruse of history. Consequently, Spengler believes that he is able to imagine events for which he has no historical evidence—such as the construction of cities in China and India—and to prophesy the developmental patterns of cities some eighty years into the future. This is the cultural-theoretical analogue to Goethe’s claim that from his symbolic *Urpflanze*, “an infinite number of additional

¹² I have chosen this highly representative passage in part because both Adorno and Benjamin were familiar with it. Adorno begins his 1941 critique of Spengler by quoting from Spengler’s description of “The Soul of the City” (1981: 51). Benjamin’s several quotations of Spengler through the *Arcades* are all derived from this short chapter of Spengler’s work. Particularly intriguing is the fact that, although Spengler uses the concept of *Urpänomen* all throughout the first volume of *Decline of the West* (which neither Benjamin nor Adorno appear to have read), the term only appears once throughout the entire second volume, and yet the occurrence is in this very chapter, on a page from which Benjamin cites passages. Was Benjamin inspired by Spengler’s description of the city as “an *Urpänomen* of human existence?” Unlikely—for Benjamin’s copy of *Le déclin de l’Occident* was in French, and he would have encountered this phrase as “un phénomène primaire,” which does not sound especially Goethean.

plants can be invented.” Every derivative phenomenon follows the exact same pattern.

All of this looks completely different in the work of Benjamin. His “origin” of modern life is not culture as such but “economic facts,” or in another statement, “the fetish character of the commodity.” He has no interest in discovering laws applicable to the whole of human history, and he ridicules idealist universal histories of the Spenglerian variety as a kind of Esperanto. Whereas Spengler believes that there is one single *Urphänomen* of human history that has blossomed only eight times—this is often described as Spengler’s pluralism, although eight expressions of a single archetype is not particularly plural—Benjamin remains interested in a specific *Urphänomen* of capitalist modernity that blossoms in every particular cultural phenomenon. His guiding intention is “to conjoin a heightened intuitiveness (*Anschaulichkeit*) to the realization of Marxist method,” or rather, “to grasp an economic process as an *anschauliches Urphänomen*” (1999: 461; 460). To borrow some of the language from the traditional Marxist theory of culture, Benjamin wants to show—to make intuitive—the fact that “the economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure—precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the content of dreams” (1999: 392).

Benjamin, however, unlike Spengler, proceeds more or less without a key; he assembles artifacts from the superstructure without knowing anything about the base. This is authentically Goethean; Benjamin’s method of poring through descriptions of Parisian life at the Bibliothèque Nationale and assembling these materials into a coherent whole resembles Goethe’s aleatoric investigations in the botanical gardens southern Italy far more closely than Spengler’s highly selective appropriation of historical data. But what is the idea that binds together Benjamin’s observations? Economic facts? Commodity fetishism? Benjamin’s theoretical understanding of political economy is not nearly sophisticated enough to say anything more about this. Let us examine the “magnificently improvised theory of the gambler” that Benjamin read to Adorno in Königstein in 1929 (1981: 238/GS 10.1: 249). The importance of this preliminary sketch for the *Arcades* can hardly be overestimated; it is possibly the most direct inspiration for Adorno’s notion of an “adequate construction of the commodity form” outlined in his inaugural lecture of 1931, and formally it appears as a sort of prototype for Adorno’s later aphoristic style. The fragment begins in medias res:

“Hasn’t his eternal vagabondage everywhere accustomed him to reinterpreting the image of the city? And doesn’t he transform the arcade into a casino, into a gambling den, where now and again he stakes the red, blue, yellow *jetons* of feeling on women, on a face that suddenly surfaces (will it return his look?), on a mute mouth (will it speak?)? What, on the baize cloth, looks out at the gambler from every number—luck, that is—here, from the bodies of all the women, winks at him as the chimera of sexuality: as his type. This is nothing other than the number, the cipher, in which just at that moment luck will be called by name, in order to jump immediately to another number. His type—that’s the number that blesses thirty-six-fold, the one on which, without even trying, the eye of the voluptuary falls, as the ivory ball falls into the red or black compartment. He leaves the Palais-Royal with bulging pockets, calls to a whore, and once more finds in her arms the communion with number, in which money and riches, otherwise the most burdensome, most massive of things, come to him from the fates like a joyous embrace returned to the full. For in the gambling hall and bordello, it is the same supremely sinful, supremely punishable delight: to challenge fate in pleasure. That sensual pleasure, of whatever stripe, could determine the theological concept of sin is something that only an unsuspecting idealism can believe. Determining the concept of debauchery in the theological sense is nothing else but this wresting of pleasure from out of the course of life with God, whose covenant with such life resides in the name. The name itself is the cry of naked lust. This holy thing, sober, fateless in itself—the name—knows no greater adversary than the fate that takes its place in whoring and that forgets its arsenal in superstition. Thus in gambler and prostitute that superstition which arranges the figures of fate and fills all wanton behavior with fateful forwardness, fateful concupiscence, bringing even pleasure to kneel before its throne.” (Benjamin, 1999: 489-490)

Benjamin’s literary style is micrological. He revels in the greater social significance of the individual detail, and he notably calls this capacity, in an earlier context, the “faculty of imagination (*Phantasie*),” that is to say, “the gift of interpolating into the infinitely small, of inventing, for every intensity, an extensiveness to contain its new, compressed fullness” (Benjamin, 1996: 466). He artfully maneuvers between a cascade of “infinitely small” images—the baize cloth of the casino tables, the ivory roulette ball, the bulging pockets of the victorious gambler—and grand economic, theological, psychological, and philosophical reflections, all discharged

in a rapid-fire stream of tightly coordinated associations. Despite the fragment's prima facie chaos, there is a clear representational strategy at work. Benjamin is attempting to provide an *Urphänomen*, namely "economic facts" (or more precisely, the commodity form) with a degree of *Anschaulichkeit* that is lacking in traditional Marxist historiography. In the somewhat more focused, first half of the fragment, there is an attempt to develop a series of homologues between two spheres of nineteenth century Parisian culture that are mediated by the commodity form: "gambling hall and bordello," or the thrill of gambling and the thrill of sex; colorful gambling tokens and spontaneous emotions; the arbitrariness of the number and the fungibility of the prostitute's body. But that is as much as Benjamin's method is able to capture, and it is not at all clear from this passage—nor any other passage in the later, more self-consciously Marxist drafts of the *Arcades Project*—how the "unfolding" of economic facts "gives rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms." There is scarcely any regulative principle at work here, and the reader would be hard-pressed to derive an archetype from this and other sketches that may then be employed to descend to the metamorphoses of everyday life in nineteenth-century Paris. That is what Benjamin would need in order to achieve his Goethean aspirations.

Benjamin takes seriously Goethe's inductive principle that "everything factual is already theory" and he believes that this recuses him from the need for any theory at all.¹³ Spenglerian historiography is, by contrast, overburdened by its regulative theoretical apparatus. His *Urphänomen* is a Goethean "key" to the encrypted phenomena of everyday life, but it is not constructed out of a living relation to reality. This is, to be sure, somewhat of a schematic exaggeration. Spengler's work would be a lifeless logic without illustrative reference to the Gothic cathedral and the patrician houses, and Benjamin's sketch would be a confused mess of observations if a tacit interest in the commodity form did not linger in the background. But both Benjamin and Spengler are unique as historians inasmuch as they drive their respective representational strategy to its limit; this is what Adorno recognizes as the merit in each of their works. He praises Benjamin's attempt "to redeem induction" (1973: 303 [298]) through his "close contact with his material surroundings" (1981: 236 [247]). On the other hand, insofar as Spengler's approach to cultural explanation begins with a schema, his approach "has the merit of exposing the

¹³ Benjamin quotes these Goethean words more than any other (1994: 313; 1996: 192; 1999: 864). Spengler also quotes this apothegm in the first volume of *Decline* (1926: 156).

'system' in the individual"; he allows the reader to comprehend the logic of the *Weltgeist* at work in material reality (1981: 62 [59]).

But rarely do the poles of induction and deduction meet in the work of Benjamin and Spengler; this is the extent to which their massive historiographic projects are failures in Adorno's eyes. Adorno criticizes Benjamin's "social physiognomics as all too immediate, lacking reflection on the mediation by the whole of society," and so his "materialist construction of history lags behind theory" (1976: 39 [323]). Benjamin's fragmentary and unregimented presentation of details is "too close to its object" such that "the object becomes as foreign as an everyday, familiar thing under a microscope" (1981: 240 [251]). Spengler, on the other hand, "proudly calls his method physiognomics," although "in truth his physiognomic thought is bound to the total character of his categories. Everything individual, however exotic, becomes a cipher of the grandiose, of the 'culture', because Spengler's conception of the world is so rigorously governed by his categories that there is no room for anything that does not easily and essentially coincide with them" (1981: 62 [59]). Both are bad physiognomists: Benjamin is too close to things and thus cannot convincingly illuminate in a single coherent vision the essentiality that stands before his eyes; he is an impressionist. Spengler inserts every little thing into the framework of his historiographic schema, regardless of whether or not it fits; he childishly scribbles in between the lines of his coloring book.

5 ADORNO'S TRAINED IMAGINATION

Goethe's scientific method mediates between these extremes. In the laudatory words of Friedrich Meinecke, the most distinguished intellectual historian to make the case for a specifically Goethean historical sensibility, Goethe's writings oscillate between "an inductive reverence for the small and a grandiose awareness of the great encompassing whole." His expositions of natural phenomena are like a "pendulum swinging between reality and the ideal" (Meinecke, 1972: 482, 488). Adorno does not appear to be entirely aware of the need for this delicate balance of induction and deduction in his earliest philosophical writings, but an insistence on the mediation between these two poles characterizes all of his sociological treatises of the 1960s. What is required of the researcher, Adorno notes in his manifestly Goethean words, is a "reciprocity of theory and experience," or in other words, "a combination of imagination (*Phantasie*) and a flair for the facts." In these

late sociological writings, “imagination” no longer appears as an occult faculty. It is simply the tacit theoretical mediation of all experience, the ability to tentatively subsume empirical observations under higher ordering principles. All observation proceeds from some sort of *focus imaginarius*, and there is thus “no experience that would not be mediated through—often unarticulated—theoretical conceptions.” But this conception, or regulative principle, cannot be pulled out of thin air; it is not just the condition, but also the result of a spontaneous engagement with reality. There are “no conceptions that are not—insofar as they are worth anything—grounded in and constantly measuring themselves against experience.” In short: “theory and social physiognomics are fused” (Adorno, 1968: 186).

Does this not sound an awful lot like Weber? I was not entirely fair to him in the earlier sections of this essay. I noted that Weber makes use of regulative theoretical conceptions in order to illuminate cultural phenomena by providing them with a hypothetical animating principle. The most serious drawback of this procedure is that “each one sees what he carries in his heart,” and so it is consequently possible for a dozen researchers with a dozen uniquely fashioned hearts to interpret reality as a function of a dozen incompatible ideas. Weber recognizes and rigorously defends the possibility of such epistemic relativism in his treatise on objectivity. But he is, all the same, a fine macro-sociological theorist with a keen eye for the constitution of the hearts of individuals by the relatively homogenous structure of modern life. It *can* happen that the researcher makes use of an entirely arbitrary idea to explain away every detail of the world—it stands to reason that this is what Spengler does—but it is more often the case that the meticulous researcher constructs an ideal-type on the basis of a “methodologically trained imagination” (*methodisch geschulte Phantasie*) that is “oriented toward reality” (2012: 118). This is the inductive moment of ideal-typical concept formation; it is a fusion of theoretical presuppositions with physiognomic sensitivity. Weber never tires of emphasizing the need for this productively imaginative experience. The commonplace notion that science is nothing more than “mere calculation, carried out in laboratories or bureaus of statistics with cool reason alone,” demonstrates “remarkably little understanding of what actually goes on in factories or laboratories: there too, something has to *come to you*—and the right thing too—if you are able to accomplish anything valuable” (2020: 12). A critique of Weberian subjectivism is valid only insofar as it takes this indispensable and unmistakably Goethean moment into account: the imaginative probing after “the right thing.”

I have also noted that Adorno criticizes Weber's neo-Kantian presuppositions throughout his life. Let it be known that Adorno has a tendency—one that he shares with Benjamin and Spengler, incidentally—to overestimate his own originality, and to claim that he is making a novel contribution to sociology or philosophy when he is in fact repackaging well-worn ideas. Adorno tempers this tic as he matures in life. Even if one struggles to find any kind of *coupure épistémologique* in Adorno's remarkably consistent career, his later work is nevertheless characterized less by a callow attempt to overturn the disciplines of philosophy and sociology and more by a sober admiration for theoretical heights that have long been reached. The following surprising passage from *Negative Dialectics* on the concept of "constellation" should be read as a kind of postface to Adorno's inaugural lecture, which, to recall, was inspired by Benjamin's study of German *Trauerspiel*—so deeply grounded in this earlier work that Benjamin accused Adorno of plagiarism. Now, thirty-five years later, Adorno writes:

"How to unlock the object by way of constellation is less to be learned from philosophy, which has never been interested in such things, than from important scientific investigations; advanced scientific work has in many instances been ahead of its own philosophical self-understanding in the form of scientism. It is by no means necessary to take intrinsically metaphysical studies as one's point of departure, like Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, which conceives of truth itself as constellation. One should rather refer back to such a positivistically-minded scholar as Max Weber. To be sure, he understood the 'ideal-type' in the sense of a thoroughly subjectivist epistemology, as a tool to approach the object, lacking any substantiality in itself and thereby capable of dissolution at will. But as is always the case with nominalism, however futile he may consider his concepts, something of the character of the object reveals itself in them; the concept reaches beyond its heuristic vantage." (1973: 164 [166])

Adorno's point, which he elaborates throughout the rest of this section of the text, is this: a neo-Kantian sociologist like Weber might *think* that his concepts bear no necessary relation to the object itself—that is his scientistic self-understanding—but because such regulative ideas are synthetically constructed and amended through a close contact with a range of empirical phenomena, they *do* manage to capture something of objective reality. Adorno likens Weber's ideal-typical constructions, namely in his work on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, to emphatically artistic compositions. They are "subjectively generated," and yet "the

nexus that [Weber's work] establishes—precisely the 'constellation'—becomes legible as a sign of objectivity." His ideal-types "transform themselves into determinate knowledge" (1973: 165 [167]). This is the moment that appears in Goethe's work as the curious transformation of the merely "hypothetical" idea into an idea that exists in reality itself; it is the moment described in Adorno's inaugural lecture as the "annihilation of the question"; it is Benjamin's "dissolution of the empirical world into the world of ideas." And now, in his most mature theoretical statement, Adorno claims that the model for this expository method is not to be found in the philosophical work of Benjamin, but rather in the empirical studies of Weber, namely the figure in German intellectual history who is best known for grounding the social and cultural sciences within the bounds of possible experience set forth by Kantian epistemology. Weber's method "proves itself to be a third option beyond the alternative of positivism and idealism," Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics* (1973: 166 [168]). That is exactly how Adorno defines his own aspirations at the start of his career.

Does this mean that Adorno's interpretive philosophy, which originates in the Goethean method of "exact imagination," concludes with Weber's "methodologically trained imagination"? Does Adorno eventually come to realize that his ambitious philosophical aspirations were already accomplished by fin-de-siècle sociological research? Is that all there is? Such a claim is likely to irritate the philosophers, who wish to preserve Adorno's eccentricity from the sterility of the social sciences; to humor the sociologists, who see nothing but unbridled speculation in Adorno's critique of sociological method; and to befuddle the cultural critics, who are rarely taken by such methodological considerations. But it should in any case be taken seriously as a possibility.

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