

TRACING NEGATIVITY. ON JESSICA BENJAMIN'S CRITICAL THEORY OF THE FORMATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY*

Rastrear la negatividad. Sobre la teoría crítica de Jessica Benjamin de la formación del género y la sexualidad

FELIX SASSMANNSHAUSEN**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores traces of negativity in Jessica Benjamin's theory of gender and sexual formation and how they are linked to the notion of negativity in Frankfurt School critical theory. It reconstructs Benjamin's psychoanalytic notion of intersubjectivity that draws on Hegelian dialectics. And it examines how the patriarchal-capitalist mode of production and reproduction deprives subjects in bourgeois society of the ability to develop ego strength, leading to a vicious circle of gender and sexual complementarities. In doing so, the paper shows how Benjamin's approach can help to shed light on underlying material conditions that fuel current ideological mobilizations in the ongoing cultural battles surrounding gender and sexuality, and the persecution of the non-identical therein.

Keywords: critical theory, gender, sexuality, psychoanalysis, Jessica Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Oedipus complex, object relations, intersubjectivity, dialectics, negativity, subject formation, patriarchy, capitalism, Sigmund Freud.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las huellas de la negatividad en la teoría de la formación sexual y de género de Jessica Benjamin y su relación con la teoría crítica. Reconstruye la noción psicoanalítica de intersubjetividad de Benjamin a partir de la dialéctica hegeliana y examina cómo el modo de producción y repro-

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** Científico político, periodista y redactor - Leipzig.

ducción patriarcal-capitalista priva a padres e hijos de la capacidad de desarrollar la fuerza del yo, lo que conduce a un círculo vicioso de complementariedad de los roles de género y el deseo sexual. Con ello, el documento pretende arrojar luz sobre las condiciones materiales subyacentes que alimentan las actuales movilizaciones ideológicas en las actuales batallas culturales en torno al género y la sexualidad, así como la persecución de los no idénticos en ellas.

Palabras clave: teoría crítica, género, sexualidad, psicoanálisis, Jessica Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, complejo de Edipo, relaciones objetales, intersubjetividad, dialéctica, negatividad, formación del sujeto, patriarcado, capitalismo, Sigmund Freud.

1 INTRODUCTION: RAGING BATTLES OVER GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In his inauguration speech on the 20th of January 2025, the newly reelected President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, declared that he would “establish male and female as biological reality and protect women from radical gender ideology” (White House 2025). The public present at the Rotunda of the US Capitol reacted with cheers and standing ovations. In a following executive order of that day, Trump issued it to be his government’s policy, that these two sexes “are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality”, turning back some policies of the Biden administration (White House 2025b). This youngest development is but the tip of the iceberg in a wider cultural battle that has been raging over gender and sexuality for years (Hark/Villa, 2017; Lang/Peters, 2018). At the centre of the heated debate is the question of what part biology and what part culture play in the development of gender and sexual desire (Kirchhoff, 2022: 342). The vehemence of the dispute shows that there is more at stake here than the question of scholarly definitions. Rather, a struggle is being fought over values that touch on the core of how society is organized: therein conservatives and the far right tend to draw on what they claim to be a natural order of society with the bipolar gender model of male and female and the heterosexual family at its core to justify what they consider the status quo (Paternotte/Kuhar, 2017; Winter, 2022). Liberal and progressive voices tend to put forward the concept of self-determination according to which each individual should be able to decide for themselves whether sexual norms and the gender ascribed, suit them; or whether they should choose other identity options available (Kirchhoff, 2022:

343). Both sides tap in to the potential of the debate to mobilize the power of emotions as a driving factor in the course of societal ruptures.

One could speculate about the historical reasons that are contributing to such a battle over the relationship of culture and nature right now. But that would miss the point. Because the debate about what actually defines gender and sexuality is at least as old as bourgeois society itself (Hausen, 1976; Frevert, 1996; Foucault, 1983). We don't have to look that far back. A brief glance at the 1924 publication "The Decline of the Oedipus Complex" by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1924) and the debate between Freud and the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld on the "nature" of Homosexuality, for example, shows that it was precisely this issue that already preoccupied Freud and his contemporaries 100 years ago (Bruns, 2011). Thus, rather than searching for current reasons for the ideological ruptures, it might prove fruitful to inquire into the material basis of the ideological mobilization itself. Hereto, we can lean on psychoanalytical theory because its intellectual richness manifests itself in its ability to address the question of the formation of gender and sexuality without unilaterally resolving it in either one direction (nature) or the other (self-determination). In this sense, psychoanalysis can, at least in part, be understood as a dialectical approach to subject-formation in bourgeois society. Critical theorists such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer adhered to this particular strand of thought for this reason exactly, fundamentally challenging the idea of a god-given or *prima facie* natural order of things.

And it is therefore not surprising that both psychoanalysis and critical theory offer interesting points of reference for feminist intellectuals (Umrath, 2019: 99; Benhabib, 1993; Knapp, 1996; Ilouz, 2004; Knapp, 2004; Radonić, 2004; Stögner, 2014; Becker-Schmidt, 2017; Kirchhoff, 2022). This rich tradition includes Jessica Benjamin, whose work is best characterized as a curious exploration of the various schools of psychoanalysis that have developed over the last century, bringing them together with the core ideas of the Frankfurt School (Benjamin, 2013b: 104; Benjamin, 1977: 47; Benjamin, 2004: 63-64).¹ On the one hand, she bases her analysis on aspects of the traditional Freudian model in which the infant relates to the primary objects guided by its partial drives that lead them into the core nexus of the Oedipus complex (Benjamin, 2015: 25; Laplanche/Pontalis, 1973: 373). On

¹ And yet, Benjamin's writing has only sporadically been subject to a wider debate on critical theory. This is due to a somewhat dogmatic tradition in critical theory that mainly focusses on monadic aspects of domination, rather than taking intersubjective dynamics into account.

the other hand, Benjamin leans on object relations theory according to which pre-oedipal experiences are decisive for the question of how the infant enters the complex, how it resolves it and what the specific form of its decline means for the children's development of gender and sexuality (Benjamin, 2013a: 81 and 86; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1974: 49).² However, with her theory of intersubjectivity, she adds relational aspects to both approaches. Benjamin claims that it makes a difference whether these objects are, in fact, capable of interacting as subjects with the infant (Benjamin, 1993a: 17). In other words, she enriches the Freudian drive model and Kleinian object-relations theory by adding another layer in which she analyses the relationship with the primary other as a dialectical relationship between both subject and object as well as subject and subject. In this regard, her approach proves to be challenging and intriguing, as it encompasses both monadic and relational aspects of bourgeois subject-formation.

The question Benjamin asks against this background is to what extent the primary objects for the infants, the parents, have themselves been able to constitute themselves as individuals with a higher or lesser degree of subjectivity, referring not only to agency and ego-strength but also to authorship (Benjamin, 1998: 39); and what the implications of this are for the child's ability to form an ego of its own. Benjamin does so by turning to the early infantile development of consciousness and self-consciousness and critically engaging with Hegelian dialectical thinking and critical theory (Benjamin, 1993b: 46). My main argument in this essay is that, in Benjamin's theory of ego formation, and therefore of gender and sexuality, her notion of the failure of destruction in the phantasy has strong ties to the concept of negativity as it was put forward by Adorno (Benjamin, 2013b: 119). To develop this thought, I will first reconstruct Benjamin's account by revisiting a core element in psychoanalytic theory: the Oedipus complex and its negative premises (Benjamin, 2015: 195; Benjamin, 2013a: 83; Kirchhoff, 2022: 335). I will then discuss intersections between Benjamin's interpretation of the Lord-Bondsman-Dialectic in Hegelian thinking with special regard to the concept of negation and Adorno's notion of negativity, as well as his approach to the non-identical. I will finally return to the question of the material basis for the contemporary ideological mobilizations.

² Even though Benjamin draws on Melanie Klein's object relations theory, she questions the notion of Klein's assumed heterosexuality of the infant, which contradicts Freud's idea of constitutional bisexuality (Benjamin, 1993a: 15; Radonić, 2004; Quindeau, 2022: 312). And she rejects the idea that the pre-Oedipal and the Oedipal phases are antithetic.

2 REVISITING FREUD: THE TWOFOLD-CHARACTER OF THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

It is especially Freud's account of the female resolve of the Oedipus complex and his understanding of the development of femininity that remained inconclusive and became a point of heated debate (Kirchhoff, 2022: 329; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1974: 7; Freud, 2000). Even in his lifetime, feminist commentaries contested his version of the path to femininity (Rohde-Dachser, 1997: 21). It has ever since led to controversies, ranging from critiques denouncing the theory as a patriarchal myth about womanhood and female sexuality altogether; to the notion that the Oedipus complex can be understood as a theory of socialization that merely describes the different ways in which infants, both male and female, are introduced to patriarchal culture (Rohde-Dachser, 1997: 21). While Benjamin certainly adheres to the latter, she points to another dimension: according to the Freudian model, Benjamin claims, it seems as if it is the development of femininity that requires explanation. Male sexuality and gender, however, seem to a lesser degree questionable. Benjamin doesn't only consider the complex itself as a pathway leading the infant into patriarchal culture, she discusses the underlying androcentrism and questions the development of masculinity as part of complementary gender identities and sexual desires, thus enabling her to develop a critical theory of gender and sexuality that aims at the very foundations of bourgeois subjectivity (Benjamin, 2013a: 71; Umrath, 2019: 54).

For this, Benjamin draws upon an inner contradiction in the Freudian notion of the Oedipus conflict that he himself never quite resolved: the less comprehensible negative or complete complex (Kirchhoff, 2022: 333). In his key essay "The Id and the I", Freud states that the simple Oedipus complex "is, in fact, not most common at all" (Freud, 2009: 272; Benjamin, 2013: 81; Laplanche/Pontalis, 1973: 352). He goes on to describe what he considers the more nuanced version: when entering the Oedipus stage, the boy doesn't only develop an ambivalent attitude towards the father and a tender object-relation towards the mother, but he "also behaves like a girl at the same time". He shows "the tender feminine attitude towards the father and the corresponding jealous-hostile one towards the mother" (Freud, 2009: 272). Rather than a mere identification with the father (in the case of the boy) or returning to the mother (in the case of the girl), the infants "develop

representations of both sexes” which coexist and at times interfere with each other (Benjamin, 2013a: 85).

This “intervention of bisexuality”, as Freud called it, makes it difficult for the analyst to actually “see through the primitive object-relations and identifications and even more difficult to describe them comprehensibly” (Freud, 2009: 272; Fast, 1996: 67). This very idea calls into question the linear account of the development of gender in the simple complex, as it has widely been debated. For the effect of the infant's constitutional bisexuality has a multitude of intricate consequences for the Oedipus complex as a whole: the negative complex implies that the formation of the ego and super-ego is embedded in a nexus of simultaneous identification with and rejection by the father and the mother even before the infant enters the complex itself (Benjamin, 1993a: 17). This opens a pathway to a less causal and deterministic analysis of the primary object relations and their effect on the resolve of the Oedipus conflict – a theoretical openness that Benjamin expands upon (Benjamin, 1993a: 30).

Consequently, rather than denying the significance of the Oedipus conflict, Benjamin emphasizes the complex nature of the infant's journey towards it in which many junctions are passed (Laplanche/Pontalis, 1973: 395). To illustrate this point, she returns to the original myth, reminding us that the story of Oedipus doesn't begin with his subconscious urge to kill his father, King Laios. Rather, the latter, afraid of being killed and replaced by his son, as the oracle had foretold, tried to escape his fate by eliminating Oedipus at his birth (Benjamin, 2015: 166–167). Laios only refrained from murdering his successor because his wife, Iokaste, intervened, and they agreed to abandon Oedipus in the mountains of Kithairon. Based on this reading of the myth, Benjamin concludes that before entering the Oedipus stage and developing aggressive impulses towards the father, the infant is already embedded in relations with his parents: pre-Oedipal experiences of aggression and rejection, by the father, as well as the mother, preformed Oedipus' subconscious urge to replace his father with his mother.

Whilst Benjamin thus, in accordance with Freud, claims that the parents serve as objects which the infant's drives are directed to, they are also individuals with a higher or lesser degree of subjectivity in the sense of authorship whose interactions with the child determine to what extent the drive energy can actually be discharged. The relation between the infant and its parents, hence, has a two-fold character: an intra- and an inter-psychoic dimension constituted by both, a dialecti-

cal relationship between subject and object, as well as subject and subject (Benjamin, 1993b: 41; Stögner, 2022: 32).³ Benjamin hence doesn't replace the Freudian drive theory by sociological abstractions, as Adorno famously criticized Karen Horney's revision of core psychoanalytical notions in his Essay "Die revidierte Psychoanalyse" (Adorno, 2020). Rather, she expands on the two-fold character of the psyche by claiming that the ability to regulate the intrapsychic tension, stemming from the conflicting drives directed at the primary objects, is dependant upon the ability of the parental object-subjects to cope with infantile aggressive impulses—an ability that is heavily entangled with societal structures of production and reproduction.

3 DESTROYED SUBJECTS, HOLLOW OBJECTS

Following object relational theorists (Klein, 2011; Chodorow, 1985; Winnicott, 2017), Benjamin sets out to investigate the infant's complicated pathway into the Oedipus complex, which she subdivides into three developmental stages of individuation that are only for the purpose of description delimited schematically: the phase of differentiation, the practising phase, and the phase of rapprochement. Leaning on Freud, Benjamin states that in the primary stage, the infant's main concern lies with its physiological dependence in which "the first relationship (of the child to the mother) is based on the oral drive" towards the mother's breast, alleviating "tension by providing satisfaction" (Benjamin, 2015: 25). In this phase, the infant can not yet distinguish between the self and the primary object. The mother acts as a mere prolongation of the child's primary narcissism (Benjamin, 2013a: 83).

Dawning knowledge of its limitations due to its dependence and accompanied experiences of frustration, force the infant to reconcile its grandiose narcissistic ambitions. The toddler is compelled to give up its phantasy of oneness with the world by learning to accept the difference between itself and the mother as a primary object (Benjamin, 2015: 47). This leads the child into the practising phase, which it experiences as a joyful and euphoric time of discovery of what it can slowly learn to grasp as the outside world, while simultaneously developing a curiosity towards its genitals (Benjamin, 2013a: 83). Depending on the reaction by the pri-

³ Whereas, according to critical theory, the object is primordial over the subject (Colligs, 2022: 238; Adorno, 2003: 184).

mary object-subject, Benjamin claims that the euphoria, and with it this first phase, reaches its limits (Benjamin, 1993c: 67). This prepares the infant for acknowledging that the mother is also part of this outer world, rather than being a mere prolongation of its own narcissistic beliefs.

According to Benjamin, this leads into what can be considered the most crucial step in the dialectical formation: the phase of rapprochement, which begins at the age of about 14 months (Benjamin, 1993b: 49). Therein, the infant is busy coping with the emergence of its conflicting feelings, crises of its grandiose aspirations and corresponding aggressive impulses towards the mother, caused by its unwillingness to accept the limitations (Benjamin, 2015: 47). Based on her reading of object-relations theory, Benjamin claims that, to be able to cope with its own aggressive impulses, the infant splits the mother object in two: an omnipotent potentially devouring object on the one hand and a nurturing object that abides by the will of the infant on the other (Benjamin, 2013a: 79). While the nurturing mother is introjected, the omnipotent mother is held on the outside as a projection (Benjamin, 2015: 58). The more rigid the mother reacted in the practising phase, the wider the gap between the split internal introject and external projection turn out to be and the more fear of the omnipotent mother “fills the gap between phantasy and reality” (Benjamin, 1993c: 69).

The further development depends on how the primary object-subject copes with the emerging aggressive impulses stemming from the frustrations, which, drawing on the psychoanalyst Donald J. Winnicott, Benjamin refers to as an effort to destroy the mother in the phantasy (Benjamin, 2018: 13); and whether she can survive the attacks, which is why this phase can also be described in terms of a crisis of parenthood. If the mother survives the attacks in the sense that she doesn't retreat or retaliate and can “deflate the child's grandiose aspirations to a sufficient extent” by holding and helping it to regulate its highly ambivalent feelings, the infant can revise the externalized bad mother-object which then better corresponds with the introject, enabling a feeling of coherence between inner and outside object (Benjamin, 1993b: 49), reducing the gap between introject and projection (Benjamin, 2015: 88). This allows for a lower level of anxiety, enables the child to regulate itself better and to experience forms of mutual recognition which “includes emotional attunement, mutual influence, active togetherness” and “shared states

of consciousness” (Benjamin, 2015: 20).⁴ With the bond surviving the destruction in the infant’s phantasy, the child can develop into a relatively independent self because it can experience an independent other.

But even though “the failure of survival is unavoidable sporadically”, which doesn’t necessary lead to a form of deprivation of the infant’s sense of self, this becomes problematic when the mother is structurally incapacitated to survive the attacks by the infant and is thus unable to help it regulate its aggressive impulses (Benjamin, 2015: 86-87). Be it because she never experienced a state of mutual recognition herself or because the social and economic circumstances disable her from surviving the attacks, leading her to either retreat or retaliate (Benjamin, 2015: 87). If the mother retreats, the infant experiences its aggression as destructive. “What could be worked through and mastered together [...] is shifted from the domain of the intersubjective [exclusively, F.S.] to the domain of the intrapsychic” (Benjamin, 1993b: 52). In the imagination of the child, its grandiose ambitions are affirmed, inflating anxiety and creating a feeling of guilt regarding its destructive impulses, a notion comparable to the depressive position in Kleinian object relations theory (Laplanche/Pontalis, 1973: 114-115). On the other hand, if the mother retaliates, the infant perceives the externalized mother-object “as all-powerful and itself as helpless” (Benjamin, 2015: 68), also creating a strong feeling of a fear for retaliation, comparable to the paranoid position in Kleinian theory (Laplanche/Pontalis, 1972: 368).

In both cases, the “mother’s dysregulation translates into the child’s fantasy of his mother being ›destroyed‹ by his distress, by his need for loving responsiveness” (Benjamin, 2018: 87). In the child’s perception, the outer subject seemingly didn’t survive the destructive acts. Consequentially, both the introject and the externalized object are hollowed out because they don’t resonate with reality, leaving the infant incapable of maintaining stable and consistent inner objects (Benjamin, 1993b: 52). In both cases, internalization takes place: “What cannot be worked through and dissolved with the outside other is transposed into a drama of internal objects” (Benjamin 1995: 40). The infant experiences “a breakdown of the necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition” that would be a prerequisite for the encounter between self and others as independent yet entan-

⁴ This is, however, not static once achieved or a mere sequence of developmental stages, but “a constant dynamic that pervades all events and phases of life” and that very much depends on the structures and burdens the mother is confronted with daily (Benjamin, 2015: 20).

gled beings (Benjamin, 2015: 20). The result is that the children “are tempted to believe that they can be independent without acknowledging others” (Benjamin, 2015: 68). The child fills the hollow object with idealized symbolizations that take the complementary forms of domination and submission, activity and passivity (Benjamin, 1993b: 52). This nexus preforms the infant’s pathway into the Oedipus complex.

4 OEDIPUS' PATH TO FREEDOM: FALSE DIFFERENCIATION AND COMPLEMENTARITY

Leaning on Freud, Benjamin states, that the infant now uses the father as a third by the means of identificatory love in order to cope with its feelings of guilt and anxiety stemming from the gap between the internalized introject and the externalized projection. The wider the gap, the more the father is needed to serve as a defensive instrument and “figure of freedom, with access to and pleasure in the world” (Benjamin, 2013a: 83). Through this identificatory love for the father, the infant now learns to cope with its aggressive feelings that Freud referred to in his depiction of the Oedipus complex.⁵ However, this specific form of love is not purely defensive, but rather also a “specific structure that demands to be recognized as similar by the other” (Benjamin, 2013a: 83–84). Here, a new contingency opens up: it depends on the father’s presence, availability and his ability to acknowledge the identificatory love by the infant or whether he rejects its efforts (Benjamin, 1993d: 104; Benjamin, 2013a: 84).⁶ This, in turn, determines the pretext of the rivalry with the father and to what extent it takes a hostile hue as we know it from the Freudian interpretation.

Thus, whether the father is capable of accepting the identification and the resulting antagonistic feelings Freud described also determines the infant’s capability to regulate its ambivalent impulses. Whereas it is more likely that the father temporarily accepts the identification by what will have become a boy, Benjamin, turning to what will have become a girl, explains that her efforts of identification with

⁵ Agreeing with Freud, Benjamin claims that the father was, in fact, already present in the pre-Oedipal stages, but he didn’t appear as a rival.

⁶ The Child, only having developed residual forms of a directional sexual desire or gender identity, is thus dependent upon the recognition by the parental objects-subjects, be they mother and father, mother and mother, father and father, only mother, only father. In these cases, the search for the liberating third is organized according to the roles within the specific constellation.

the father are likely rejected. This in turn influences the degree to which the love for the mother shifts into a form of idealized love of the father: the girl learns that it cannot be like her father, her aggressive impulses are more strongly rejected, leading her to give up her position. This forces her back to the mother for identification and entering a rivalry with her over the now idealized and submissive love for the father (Benjamin, 1993a: 31).⁷

According to Benjamin, who follows the psychoanalyst Irene Fast, the infant now uses its anatomical difference regarding its parents as a rationalization to explain the rejection by the father, the “loss of what binds them to the object through identification, through the possession of the same thing that the other has” (Benjamin, 2013a: 85). Thus, the fear of castration points to more than the anatomic difference: it serves as an anchor for the infantile theory and represents the fear of “losing one's own organ, one's own identity and one's own gender-specific body” under circumstances in which efforts to form a bond have already been negated (Benjamin, 2013a: 88). In this sense, we can link the identification of anatomical difference with gender difference as a retrograde product of infantile sexual theories, as the psychoanalyst Christine Kirchhoff reconstructed it (Kirchhoff, 2009): the anatomic differences will have become defensive tools for the infant to make sense of and cope with the crises it experiences in its early phases of development (Kirchhoff, 2022: 337).⁸

Following the crisis of rapprochement and the Oedipus complex, the bonds based on mutual recognition are replaced “by almost exclusively complementary relationships”, externalized objects of a “bad mother” and a “liberating father” (Benjamin, 2015: 90). The boy's identification with and the girl's idealization of the father is based on a social postulate of an active masculinity that “stands in a different relation to the world, to culture, to the outside” than the mother (Benjamin,

⁷ This isn't dependent on whether the father was factually there or not. In fact, frequently, the absence of the factual father would make the search for another defensive third that is capable of mutual recognition easier. However, the anatomical difference of the sexes plays a role insofar as it might subconsciously form an aspect on the parent's account whether they accept or reject the identification of the infant. Hereto, Benjamin draws on the Psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel who did extensive research on the development of female ego formation, desire, and sexuality. Thus, through the intersubjective relationship between e.g., the father as the defensive third and the infant, the anatomical difference of the sexes can very much play a role. It just wouldn't be as causal and linear as it is often discussed.

⁸ Benjamin thus does not have to deny the relevance of the bodily difference, yet it is not anatomic fate regarding the development of gendered and sexual dimensions. The degree of retrograde rationalization depends upon the acceptance or rejection of the identificatory effort by the child in relation to the father.

2013a: 84). F femininity turns into an “absorption, adaptation and receptivity”, which is constituted as an antidote to the omnipotent control by the pre-Oedipal phallic mother (Benjamin, 2013a: 79). For what will have become a girl, the desire to differentiate herself from her mother is painful: as she turns into a rival, the girl must destroy the mother within her who is not only an object of love but also turned into a pillar of her identity (Benjamin, 2015: 96-97). Femininity is now closely linked with the “undesired, primitively feared experience” of passivity and helplessness “on which the phallus can now have a controlling and structuring effect” (Benjamin, 2013a: 80; Wilhelm, 2020: 257). Binding herself to the phallic father offers her a way into the world (Benjamin, 2013a: 79).

For what will have become a boy, fencing off this passivity produces masculinity as a position of reversal: “the woman/mother who was powerful and needed when one was an infant is now reduced to a devalued or denigrated maternal object” (Benjamin, 2018: 15). Fear of regressing into this passivity becomes constitutive for the boy. In patriarchal societies, developing masculinity is thus based on fending off femininity: this “insecurity of gender identity [becomes] a kind of 'trap' [...] that spans the entire male individuation process” (Benjamin, 2015: 93). This “false differentiation” is how complementarity becomes the structural principle of the Oedipal phase, and how the complementarity of the sexes is internalized, “no matter how much it may contradict the complex reality of individual desire and individual identifications” (Benjamin, 2013a: 89).

To conclude, following the repeated intersubjective experience of a breakdown of the tension between self and the mother in the pre-Oedipal phase, not allowing for states of mutual recognition, the infant remains incapable of holding and regulating the intrapsychic conflicts.⁹ To cope with the unbearable inner tensions, the child resorts to what Benjamin refers to as false differentiation. Both gender and sexuality are split into complementarities: the rationalization of the Oedipal conflict, brings forth the masculinity of what will have become a boy and the femininity of what will have become a girl as described by Freud (Benjamin, 2013a: 84-85). Developing both male and female gender roles and sexuality in bourgeois society are consequentially fragile defensive mechanisms to cope with the repeating loss of bonds and the intrapsychic tensions that the infant finds itself incapable of regu-

⁹ Regarding the relationship of Benjamin's theory and the Freudian drive model, it is interesting to note that the tensions originate from the conflict between the death drive and “its 'immortal opponent', Eros, the life instinct” (Benjamin, 2015: 82-83).

lating due to the lack of inner and outer object consistency (Benjamin, 2013a: 81). Benjamin's specific analysis of the dialectical interplay between intersubjective and intrapsychic aspects of the formation of gender and sexuality in patriarchal societies is thus based on fundamentally negative premises. As I will show, this can be traced back to her understanding of critical theory and Adorno's notion of negativity.

5 LORD AND BONDSMAN – DIALECTICS OF DOMINATION AND SUBMISSION

To further develop this thought, we can turn to how Benjamin draws on Hegelian dialectics to ask about the relationship between gendered domination and submission—and how it relates to sexuality (Benjamin, 2018: 14; Benjamin, 2015): in “The Phenomenology of Spirit”, Hegel discusses the dialectic between Lord and Bondsman. He claims that “self-consciousness is in and for itself by and through being for another in and for itself”, implying that self-consciousness “is only as a recognized thing” (Hegel, 2005: 153). His idea of recognition states “that the self, to assure itself of its existence, is dependent on the opportunity to act towards another” that can be experienced as “other” (Benjamin, 2015: 68). This presupposes that the other “must be equally independent” (Hegel, 2005: 154). Or as Benjamin puts it: “The self cannot [...] adequately [be] reflected by an object, it must find another equal self to do this [...], a self which it can recognize in turn” (Benjamin, 2018: 15). To exist for itself, the self must thus “exist for another” (Benjamin, 2015: 68). In Hegel's philosophy, however, this relationship is not one of social equals. The Lord depends on a relationship in which he “makes the weaker a bondsman” and the bondsman accepts its submission thereby recognizing the master as such (Hegel, 2005: 161; Benjamin, 2015: 69-70; Benjamin, 2013b: 108; Benjamin, 2018: 183; Cyfer, 2022: 270).

Benjamin leans on this Hegelian notion in her psychoanalytic account of recognition according to which it is required that—in the asymmetric relationship between infant and parent—the child learns to recognize its limitations but is at the same time dependent upon recognition by the parent, thus by the survival of the primary subject-objects. If this fails because the other can't hold or withstand the infant's and its aggression and retaliates or retreats, the dialectical tension between self and the other breaks down. Or to put it in Hegelian terms: the infant negates

the other and “abolishes in such a way that it does not preserve and maintain what has been abolished, and thus does not survive being abolished” (Hegel, 2005: 152; Benjamin, 1993b: 49). The breakdown of the dialectical tension between lord and bondsman thus brings forth false differentiation and the complementarity of domination and submission, setting a vicious circle into motion (Benjamin, 2013b: 103). As the attempt to experience the other fails, the infant’s “fate is to repeat the original collapse again and again until the other sets a difference” (Benjamin, 2015: 84). Because aggression that is not worked through “continues to add fuel to the fire of revenge and retaliation fantasies” (Benjamin, 1993d: 70).¹⁰

Based on Benjamin’s account of Hegelian dialectics, we can conceptualize what she characterizes as false differentiation as abstract negation in terms of Adorno: a form of negation that merely formally negates and by which the inner contradictions of the object are seemingly sublated through externalization whilst the contradictions within are preserved and remain at work.¹¹ “The elementary tension of forces within the individual [...] becomes a dynamic between individuals”, as Benjamin states (Benjamin, 2015: 78).¹² Gendered domination and submission are in this sense the result of abstract negation, leading to a breakdown of the dialectical tension, while attempts to restore the tension turn them into alienated and reified forms of false differentiation (Benjamin, 2018: 15). In the sense of abstract negation of the other, the bonds with the outer objects-subjects are indeed destroyed. The infants resort to abstract complementary categories through the mode of submissive idealized love, failing to uphold the “continual oscillation between relating to the outside other and the inner object” (Benjamin, 2018: 5). This ties in with what Adorno and Horkheimer referred to as pathic projection in the chapter on Antisemitism in the “Dialectic of Enlightenment”, which they essentially de-

¹⁰ This is why fantasies of domination and submission “play a significant role in the mental lives of many people” who then consent to relationships that have a sadistic and masochistic character (Benjamin, 2015: 71). For “the masochist’s desire to discover his inner authentic reality in the presence of another finds its equivalent in the sadist’s desire to break out of his self: into a shared reality” (Benjamin, 2015: 90).

¹¹ Adorno contrasts abstract negation with the notion of “certain negation” that takes the form of immanent critique: therewith concepts are confronted with their objects and, conversely, the objects with their concepts (Adorno, 2007: 44; Adorno, 2003: 161). In this sense, we can grasp Benjamin’s notion of successful destruction in the phantasy as a form of certain negation.

¹² It is no coincidence that this dialectical figure is strongly reminiscent of the Marxian derivation of money as an externalization of the contradiction between use value and exchange value in the commodity. Whereas in Marx’ terms, it is only through this externalization that money makes the exchange of equivalents possible, Benjamin shows that it is this externalization that is the *conditio sine qua non* of bourgeois subjectivity.

scribe as the failure of reflection: the inability to create a sound relation between the inner and the outer objects. "As the subject can no longer give back to the object what it has received from it, it does not become richer but poorer" (Horkheimer /Adorno, 2004: 199).¹³ Failure of destruction in the fantasy in Benjamin's sense hinders the infant to re-integrate the ambivalences of the introjected and the externalized objects.

6 NEGATIVE DIALECTICS AND THE FEAR OF THE NON-IDENTICAL

But for Hegel as well as for Freud, "the collapse of this tension [...] is inevitable" (Benjamin, 2015: 69). While in Freud's theory, aggression and the desire to dominate are "descendants of the death drive" (Benjamin, 2015: 69); in Hegelian dialectics, the breakdown is elevated to an ontological structure (Benjamin, 2015: 69; Adorno, 2008: 124). Criticizing this ontology and referring to Marx, Benjamin departs from a paradox: While she claims that the Hegelian lord-bondsman dialectic and the Freudian notion of the active-passive dialectic are true to the extent that they describe patriarchal subject-formation, they are false in the sense that they aren't ontological fate. In the same way, her critique of gender and sexual complementarity rejects the opposing categories of femininity and masculinity as ontological entities, but at the same time accepts that they inevitably structure our experience and remain effective (Benjamin, 2013a: 57 and 99).

Whilst Adorno and Horkheimer put questions of gendered domination and sexuality into perspective (Umrath, 2019: 369), they refrained from systematically engaging with concrete living conditions of women (Becker-Schmidt, 2017a: 43). Benjamin, as we have seen, points to their role as the primary caregivers and the consequences of their living and working conditions in an alienated and reified society.¹⁴ In their infancy, they will more likely than not have been confronted with retaliating or retreating parents when acting on their drives and aggressive impulses through patriarchal moral codes; they would most likely have had to return to

¹³ This approach enables to add to the explanation of the fierce culture war that is raging over gender and sexuality and how it intersects with antisemitism (Stögner, 2014). Expanding on Benjamin's theoretical approach could add to a comprehensive understanding of contemporary forms of antisemitism and differentiate between the fear from the other in racist ideologies and from the non-identical in antisemitism.

¹⁴ A fact that is often depoliticized and romanticized as love and represents possibly the largest expropriation in the world that is taking place in the world today (Colligs, 2022: 244; Soiland, 2022: 103).

identifying with the mother who doesn't offer autonomy and bind herself in love to the idealized father. The fewer women and mothers are enabled to experience mutual recognition in their primary relations, the more they turn into objects for the needs of the child themselves, so that the child in turn cannot experience bonds based on recognition (Benjamin, 2015: 34-35). Caregivers in general and women as—until today—primary caregivers are confronted with specific aspects of domination that put them and their ability to survive the infant's aggression under a particular amount of duress: being dually burdened with care and wage work (Becker-Schmidt, 2017b: 88; Scholz, 2005: 19), and with absent or unavailable men (Scholz, 1997) as well as fathers who are similarly disabled from coping with the infants' efforts to liberate themselves from the crises in the phase of rapprochement, they are likely confronted with living and working conditions that put them through stress and give them little room to hold and regulate their infants' aggressive impulses. As such, identities structurally remain fragile and are prone to crises.

Thus, rather than assuming an ontological tendency to collapse, Benjamin claims that it is embedded in bourgeois society which is, according to critical theory, constituted by a specific form of domination over inner and outer nature (Adorno/Horkheimer, 2004: 61-62; Wolf, 2022: 81) and its reified and alienated forms of reproduction (Colligs, 2022: 240). Adorno and Horkheimer describe it as a form of male domination that is based on instrumental reason, the logic of identity and the exchange of equivalent commodities. To bring forth the "identical, instrumental, male character of man" that is required for this specific mode of production and reproduction, humanity had to do terrible things to itself "and something of this is still repeated in every childhood" (Adorno/Horkheimer, 2004: 19).¹⁵ Society is experienced by the individual "in shocks" and "in sudden, abrupt jolts", "which are caused by [...] the alienation of the individual from society" (Adorno, 2020: 24). What binds the individuals together is "almost [...] a system of scars [...] that are only integrated with suffering, and never entirely" (Adorno, 2020: 24; Wolf, 2022: 74).¹⁶ Society is thence fundamentally held together by a negative premise,

¹⁵ Benjamin leans on this aspect of Adorno's thinking when she states: "What triggers submission is the rational, calculating and even instrumentalizing attitude of the [male, F.S.] master" (Benjamin, 2015: 80).

¹⁶ However, Benjamin critically notes regarding Adorno that he wrongfully accepted the Freudian ontology. According to her, critical theory must recognize that the process of subject formation "is a defence against unbearable reality", a specific mode of production and set of cultural configurations

“by the threat of physical violence, albeit often indirect, and this is the source of ‘potential hostility’, which manifests itself in neuroses and character disorders”, rather than empathy (Adorno, 2020: 32).

Based on this notion and by tracing negativity in Benjamin’s thinking, we can thus decrypt how societal structures that systematically hinder parental object-subjects, especially mothers, from surviving the infant’s destruction in the phantasy, lead to a breakdown of the dialectical tension between self and the other, enforcing defence mechanisms. This touches upon a core of Benjamin’s dialectical critique of identity (Cyfer, 2022: 282; Benjamin, 2018: 17): a society that forces the subjects into complementary gendered identities and sexual desires based on these identities, enforces splitting of the non-identical (Benjamin, 2013b: 134-135; Colligs, 2022: 239-240; Kirchhof, 2022: 329 and 340).

In light of Adorno’s critique of Hegelian dialectics and regarding this fundamental negative premise of ego-formation in modern patriarchal and capitalist society, we can now finally link Benjamin’s approach to the notion of the non-identical in Frankfurt School critical theory. According to Adorno, the result of an idealistic dialectical negation is identity: the idea in Hegel’s philosophy that negation is sublated in positivity “is the quintessence of identification” (Adorno, 2003: 161). “The mistake of traditional thinking [is] that it considers identity to be its goal” (Adorno, 2003: 152). Criticizing Hegel, Adorno claims that the whole is negative and thus “the negation of particularities, which has its epitome in that whole, remains negative” (Adorno, 2003: 161). Positivity and identity that are the result of the dialectical movement in Hegelian thinking are then what Adorno claims to be “anti-dialectical principles” (Adorno, 2003: 161). Rather than striving for identity, negative dialectical thinking “denies the false reconciliation between the contradictory moments that identifies the non-identical at a higher level” (Wilhelm, 2022: 254). Since “the thought that identifies always does violence to every single object through identification” (Adorno, 2007: 51), reflection on the negative residue is key: “The subject must redress what it has done to the non-identical” (Adorno, 2003: 149).

But as the non-identical eludes the conceptual, it remains indeterminate and triggers anxiety in the identifying thought: The persistence of what has been fended

and “not a natural mode of constituting consciousness, necessitated by the opposition of the drives” (Benjamin, 1977: 63). Benjamin thus calls for a theory “which explains how the ego is formed through social interaction” - rather than through drives alone.

off, triggers fear because it reminds of the aggression that was needed to split. The subject “knows why it feels absolutely threatened by the slightest excess of the non-identical” (Adorno, 2003: 184). This fear of this threat by the split non-identical returns as a form of “neurotic anxiety” (Neumann, 1978: 429). Recalling Benjamin's reflections on complementarity in early childhood development now brings us back to the contemporary battle over gender and sexuality in which the aggressive defence of the natural order of two genders can be decrypted as a “false healing” of this anxiety (cf. Brunner 2016).

7 CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Benjamin does not renounce Freudian drive theory nor does she reject the Oedipus complex as a core nexus in the development of gender and sexuality. At the same time, she argues that the Freudian notion is false as she puts forward a more nuanced view of the Oedipus complex, emphasizing the impact of early relationships on the development of gender and sexuality and challenging the idea that domination is inevitable. She proposes taking the twofold character into account, in which we ought not only look at how the infant, based on its drives, relates to the primary objects but also take the parent's subconscious reactions towards the infantile frustrations and aggressive impulses, destruction in the phantasy and abstract negation of the other, into account. Before entering the Oedipus complex, the infant has already crossed several junctions in which the stage for how the complex is resolved is set. Benjamin thus emphasizes the pre-Oedipal phase in which, in bourgeois-patriarchal societies, the child is confronted with parental object-subjects that are structurally disabled from surviving the aggressive impulses leading to the experience of rejection.

This experience of a lack of recognition by the parents leads to “false differentiation” where masculinity is built on rejecting femininity. Based on the Freudian notion of the negative Oedipus complex, in which the child develops representations of both genders, Benjamin shows how essentially poly-sexual infants are forced into one of two complementary identities. And with her theory, we can understand how the vicious circle of negative dialectics of gendered and sexual domination and submission are set in motion. This embeds Benjamin's approach in the notion of negativity in Adorno's thinking. False differentiation and the patriarchal autonomous subject that assumes independence of others and is identical

with himself, as Adorno and Horkheimer criticized the male character (Wolf, 2022: 199), is, in the sense of Benjamin, the structural outcome of a reified society.¹⁷

Returning from this reconstruction of Benjamin's approach as it is linked to Adorno's notion of negativity and the non-identical to the raging battle over the question of nature and self-determination: Based on Benjamin's theory, we can see that there is a fundamental truth to referring to an order of things that lies beyond the will of the individual regarding gender and sexuality. This order of things, that is in essence a social order, appears as natural, forming what can be understood as second nature (Wolf, 2022: 80).¹⁸ Declaring what is essentially second nature as first nature, as the newly re-elected Trump administration claims, implies reproducing mystified complementary genders and sexual desires, reinforcing alienating and reified social and economic structures that bring forth withered subjects and false differentiation—a vicious circle. And it is this dynamic exactly that turns the very idea of self-determination into ideology in a societal context in which structurally disables us to recognize others, thus enforcing complementarity. This is why “the division and polarization of the sexes persists in the structure of our individuality” and why it is so enduring (Benjamin, 2015: 102). In the sense of this fundamentally negative premise of bourgeois society and Benjamin's dialectical approach to deciphering it, we can understand why the abstract binary and complementary—thus mutually exclusive—categories of male and female or sexualities are prone to fragility and crises. This creates the paranoid fear of the non-identical; and can thus so effectively be mobilized in the contemporary battle over gender and sexuality.

So, is that all there is? Benjamin emphasizes that even in these damaged forms of dealing with the lack of bonding experience, the possibility emerges that things could be different. As much as false differentiation leads into domination and submission, it points to the unfulfilled urge to experience a bond, in which the outer object survives the destruction in the phantasy. Impulses that under different

¹⁷ To explain why forms of gendered and sexual domination are so stable, Benjamin draws on the notion of alienation and fetishism in Marx's *Capital*. In her 1977 essay, in which Benjamin critically engages with Adorno's theory of internalization, she states: “the social individual is rooted in the biological individual—that is, the social form of individuality which emerges” and that appears as “a natural and universal form of ego development” (Benjamin, 1977: 60).

¹⁸ However, Benjamin refrains from linking her theory back to the body as a place of pleasure and displeasure. Whilst she at times points to her acceptance of the drive theory, she doesn't reflect on the character and consequence of the body as being simultaneously nature and not nature (Göllner, 2019; Wolf, 2022; Kirchhoff, 2022).

circumstances could lead to a higher degree of ego strength in an emphatic sense (Benjamin, 2018: 15). They would enable the joyful discovery of the other, whilst playfully imitating submission and domination. That would likely generate a higher likelihood for the ability to integrate the other gender in one's own self: "The identification with the other leads to a paradox (creating potential sexual tension without domination): I am what I identify with, and yet, I am not", Benjamin gives us a hunch of how this might be experienced (Benjamin, 2013a: 87). Or: It is the intersubjective space that enables "to bridge difference, to adopt diverse positions and to tolerate non-identity instead of erasing the position of the self or the other" (Benjamin, 2013b: 135).¹⁹

Improving living and working conditions for both men and especially for women within capitalist societies would certainly allow for a better ability to survive the infant's aggressions. While on a clinical level, the psychoanalytic practice aims to "restore the space of thirdness" (Benjamin, 2018: 7), on a societal level this can only be achieved through fundamental changes of the mode of production and reproduction and its deeply inscribed forms of gendered domination, allowing for a less defensive Oedipal splitting (Benjamin, 2018: 12).

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¹⁹ However, regarding this specific passage, we ought to specify Benjamin's notion of the non-identical: she mainly characterizes it as that which is not part of the identity and thus also encompasses what can be referred to as the other. In Adorno's philosophy, the non-identical is not merely the negated other but a third. It is what remains after the identical, and its negation is split into two fragile concepts (Kirchhoff, 2022: 338).

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