

Adorno and the political economy of communication

Trish Morgan, *National University of Ireland*

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Abstract

The Frankfurt School of critical theory occupies a significant space in the history of the political economy of communication and culture. Theodor Adorno as a member of the school provided a unique multidisciplinary perspective on the political economy of culture. However, place and the apparent relevance of the school have been affected by postmodern and cultural studies scholarship at a time when neoliberalism has prevailed. This is evidenced by a turn away from Adorno and a critique of his work as ‘elitist’. The postmodern, cultural and neoliberal turns have remained dominant. It is only recently that Adorno is being rehabilitated in relation to discourse on cultural and communication theory.

In the latter context, it is important to position the work of Theodor Adorno within the tradition of the political economy of communication. He conducted pioneering work on the political-economic power structures involved in the production of culture. Taking his 1938 work, *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* as an exemplar of his work, this article outlines Adorno’s philosophical and cultural theories with a view to contextualising them in terms of contemporary scholarship in the political economy of communication. This contextualisation leads to a consideration of Adorno’s work as a resource for examining the ‘strange non-death of neoliberalism’ (Crouch, 2011).

Recently, the foregrounding of the political and cultural theories of the Frankfurt School within the political economy tradition has been welcomed, notably by Foster and McChesney (2013). These authors, in discussing the work of Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, provide a useful overview of the Frankfurt School with regard to the political economy of communication. However, although this account acknowledges contributions to the concept of a cultural apparatus by Benjamin, Horkheimer and Marcuse, Adorno is largely overlooked. This is not atypical, as Adorno’s polemical critique of the ‘culture industry’ combined with his difficult and dense writing style is seen as off-putting, sometimes irrelevant and, at worst, elitist.

This article suggests that Adorno merits a more prominent place within the political economy of communication. However, it acknowledges that Adorno's contributions as a composer and musicologist colour the analogies through which he mounts his critiques of the industrialisation of culture and communications. One must also acknowledge that Adorno did not develop a political theory per se, but a philosophical and cultural one. Nonetheless, his analysis of the 'culture industry' and its connections with prevailing power structures provide important insights into the political economy of communication. Here, I focus on Adorno's 1938 work, *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* (Adorno 1938/1991). This work is the precursor to Adorno's later 'culture industry' analysis with Horkheimer (in the essay that predates their discussion of this concept in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944/1972).

Adorno, as a member of the Frankfurt School, was situated within an interdisciplinary environment. As Foster and McChesney observe, "central to the Frankfurt School's concerns was the relationship of mass culture to politics and social change" (Foster and McChesney, 2013: PN). In this regard, the Frankfurt School attempted to synthesise Marxist theories of political economy with Freudian psychoanalytical perspectives (Foster and McChesney, 2013) [1]. Adorno viewed the political economy of culture through multiple lenses. His knowledge of music contributed to the case study of a cultural form undergoing massive changes due to its industrialisation.

With their hybrid approach, the Frankfurt School theorists can be seen as early exemplars of a critical-institutional perspective on cultural production, media and communication. However, the work of the Frankfurt School and of Adorno became subject to critique within postmodernist interpretations of cultural production. Criticism of Adorno for the sheer totality of his cultural critique can be warranted, however there is a sense that the subtleties of Adorno's work have been neglected. The baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. This article uses *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* as a vehicle for understanding Adorno's insights about the political economy of culture.

Adorno on music

Just what was Adorno's jazz?

Adorno's writings on jazz have come under particular scrutiny for their supposed elitism and disdain. They are regarded at least as an "encumbrance" (Jameson, 1990: 5) and at worst as "an acute embarrassment" (Robinson, 1994: 1). However, to judge Adorno's broader critique of industrialised culture on the bad press associated with his writings on jazz would be a mistake. As Robinson (1994) notes, there exist two misconceptions around Adorno's jazz works: the first assumes that Adorno's 'jazz' is cognate with what we contemporarily understand as 'jazz'; and the second assumes that Adorno was referring to American or New Orleans jazz (Robinson, 1994: 1).

In explaining one of these misconceptions we demystify the other. Adorno was referring to the German Weimar Republic manifestation of jazz. This kind of jazz was neither American nor the jazz that we understand today. In the 1920s, Germany was still under economic sanctions from the Allies after WWI, and culturally isolated from American culture. Therefore, no American jazz musicians visited Germany, nor were their recordings available. In light of this, the popularity of

jazz in Germany derived from its “home-grown” products (Robinson, 1994: 4), which were fusions of foxtrots and military marches. There were also influences from the salon orchestra and “gypsy music” (Robinson, 1994: 5). Thus, at best, the jazz that Adorno was familiar with bore only a passing resemblance to American/New Orleans jazz. When jazz imports became more readily available, they were not representative of that musical culture. It was the more heavily commercialised jazz products, such as those from white bandleaders, that made their way to Germany. Thus, even as more imports became available, there was little black American jazz among them. This can be attributed to catalogue segregation by recording companies (Robinson, 1994: 6) [2].

Controversially, when Adorno became aware of the music of ‘legitimate’ jazz greats, this did not alter his general critique. His expertise in musicology led him to draw comparisons between the rhythmic structures of jazz and classical music, along with associated innovations in harmony and melody. However, such comparisons left Adorno cold. He saw more advanced innovations in Brahms and Debussy and concluded that “harmonically, jazz remained well behind the state attained by art music” (Robinson, 1994: 10). Being relatively unaware of the great jazz soloists of the time, Adorno’s critique stemmed from his familiarity with Weimar Germany jazz and Tin Pan Alley jazz. Crucially, he adjudged the merits of these musical forms in the context of their commercialisation. Therefore, while those familiar with the now extensive canon of jazz might wonder at Adorno’s scathing polemic, it is important to acknowledge the context of the writing. At that time, jazz in Germany was the music of the elite class; subsequent American imports were highly commodified (Robinson, 1994: 19). With these thoughts in mind, Adorno’s critique appears more aligned with his overall project of exposing the mass industrialisation of culture.

By 1933, when Hitler came to power, jazz music in Germany had mutated from a form of dance music to the form of a military march (Robinson, 1994: 10). Thus, the jazz music with which Adorno was familiar came to symbolise German militarism. It is in this context that Adorno proclaimed that “jazz has lent itself so readily to the uses of fascism” (Adorno, 1937; as cited in Robinson, 1994: 21). While Adorno can be critiqued for generalising about jazz from his particular understanding of it, when taken in the context of his exposure to the ‘militarised’ and Tin Pan Alley forms, his fundamental opposition to the commercialisation of culture can be seen in a sympathetic light. Indeed, as Robinson observes, in the Weimar Germany context, Adorno’s works on jazz “not only take on an air of plausibility but find confirmation from other sources as well: from gramophone catalogues and sheet music anthologies, professional magazines and radio broadcasting” (Robinson, 1994: 21). Thus, when historically situated, Adorno’s work on jazz as a sociology of music and culture holds a rich relevance for a critique of the political economy of communication.

The historical context of listening

Another perspective associated with Adorno’s political economy of culture can be gleaned from considering *how* Adorno perceived music as a form of culture. *On the Fetish Character* is concerned with a regression in listening perception brought about by the industrialisation of music culture. In order to fully understand Adorno’s views on this matter, it is useful to consider his historical situation. The well-known story of his exile and the culture shock experienced during his

time in America must be complemented with the realisation that the culture of listening was itself changing.

How Adorno received and perceived music was significant for the development of his theories on culture. Matters of family background are particularly important. Both his mother and aunt, who shared Adorno's childhood home, were musical performers. His mother was a professional singer until her marriage, and his aunt was a professional pianist. Adorno himself was a skilled pianist and composer, and seriously considered a career in performance and composition (Leppert, 2002: 2). With this combination of background and training, Adorno was deeply situated within a practice of live musical performance. He contributed to the music journal *Musikblätter des Anbruch* from 1925, becoming part of its editorial board in 1929 (Levin, 1990: 26). One column in this journal, devoted to 'mechanische musik', sought to investigate and critique the new forms of mechanical reproduction in music (Levin, 1990: 28). He wrote two essays around this time concerning the phonograph: *The Curves of the Needle*, published in 1928 (Adorno, 1928/1990) and *The Form of the Phonograph Record*, published in 1934 under the pseudonym Hektor Rottweiler (Adorno, 1934/1990). Therefore, Adorno was ideally placed to compare and critique the forms of music, musical genres and how technological and commercial developments were altering the culture of listening.

Adorno's early musical life and career coincided with studies of Kant and Marx. This undoubtedly made him aware of Marx's observations about the experiencing of culture. As Katz notes, Marx commented on how the "service" of a performance, "satisfies my aesthetic need, but what I consume exists only in an action inseparable from the singer, and as soon as the singing is over, so too is my consumption" (Marx, ca 1861–1863; as cited in Katz 2010: 13). Thus, prior to recording technologies, all music was performance; the listener could not take away a musical commodity for subsequent hearing. The music performance was also unique and impossible to capture exactly in a reproduction. Adorno was therefore straddling two worlds. He was deeply embedded in a culture of performance, both in his practice and listening, and yet was amongst the first generation to experience the new technology of recorded music. Adorno was thus aware of the visceral and material differences between recorded music and live performance. In short, the unique performance *was* the commodity, whereas with recorded sound, the performance could be abstracted from its live setting, infinitely reproduced and commodified. Adorno's sociology of music was informed by the unfolding of recording technology and the industrialisation of culture that developed around it.

Thus, by acknowledging Adorno's historical situatedness, we can view his sociology of music in various contexts: namely, the political economy of culture in the Weimar Republic, the cultural shaping of emergent technologies and the transformation of culture into an industrialised commodity.

Adorno and evolving political economies

Adorno's philosophical theory

I now turn to a brief overview of Adorno's philosophy, which informs his immanent critique of the industrialisation of culture. Adorno was deeply sceptical of instrumental reason, viewing it as

potentially “totalitarian” and “deeply damaging of both interhuman relations as well as the relation between man and nature” (Hammer, 2007: 127). In this critique, Adorno does not suggest an anti-science stance, but questions the assumption that we can totally know our world through instrumental reason alone. For Adorno, the ‘totalitarian’ nature of instrumental reason manifests itself in a limited perception. The possibilities of experiencing lived reality in alternate, expanded ways are truncated leading to societal neuroses. We will see traces of this viewpoint in *On the Fetish Character* where Adorno argues that regression manifests in neuroses such as rage.

For Adorno, transcending the impositions and constraints of instrumental reason is linked to reconciliation and hope, but also to disruption (Hammer, 2011: 240). This transcendental space is “connected to a search for the non-identical, items that hold a special interest, exert a special authority, without domination” (Hammer, 2011: 240). When read in the light of these philosophical concepts, it becomes clearer as to why Adorno railed against the standardisation of mass culture. For Adorno, such cultural products precluded the possibility of transcendental experience, and of contemplating ‘other’ formulations of society. It is this key aspect of his theory that is of significance when discussing the political economy of communication.

Adorno’s critical theory considers the extent to which the industrialisation of culture undercuts the potential of cultural artefacts to offer a negative harmony or an alternate space of disruption and ultimately hope. For Adorno, this outcome is unequivocal. Instead of developing a ‘negative harmony’, industrialised culture generated a dysfunctional society and a broad sense of compliance to it. Thus, those commodified cultural items that promise a sense of transcendence or escape from disenchantment into what Adorno terms “immediacy” in fact offer a ‘false immediacy’. Instead of offering a sense of ‘other’ experience, commodified culture repetitively reinforces the status quo, and thus precludes any possibility of transcendence.

Postmodernisms and aesthetic populism

In terms of the political economy of culture and communication, Adorno’s work brought about a significant reaction, characterised by the postmodern expression of “aesthetic populism” (Jameson, 1984: 54). Importantly, for our consideration of Adorno’s political economy and its contemporary relevance, the postmodern turn was not just cultural. Indeed, a comparison may be drawn between theories of postmodernism and those that eulogise a new type of society, most notably the ‘post-industrial’ society of Daniel Bell, along with the ‘information society’ (Jameson, 1984: 55). The support these theories lend to the postmodern paradigm enhances the view that one can transcend the economic laws of capitalism. Yet the insights associated with post-industrial theory and the information society are deeply embedded in the political economy of ‘late’ capitalism. In this context, cultural production became increasingly aligned with commodity production and the “frantic economic urgency” of “waves of ever more novel-seeming goods” (Jameson, 1984: 56). Jameson links this cultural malaise with both multinationals and the military-industrial complex. In short, postmodern ideology and its accompanying commodity culture is inherently bound to multinational capitalism and thus unable to critique it. From Adorno’s political economy of culture perspective, postmodernism is also highly problematic because it precludes the prospect of transcendent experience.

This increasing emphasis on theories and concepts of ‘culture’ can be termed the ‘cultural turn’. This tendency corresponds with the process of individualisation, consumerism and the commodification of culture at the expense of the “collective” (Preston, 2005: 60). A characteristic of this cultural turn, is that “consumerism, especially that related to cultural and media products, is now highlighted as a key site for active, playful, or pleasurable appropriation and the creative, even subversive, construction of diverse identities” (Preston, 2005: 62). Therefore, in a reversal of Adorno’s concerns about the ‘standardisation’ of culture, contemporary commodified culture becomes a site of pleasure and play, and through that play, a site of subversion. This is at odds with Adorno’s argument that certain cultural dispositions may ‘negatively’ occupy a site of transformation (in circumstances where the entertainment and play value of commodified culture denies this potential).

Coincident with this cultural turn, the neoliberal turn foregrounds the ‘information society’ by privileging ICTs as catalysts and pioneers of this new age. In terms of culture, the ‘content neutral’ invisible hand of the market ensures the diversity of cultural artefacts and freedom of choice for the consumer. In this market framework, private ownership provides the consumer with the best choice of media ‘products’ while large media corporations offer a diverse range of cultural products in order to maximise market share. Advertising is seen as “commercial free speech” that informs “rational” consumers about products (Preston, 2001: 242–243). In such formulations of culture, the possibility of an Adornian ‘transcendence’ is largely denied, as culture is no longer seen as a means of encountering any sense of ‘other’. These assumptions of the ‘free’ market and the ‘rational’ consumer (unembedded within an aggregate audience), point to the philosophical problem of instrumental reason with which Adorno grappled. Neoliberal paradigms ignore Adorno’s fundamental question as to whether we can know the world by instrumental reason alone.

Critiques of Adorno

During these ‘turns’, the work of Adorno was extensively critiqued, perhaps most famously by his own student Jurgen Habermas [3]. These critiques were based on the view that Adorno was no longer relevant and/or that he was ‘elitist’. As Thompson notes, “it has now become almost a total commonplace to view Adorno’s critique of popular culture with disdain” (Thompson, 2010: 37). Jameson outlines how he actively distanced himself from Adorno in the 1970s, due to his perception of Adorno’s hostility towards the USSR, the third world, and the black movement (by Jameson’s own admission, the latter perception was based on an “overhasty” reading of Adorno’s works on jazz) (Jameson, 1990: 4) [4]. The charge of pessimism and negativity was also levelled at Adorno at this time due to his focus upon such horrors as Auschwitz and the possibility of it happening again. To some, he seemed preoccupied “with the doom and baleful enchantment of a ‘total system’” (Jameson, 1990: 5).

Likewise, in the context of postmodernist critique, Adorno and Horkheimer both came to be perceived as “heavies” who “developed a totalling theory of mass culture based on questionable notions of the development of 20th century capitalism” (Hohendahl, 1992: 7). Adorno at this time was seen as “preoccupied” with an “outdated and outlandish” cultural theory that foregrounded high culture at the expense of understanding how social groups perceive popular culture. This is especially so in Adorno’s work on music, where postmodernists see him as “a firm and sometimes

rigid defender of the modernist position” (Hohendahl, 1992: 7). Adorno’s use of language [5] was seen as a manifestation of his elitism which, when added to his negative appraisal of mass culture, “offends the populist pieties of progressive American thought” (Jay, 1984: PN). Indeed his “apparently uncompromising defence of modernist art” along with his “apparently uncompromising critique of mass culture” led postmodern thinkers to perceive Adorno as opposed to “claims for a democratic transformation of culture” (Bernstein, 1991: 1).

We see the manifestation of Adorno’s ‘pessimistic’ theories in *On the Fetish Character*. Here, he juxtaposes examples from popular music with those from ‘high’ musical culture, usually to the detriment of the former. In this way, it is all too easy to reveal Adorno’s supposed ‘elitism’ in that he clearly favours ‘high’ culture over ‘low’ or popular culture. However, when one takes account of his historical and philosophical background, we can better understand that it is not the musical pieces themselves that Adorno concentrates on, rather it is what they represent. There is either the possibility of transcendence or an industrialised product designed for profit. When considered in this light, we no longer see an elitism but an idealism in Adorno’s political economy of culture.

Adorno was primarily a sociologist of music; his concern was for the collective benefit, therefore the industrialisation of culture for profit was not beneficial. As we will see in *On the Fetish Character*, not only were industrialised cultural products musically conservative, they precluded the possibility of transcendence and enabled listeners to adapt to the increasing administration of their lives. Thus, whilst critiques of Adorno’s elitism can be levelled in relation to examples that Adorno colourfully uses to explicate his points, such critiques miss the underlying political dimension. Instead, they serve as descriptive critiques of the specific cultural artefacts that Adorno supplies as examples. Adorno’s critics do not engage with his cultural or political theories, such as “the conception of advanced capitalism (Fordism) and its fundamental restructuring of the relations of production” (Hohendahl, 1992: 8). Indeed, in this light, we can see Adorno as a firm advocate for a true democratic transformation of culture beyond the forces of capitalist industrialisation and total administration.

Thus, many critiques of Adorno’s work miss his rich perspectives on political economy. Adorno was not concerned with the protection of high culture for its own sake, but “with salvaging those elements most under threat from enlightened reason”, including “a substantial notion of individuality, and authentic happiness” (Bernstein, 1991: 22).

On the Fetish Character: Music as industrialised culture

Introduction

Clearly, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944) and its later reprise *Culture Industry Reconsidered* (1967) are the best known examples of Adorno’s work on the industrialisation of culture. This article suggests that a review of his 1938 work *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* reveals Adorno’s pioneering contributions to the political economy of culture. Although primarily a critique of the industrialisation of music, the insights offered in that essay complement those of later works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944/1972) and *Culture Industry Reconsidered*. These contain commentaries on the music industry that reflect Adorno’s understandings of the political economy

dimension. Best known as the seminal retort to Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, *On the Fetish Character* provides a robust critique of the industrialisation of culture. As Bernstein notes, "most of the central tenets of his theory of the culture industry were already formulated" (Bernstein, 1991: 4) in this essay, even though the phrase 'culture industry' did not yet appear in this work.

I will now present the key themes of the essay in an order which accords with Adorno's structure. At first glance, the structure of the piece is complex, with Adorno seemingly flitting between themes and reprising them. However, perhaps in keeping with his regard for Beethoven (who broke tradition by introducing a fifth movement into the usual four-movement symphonic form); Adorno's essay appears to be arranged structurally into five 'phases'. With this in mind, I will proceed as follows. We need, firstly, to discuss Adorno's consideration of how the value of familiarity has replaced the transformative value of culture, and how that familiarity is increasingly employed for its exchange value. Secondly, Adorno's perspective on commodity fetishism is outlined, especially in regard to culture. Thirdly, I will consider how the experience of the listener or audience is influenced by this commercialisation, and provide an overview of Adorno's portrait of the regressed listener. The fourth area of discussion is the theme of regression itself, and how that manifests in the listener. The final and fifth section considers Adorno's views on the broader implications of this fetishism and regression.

However, before immersing ourselves in the dense language and cultural theory of this essay, Adorno's assessment of the function of music and culture needs to be reiterated. Not one for lengthy introductions, Adorno begins by announcing unequivocally that music is a "disciplining function" and "a major good" (Adorno, 1991: 29). At once, music represents "the immediate manifestation of impulse and the locus of its taming" (Adorno, 1991: 29), and thus, music provides a site of authentic immediacy in terms of how it can give expression to impulses, and how it can act as a site of catharsis.

Adorno is thus concerned that changes to the "musical consciousness of the Masses", through the commercialisation of music, have "nothing to do with taste", or with freedom of choice, but are manufactured. For Adorno, the idea that the audience freely chooses mass-produced music is not only erroneous but dangerous. Such an idea potentially eliminates the transformative function of culture itself. The verification of culture based on 'taste' or subjective evaluations of what might be 'harmonious' or 'correct' or otherwise, is moot in an age of cultural standardisation. Therefore, it is just as 'questionable' to make subjective evaluations of culture as it is to unquestioningly assume a freedom of choice which, "empirically, in any case, no one any longer exercises" (Adorno, 1991: 29). From this short outline of the function of music, Adorno proceeds to the first 'phase' of the work that discusses the place of familiarity in the listening process.

Familiarity and diversion

For Adorno, to ask if a person 'likes' a piece of commercial music has become irrelevant, as familiarity with the work has become "a surrogate" for the perception of its quality. Thus, to 'like' a piece of commercial music "is almost the same thing as to recognize it" (Adorno, 1991: 29); the listener assumes that they like the music because they can recognise it. In this paradigm, recognition becomes an occasion of regression, as the listener finds him or herself "hemmed in by standardized

musical goods” (Adorno, 1991: 30). This renders the listener impotent and unable to make meaningful decisions between “the offerings where everything is so completely identical” and “biographical details or on the situation in which things are heard” (Adorno, 1991: 30).

This is an important point in the reading of Adorno’s work. The issue here is not with one type of cultural production over another, but rather with the process by which cultural production is commercialised (to the extent that it does not afford a listener an evaluation of the piece on anything else other than a cult of recognition). Adorno’s critique thus stems from the view that cultural forms are degraded into trinkets to be exchanged as cultural capital over their use value, the highest form of which is transformation. For Adorno, the coupling of capitalist economics with culture means that the “traditional anti-mythological ferments of music conspire against freedom, as whose allies they were once proscribed” (Adorno, 1991: 33). Adorno points here to an undermining of an order where music was a potential site of freedom. In this paradigm of commodification, culture loses its power as a set of “productive impulses which rebelled against conventions”. Instead, “the old adversaries of materialistic alienation, now succumb to it” (Adorno, 1991: 33). Thus, when “proper listening” is no longer possible due to the overwhelming totality of commercialised products, the listener becomes reduced to “the acquiescent purchaser” (Adorno, 1991: 33). This subtlety is lost in neoliberal formulations of culture which unproblematically conflate the notion of audiences with consumers. Concern about ‘the acquiescent purchaser’ is mapped onto a broader canvas where culture no longer provides an opportunity for critical evaluation of society. Instead, culture “suspend[s] the critique which the successful aesthetic totality exerts against the flawed one of society” (Adorno, 1991: 33).

It is the diversionary function with which Adorno is critically concerned. A potential audience capable of engaging with the dialectical critique of a ‘whole’ work of culture has now been regressed to recognising entertaining moments or soundbites. This entertainment can never provide the listener with a true experience, but an “illusory” one that “cheats the pleasure-seeker out of itself” (Adorno, 1991: 33). Contrary to his critics, this polemic is not levelled at popular culture, but at the commercialisation of any culture. Adorno stresses that, unlike previous times where “popular” culture was an organic form that formerly “attacked the cultural privilege of the ruling class” (Adorno, 1991: 34), commercialised culture became one of the “swarming forms of the banal” which “extends over the entire society”.

When the function of music itself has changed from transformation to entertainment, this change homogenises how an audience may perceive culture of any kind. In this total cultural apparatus then, the regression of the listener is such that they only consume culture for entertainment. According to Adorno, this invokes a passivity in the very audience for which passivity is not in their interests. The industry claims the audience’s approval of the standardised cultural form, and undermines any preference for the potentially radical cultural forms as a pretence. This view is hardly surprising when indeed the commercialised musical form exists just for social approval.

Within that paradigm, there is no room for an individual with ‘real’ or meaningful cultural demands. Instead, for Adorno, commercialisation implies “the liquidation of the individual” (Adorno, 1991: 35). This elimination of individuality or individual taste or preference is another symptom of the insidiousness of commercialised culture for Adorno. Rather than suggesting that

the individual is lacking by virtue of their taste, he argues that all audiences are affected by intensive commercialisation. Thus, the fruits of this commercialisation are evident not only in the reactions of the listener to popular music, but also within the audience of 'high' culture. For Adorno, "the star principle" both in popular and 'high' music [has become] 'totalitarian'" (Adorno, 1991: 35). In that case, listeners no longer relate to the music in an authentic way. Rather, they reference the "cumulative success" of not only the composer but the work itself and a "pantheon of bestsellers builds up" (Adorno, 1991: 36). Evaluating work on its success as a 'bestseller', results for Adorno in a "shrinking process" where not just the "moderately good" but also the "accepted classics themselves undergo a selection that has nothing to do with quality" (Adorno, 1991: 36). Rather, familiarity is the marker by which the audience now evaluates a piece of work, forming a sort of feedback loop: "This selection reproduces itself in a fatal circle: the most familiar is the most successful and is therefore played again and again and made still more familiar" (Adorno, 1991: 36).

This feedback loop is also present on the side of industry. Adorno observes how "the choice of the standard works is itself in terms of their 'effectiveness' for programmatic fascination, in terms of the categories of success as determined by light music or permitted by the star conductors" (Adorno, 1991: 36).

In the context of political economy, this critique of culture as a familiar entertainment product holds relevance for contemporary standpoints concerning media and communication. According to Adorno, industrialisation and standardisation of culture removes choice, or only provides choice according to accepted formats. While Adorno speaks of the 'regressed listener' as individual, he demands that we think of the societal impact of such regression. For Adorno, industrialisation of culture and the homogenisation of culture into familiar entertainment products sever any link with a progressive societal project. In this respect, his cultural theory is deeply political.

Fetishism and property

The industrialisation of culture process results in the cultural form itself becoming a form of property. Thus, the simple, 'successful' pieces that get most air time are "catalogued as the composer's 'idea' which one thinks he can put in his pocket and take home" (Adorno, 1991: 36). Well in advance of our contemporary notions of intellectual property, he also observes the situation of "musical larceny being hunted down with all the zeal of the belief in property" (Adorno, 1991: 36) because of the desire to protect 'successful' commercialised works.

The effect of this is seen in the "musical fetish", an adaptation of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. Citing examples of the singing voice and the Stradivarius violin, Adorno argues how there exists an undue fetishising and a cult of personality in commercialised musical products. Thus, the process of listening has become alienated, with the audience and the cultural artefact bearing no relationship to each other. Instead, they function as a fetishistic relationship. Adorno reminds us that, according to Marx, the fetish character of a commodity is "the veneration of the thing made by oneself which, as exchange value, simultaneously alienates itself from producer to consumer" (Adorno, 1991: 36). In this context, the concert-goer seeking access to music "is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the [...] concert" (Adorno, 1991: 36). Therefore, the consumer has "literally 'made' the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion,

without recognising himself in it” (Adorno, 1991: 34). However, the consumer has not ‘made’ the success by enjoying the concert, but by purchasing the concert ticket.

Adorno posits that there exists a special place for considering the exchange value of cultural artefacts, and that this commodity fetishism is potentially very powerful in given cultural contexts. In a world of commodities, cultural artefacts appear to be “exempted from the power of exchange”, or “to be in an immediate relationship with the goods” (Adorno, 1991: 38). It is this appearance of immediacy alone, or the promise thereof, that occludes the exchange value of cultural works. This apparent immediacy veils the exchange value. Adorno argues that “the specific fetish character of music lies in this *quid pro quo*” of interchanging an appearance of use value—that of its promise of immediacy—with pure exchange value. Thus, the ‘liking’ of a commodified cultural product, or “every ersatz satisfaction” that the audience derives from a fetishised product “depends on such social substitution” of its use value, that of immediacy, with its exchange value, or appearance (Adorno, 1991: 39). Thus, the consumer of the commodified cultural product does not see their own alienation because the exchange value provides a substitute pleasure, a surrogate listening experience.

Adorno considers the implications of this on society generally, noting that “the change in the function of music involves the basic conditions of the relation between art and society” (Adorno, 1991: 39). We have seen what, for Adorno, this relation potentially comprises. Outside of commodity fetishism, culture remains relatively autonomous and thus capable of offering genuine immediacy. Not only in culture, but also in the political dimension, the person’s alienation is increasingly complete and yet at the same time veiled by the entertainment value of the cultural good. Thus, the more complete this alienation, the less it is examined. Adorno observes how “the more inexorably the principle of exchange value destroys use values for human beings, the more deeply does exchange value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment” (Adorno, 1991: 39). Comparing this process to a religious act, Adorno observes how “before the theological caprices of commodities, the consumers become temple slaves. Those who sacrifice themselves nowhere else can do so here, and here they are fully betrayed” (Adorno, 1991: 39). Thus, in capitulating to the almost total cultural apparatus, the individual neglects a subversive potential, and in doing so is betrayed. This betrayal is outlined further in the next section.

Individual and fetish

The ‘betrayal’ in this act of consumption is described by Adorno as “sado-masochistic” (Adorno, 1991: 40) in character. The masochism is, for Adorno, evident in the “necessary manifestation of almighty production itself”. He compares it to “the behaviour of the prisoner who loves his cell because he has been left nothing else to love”. The concomitant “sacrifice of individuality” is also masochistic through the identification of one’s self with one’s success, as a substitute for more authentic formulations of identity. Mass consumerism fortifies this process, in that “the sacrifice of individuality, which accommodates itself to the regularity of the successful, the doing of what everybody does, follows from the basic fact that in broad areas the same thing is offered to everybody by the standardized production of consumption goods” (Adorno, 1991: 40). Therefore, in a society dominated by commodification, the individual both measures him or herself through their relative success, and when, through their consumption they can appreciate the exchange value of

standardised goods, they feel a further proof of their success. Yet, in this process, individuality is quashed or ‘liquidated’ in the face of a system where identity is measured only by the capacity to perform through exchange values. In the broader social context, this ‘liquidation’ in tandem with regression is a dangerous combination: the passivity of regressed listeners reflects a deeper societal passivity.

The need for commercial interests to connect identity with consumerist practices involves “the manipulation of taste” while also bolstering “the official culture’s pretence of individualism which necessarily increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual” (Adorno, 1991: 40). Therefore, the undermining of individuality happens in conjunction with the manipulation of taste, rendering notions of ‘taste’ questionable in this paradigm. Thus, Adorno challenges the reader to critically evaluate a foundational claim of commercialised culture: that audiences simply ‘like’ the products. Adorno is not undermining the audience’s capability to evaluate commercialised culture by suggesting that they are dumb masses. Rather, he suggests that through a sophisticated mechanism, the audience is sold a substitute product for an authentic experience. In this way, Adorno is not the ‘heavy’ elitist, disdainful of popular culture, but someone who is deeply concerned for fellow human beings and their ability to find authentic experiences in an increasingly commercialised world.

Commercialisation is a sophisticated mechanism; audiences are not just passively duped. For Adorno, this sophisticated manipulation takes the form of some “accidental differentiation within the strict confines of the prescribed” (Adorno, 1991: 40). Therefore, the illusion of some differences reassures the individual listener that the commercial machine is not total, at the same time as the machine becomes a total entity. These works of commodified culture contain fragmented moments of stylistic tricks, or “a conglomeration of irruptions”, but they can be only fragments when “the organisation of the whole makes no impression whatsoever” (Adorno, 1991: 40). This fetishised music product is a reified one, and when this is coupled with the alienation of the listener, “the more reified the music, the more romantic it sounds to alienated ears” (Adorno, 1991: 41).

This ‘disintegration’ of the ‘whole’ musical experience impacts upon the fetishised product itself. For Adorno, the “debris” of fetishisation—he provides the example of somebody on the subway whistling a Brahms melody—itself puts the fetishised product into question. The “reified parts” of the whole piece become programmatic and lacking in spontaneity as they are packaged for enjoyment. Thus, the illusion of spontaneity is “injected into it from the outside” (Adorno, 1991: 41) through industrialisation, a process that Adorno terms “vulgarisation”. When soundbites are packaged with the primary aim of profit-making, “the essential function of conformist performances is no longer the performance of the ‘pure’ work”, but the “presentation of the vulgarized one” (Adorno, 1991: 41). The different arrangements and stylistic treatments applied to music are done in order to ‘freshen up’ and make musical pieces more palatable for consumption rather than for any higher function. In this way, “the tired businessman can clap arranged classics on the shoulder and fondle the progeny of their muse” (Adorno, 1991: 42). This “radical reification” of this treatment “produces its own pretence of immediacy and intimacy” so that the consumer, as Adorno observed previously, feels some sense of belonging in regard to the enjoyment and recognition of the piece in its disintegrated format.

The cultural dominance of fetishisation and the totality of this process eliminates the “whole”, which is “basically not taken seriously by anyone anymore and in all discussion of culture retreats further and further into the background” (Adorno, 1991: 43). This is not just a polemic against the decline of ‘high’ culture. This is also the decline of a symbolic site of potential transformation. For Adorno, the more culture becomes commercialised, the less space exists for freedom of thought, radical thought and oppositional discourse. In the face of the fetishised music production system which he describes as a “flawlessly functioning, metallicly brilliant apparatus”, his concern is that “the cogwheels mesh so perfectly that not the slightest hole remains open for the meaning of the whole” (Adorno, 1991: 44). Thus, for the listener, the product is a “perfect, immaculate performance in the latest style” which “preserves the work at the price of its definitive reification” (Adorno, 1991: 44). For Adorno, this is not just a shift in stylistic treatments and in regard to what we may term ‘production values’. The symbolic flattening out of tensions reflects how the broader project of consumer capitalism spuriously provides a false harmony in the face of societal tensions.

Regression

I now move on to the core concept of regression. For Adorno, this is the result of reification and fetishisation of the cultural artefact. Enveloped by the fetishised musical product, the listener’s conscious perception of music is negatively affected. The regressed listener “listens according to formula” because the listener no longer has the capacity to demand more, such is the totality of the “brilliant machine” of commercialisation. He observes how “debasement itself would not be possible if resistance ensued, if the listeners still had the capacity to make demands beyond the limits of what was supplied” (Adorno, 1991: 45). However, resistance is no longer possible in the face of such total commercialisation. So complete is this that the fetish character can never be verified, as the appearance of the fetish and the authentic work have become indistinguishable: “the discrepancy between essence and appearance has grown to a point where no appearance is any longer valid, without mediation, as verification of the essence” (Adorno, 1991: 45).

For Adorno, the correlate of this fetishisation is the regression of listening. He points out that this is not a “relapse of the individual listener into an earlier phase of his own development” (Adorno, 1991: 46); rather, the listener has never had a chance to develop their perception fully. As he observes: “it is contemporary listening which has regressed, arrested at the infantile stage” (Adorno, 1991: 46). Thus, contemporary listeners never get the opportunity to develop because the cultural goods are standardised, fetishised and reified. However, in line with the theory of commodity fetishism, the listeners do not demand more than the reified product, as the substitute is mistaken for the authentic. Thus, the listeners lose “along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music” (Adorno, 1991: 46). This is reinforced by the listeners themselves who “stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception” (Adorno, 1991: 46). Their total alienation manifests in the acceptance and liking of the substitute fetishised product. For Adorno, such listeners are accustomed to listening “atomistically” and in a dissociated way. This way of listening is a process that is not “child-like” as it might be if one was introduced to a new cultural form, but “childish”. Due to this fetishisation and regressions, the “primitivism” of the contemporary audience is “not that of the undeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded” (Adorno, 1991: 47). Their retardation is at the hands of the commodification process.

This process is not simply one of the audience being ‘duped’ or ‘doped’, but rather, in the face of commodification, the audience, “whenever they have a chance, they display the pinched hatred of those who really sense the other but exclude it in order to live in peace, and who therefore would like best to root out the nagging possibility” (Adorno, 1991: 47). Thus, the listener vaguely suspects that the cultural offerings are not as progressive or fulfilling as they promise, but because the offerings are so dominant, their only option is to repress any sense that there might be something else beyond them. This is an occasion of sadness for the audience rather than a rebuke from Adorno. Here he uses Freudian influences to suggest how regression can be thought of as a coping mechanism in relation to “the possibility of a different and oppositional music” (Adorno, 1991: 47). Thus, both the fetishised product and the regression of listening associated with it align to make a powerful totality. This “sickness” as he terms it, has a “preservative” function for commercialised music, in that through the regression of the listener, the industry can crank out more standardised products with minimal innovation, safe in the knowledge that there will also exist minimal opposition. Once more, this process is not just an individual ‘sickness’, but a societal one where potentially, civic society becomes pacified by commodification and like the regressed listener, mounts minimal opposition to the political and economic status quo.

Adorno calls this process “deconcentration” (Adorno, 1991: 49), and defines it as “the perceptual activity which prepares the way for the forgetting and sudden recognition of mass music” (Adorno, 1991: 49). This ‘deconcentration’ partly acts as a coping mechanism in the face of mass-produced music, as such products “do not permit concentrated listening without becoming unbearable to the listeners” (Adorno, 1991: 49). This deconcentration is part of the overall theory of regression insofar as listeners gradually learn to accept less complex forms and also pay less attention to the cultural form. They expect a more instant gratification based on stylistic treatments manufactured only to create a temporary response. This standardisation is comprehensive, “down to the number of beats and the exact duration” of a hit song (Adorno, 1991: 49), along with how choruses are structured and how songs are structurally arranged. This overall standardisation is how the listener recognises the piece. This acts as “the veneration for the tool” (Adorno, 1991: 50). However, again realising the symbiosis between enchanted listener and commercialised cultural product, the standardisation of the cultural artefact “must be of an approved type” for listeners. In a further reinforcement of the regression process it is not that familiarity with standardised musical sonorities “awakens a taste for new colours and new sonorities” but rather, the “atomistic listeners are the first to denounce such sonorities as ‘intellectual’ or absolutely dissonant” (Adorno, 1991: 50). Therefore, in a compounding of their own alienation, the listeners reject alternates. When occasionally some unusual musical trope appears, it is included with an appearance of harmlessness. Thus, it is musically couched in a language which ensures the anomaly is a safe substitution for a ‘normal’ trope, and, lest the listener be turned away from such anomalies, the deviation is immediately resolved by something familiar.

As we have seen, Adorno proposes that the consumer of such cultural goods does have a sense of a vague discontent with these industrialised products. He suggests that the consumer experiences a “betrayal” (Adorno, 1991: 50) when offered the same, standardised cultural artefacts. Thus, when the novelty or charm of a cultural product wears off, another substitute is offered in return for the cycle to begin again. However, this does not promote any change, for despite this, “the listening

nevertheless remains regressive in assenting to this situation despite all distrust and all ambivalence” (Adorno, 1991: 51). Because of the substitution of the immediacy of musical experience with exchange value, no demands are placed on the industry to change. As Adorno notes, “substitutes satisfy their purpose as well, because the demand to which they adjust themselves has itself already been substituted” (Adorno, 1991: 51). The resulting “bad ears” can only hear value in those products along with a “rejection of everything unfamiliar”. Thus, the regressed listeners behave like children who over and over “demand the one dish they have once been served” (Adorno, 1991: 51). In this way, the relationship between consumer and industrial producer is a Faustian bargain where “a sort of musical children’s language is prepared for them” by the producers of mass music. Thus, through the fetishisation and regression process, a continuous Faustian bargain takes place which trains the listener in an almost Pavlovian way, to demand familiarity. On the part of the industrial producer, the demands are met in accord with maintaining profits. They must train both listener and producer to continue the regressive cycle. Mapped at a societal level then, we see Adorno’s concerns at the time of writing, especially in relation to how culture was being used for propagandistic political ends. He is concerned about the ‘masses’ capitulating to an affirmative, pacifying culture in an unproblematic way.

The regressed listener and society

In a hasty reading of his work, the vignette of the regressed listener could be misconstrued as a diatribe against ‘popular culture’. This would fail to consider that Adorno’s cultural theory is not aimed at the individual, but towards the institutional and societal dimension. The individual is a microcosm of what forms a collective. For Adorno, enjoying the consumption of commodified cultural goods, along with the consumption of commodities, requires the sort of spare time that comes with material comfort. In contrast to notions of ‘free’ time, he is quick to point out that “to make oneself a jazz expert or [to] hang over the radio all day, one must have much free time and little freedom” (Adorno, 1991: 55). For Adorno, it is no surprise to find in research that “the friends of light music reveal themselves to be depoliticized”. However, this depoliticisation is not just amongst ‘the masses’, or at an individual level. It seeps into what might be considered more elite circles. He observes how “in America, it is just the so-called liberals and progressives whom one finds among the advocates of light popular music, most of whom want to classify their activity as democratic” (Adorno, 1991: 55). Thus, the progressives wish to use the notions of taste and the liking of these musical products as a measure of popularity. In this dysfunctional light, “if regressive hearing is progressive as opposed to the ‘individualistic’ sort, it is only in the dialectical sense that it is better fitted to the advancing brutality than the latter” (Adorno, 1991: 55). Here Adorno refers to ‘individualistic’ hearing as that which has not been ‘deconcentrated’ or fragmented by a regression. Therefore, the air of ‘democratic’ listening by virtue of its popularity, veils the alienation that Adorno ascribes to regressed listening. If liberals deem such music ‘progressive’ (against a paradigm of alienated, regressive listening), then this evaluation is symptomatic of the dysfunction of that paradigm.

This overall deference to commodified culture involves a surrender of the true individuated self to a “pseudo-pleasure”, through “identification of power” (Adorno, 1991: 55). The broader societal perspective considers how individuals sacrifice themselves for a “security of shelter” that is only “provisional” (Adorno, 1991: 56). In a further act of masochism then, “even in self-surrender one is

not good in his own eyes” as there is a double hit to be taken from “simultaneously betraying the possible and being betrayed by the existent” (by enjoying the commodified product) (Adorno, 1991: 56). In this tension therefore, “regressive listening is always ready to degenerate into rage” because if a person realises they are “marking time” in a pseudo-freedom, then “the rage is directed primarily against everything which could disavow the modernity of being with-it and up-to-date and reveal how little has in fact changed” (Adorno, 1991: 56). Reprising his earlier observations about the replacement of hit tunes, he observes how “they would like to ridicule and destroy what yesterday they were intoxicated with, as if in retrospect to revenge themselves for the fact that the ecstasy was not actually such” (Adorno, 1991: 56). In this rage against, and rejection of alternate cultural artefacts, “the regressive listeners are in fact destructive” (Adorno, 1991: 56). The rage is not directed appropriately, but at “disobedience”, or a deviation from the cultural norm, unless the disobedience “comes under the tolerated spontaneity of collective excesses” (Adorno, 1991: 56). Thus, the regressed listener is conservative, conventional and potentially complicit with power, even if that power is corrupt. Thus, in the wider context of societal influences, Adorno is concerned that the “play” of lightness in commercialised music is a “repetition of prescribed models” that nonetheless demands to be taken seriously. However, instead of this ‘play’ acting as a “dream of freedom” through “getting away from purposiveness”, as true playfulness would endow, “the treatment of play as a duty puts it among useful purposes and thereby wipes out the trace of freedom in it” (Adorno, 1991: 56).

This compliance with commodified culture is dangerous, as in Adorno’s broader systematic picture “regressive listening represents a growing and merciless enemy not only to museum cultural goods but to the age-old sacral function of music as the locus for the taming of impulses”. Adorno warns that “not without penalty, and therefore not without restraint, are the debased products of musical culture surrendered to disrespectful play and sadistic humour” (Adorno, 1991: 58). Why this is so insidious is explained: “involved in this laughter is the decay of the sacral spirit of reconciliation” (Adorno, 1991: 58). Thus, the higher potential of music and culture more broadly is undermined. In concluding the essay, Adorno maintains that the possibility of a “consciousness of freedom” lies not in regressive listening, but in examining how “artistic music has furnished a model for this possibility” (Adorno, 1991: 58), not out of any *l’art pour l’art* elitism, but because in occupying a space outside commodification, the artistic model may offer a site of transcendence that commodified culture cannot.

In an exemplar of that ideal cathartic and transformative function of culture, Adorno posits how certain cultural work “gives form to that anxiety, that terror, that insight into the catastrophic situation which others merely evade by regressing” (Adorno, 1991: 60). This was Adorno’s desire: that instead of regressing and ignoring catastrophic societal events, the ‘masses’, or society, could realise their individuality and collectivise it rather than having it ‘liquidated’. He ends his piece with a warning and yet a hope in terms of how artists engage with such a project:

[They] are called individualists, and yet their work is nothing but a single dialogue with the powers which destroy individuality—powers whose ‘formless shadows’ fall gigantically on their music. In music, too, collective powers are liquidating an individuality past saving, but against them only individuals are capable of consciously representing the aims of collectivity. (Adorno, 1991: 60)

Adorno and the contemporary

Vulgarisation, regression, deconcentration, standardisation and fetishisation; what then of the contemporary significance of *On the Fetish Character* and indeed of Adorno's broader project regarding the industrialisation of culture? Arguably, Adorno's strength lies in his consideration of the effects of culture upon society, and in the ramifications of cultural industrialisation. Adorno's relevance for contemporary discussions of political economy of communication lies in this critique of "scientism" that, for Adorno, had failed dismally. As DeNora observes:

His work explored the failure of reason that culminated in the catastrophic events of the twentieth century: the rise of fascism, genocide, terror, and mass destruction. More specifically, he sought to understand what he perceived as a transformation of consciousness, one that fostered authoritarian modes of ruling. (DeNora, 2003: 22)

Thus, in the contemporary setting, Adorno acts as a reminder that the normativity of 'the rational', including the rationale of the 'free' market economy, is just one—and for Adorno, an inadequate—way of viewing the world.

Adorno remains relevant in a world where the encroachment of administrative processes and commodification approaches a 'totality'. His work highlights culture as a means by which reality is constituted. This forces us to look at the limits to the commodification of culture. It compels us to view the commodification of culture—and that includes news media, social media, popular music, and gaming amongst the myriad 'products' of the culture 'industry'—not as an innocuous or 'natural' process constitutive of the development of late capitalism. Rather, we should see culture as a socio-cognitive site within a broader societal zeitgeist. In this way, Adorno's concepts of 'alienated listening' and 'bad ears' have wider relevance. Arguably, the contemporary setting is such that "in daily life and on a routine basis, one is required to function in a world one has had little part in making or hope of remaking" (DeNora, 2003: 27).

The seemingly 'strange non-death of neoliberalism', registers the sense that despite its catastrophic failure the structures of power remain intact. The groundswell of opposition to the neoliberal project seems ineffectual in deposing such structures. In this way, the role of culture and communication from an Adornian perspective opens up a broader discussion of how culture has been altered through commercialism and how culture is linked to consciousness itself. As DeNora observes, "whereas 'true' music taught its listener how to perceive illogic contradiction through its challenge to critical faculties, 'false' music taught the listener how to relax and enjoy, and how to identify with particular representations or forms, and how to take pleasure in reliability, in repetition of—through that process—fetishised objects" (DeNora, 2003: 38). Thus, in contemplating why the project of neoliberalism continues amidst crisis, Adorno's theories of the audience's complicity in their own alienation hold relevance. In an administrated system, the perceived pleasures and benefits of total commodification outweigh the imperative to disobey. The gilded cage is more fun.

Likewise, it is important to recognise *how* we receive culture. Adorno witnessed a transition from live, unmediated performance to a form of music reception that "can be separated from the performer and be replayed without the artist's consent" (Katz, 2010: 28). In short, he witnessed the increasing commodification of culture, and the profound ways in which that influenced its reception

and use. The ‘atomised listening’ Adorno speaks of was not possible until the introduction of recorded music. Prior to that, the listener had to hear the whole. They could not ‘bottle up’ the recording for replay in a different spatial or temporal setting. It is interesting to note that despite the introduction of the long playing record (LP) in 1948, the triumph of the three-minute hit radio song continues. This reiterates Adorno’s critique of ‘atomised listening’. Also of importance in connecting Adornian thought with the contemporary is an understanding of the communality of listening. As Katz observes, “before the advent of recording, listening to music had always been a communal activity” (Katz, 2010: 35). Now, in a mirroring of the ‘bubble’ effect across the reception of culture in general, music, video and other media artefacts are often consumed alone, and are self-curated. In this context of individual entertainment bubbles, the collective is fragmented and powerless to act against the power structures of neoliberalism. Atomised listening, watching, sharing, liking, and tweeting are thus deeply political.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the subtleties of Adorno’s philosophical and cultural theories, with a view to highlighting the relevance of his pioneering work to contemporary debates concerning the political economy of communication. Despite the promises of the ‘communications revolution’, the ‘network society’ and the ‘information age’, societies and polities appear poorly equipped to mount any type of strategic protest against the seeming totality of neoliberal logic. Financial capital prevails over the wellbeing of state and citizen as they take comfort in contemporary, standardised, globalised projects, such as *The X Factor*. Indeed, the ‘culture industry’ embodied in *X Factor*-type entertainment, exemplifies the complete alienation of culture from its audience. Such products are so manipulated by Auto-Tune and rhythm quantisation, where both pitch and rhythm are ‘snapped’ to their nearest note or beat, that even live performances have that manipulated, pitch-perfect feel, such that “performers can (and often do) have their sound scrubbed and polished as they perform live” (Katz, 2010: 65).

Moreover, whilst the logics of the so-called ‘free market’ are increasingly found to be anything but free, entire states are all but bankrupting themselves and their citizens to prop up the interests of global financial capitalism. Discussion of Adorno’s work is also necessary in the context of the escalating environmental damage generated by the runaway neoliberal capitalist system. This crisis is not merely about debating which flavour of capitalism we choose in the future (on the assumption that socialism or any alternates have had their day). Rather, it concerns the sustainability of the capitalist ‘growth fetish’ (Hamilton, 2003) on a planet of finite resources. It seems that in our digital age with all the hubris of its revolutionary potential, political institutions are, at best, unresponsive, and at worst, complicit with the current form of environmentally destructive capitalism.

Although Adorno has become better known for being the ‘heavy’ and ‘elitist’ cultural theorist, his polemics against the commodity capitalism of his day were not levelled at the individual, but the passivity and listlessness that the gilded cage of consumerism was imbuing into civic society through culture (irrespective of technological ‘revolutions’ that might suggest the contrary). Beyond those arguments associated with the high art/popular debate, DeNora suggests how we should consider Adorno:

We must not, however, dismiss Adorno simply because we think that on points he erred. What is of value in Adorno transcends all of this. It concerns Adorno's vision, his way of perceiving the social world and music's interrelationship with that world. Above all, Adorno bequeathed a perspective. Thus it seems right to subject this perspective to the test of criticism, to interact with it across time and culture. (DeNora, 2003: 51)

Using *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* as an example of Adorno's pioneering earlier work on the cultural apparatus, this article has sought to situate cultural production—including media and communication—within the broader dimension of political economy. The postmodern, cultural and neoliberal turns subsequently provided vehicles for a reification of instrumental reason as it was evolving. It is hoped that this outline of Adorno's views about the limits to instrumental reason may precipitate a discussion around new and necessary imaginaries. We are experiencing an unprecedented fusion of cultural commodification, economic and environmental crisis. A purely 'rational' response to this situation will not suffice at this time.

Endnotes

- [1] Adorno himself, in a 1937 letter to Fromm, suggested a gender-based study. Adorno considered the "character of the feminine" as more regressed than that of men due to their alienation from the production system, as opposed to Freudian accounts of their neuroticism (Ziege, 2003).
- [2] As Robinson notes, "A statistical study of Weimar Germany's jazz broadcasting reveals that of 12,500 titles broadcast under the name of jazz, three were by Duke Ellington and none by Louis Armstrong" (Hoffmann, 1987; as cited in Robinson, 1994).
- [3] For an account of the debate see Hammer (2007: 127–129).
- [4] Admittedly, Jameson is suggesting that he did so 'like everyone else' who read Adorno's work on jazz.
- [5] Jay observes how "The musicologist and Stravinsky confidante Robert Craft speaks for many when he complains that 'a more convoluted, abstruse, and floridly unintelligible style is scarcely conceivable. It can have been designed for one purpose only, that of maintaining the highest standards of obfuscation throughout.'" (Jay, 1984: 158–159).

Author Bio

Trish Morgan is a postdoctoral researcher, based in the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA), at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Her research, funded by the Irish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), centres on the media and cultural industries and their role in fostering discourse around consumption practices and environmental sustainability. Other research interests include the political economy of digital media, production of culture, Theodor Adorno and sustainability of digital media technology. She holds a PhD in digital media from Dublin City University.

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