PETER DEWS

THE IDEA OF HOPE

Interview by Talita Cavaignac & Thomas Amorim

Could you tell us something about your background and how you came to study philosophy?

I'm a classic example of British post-war social mobility. I was born in 1952, and grew up in an aspirational working-class family—my father repaired teleprinters for the General Post Office, my mother was a school dinner lady. We lived in a suburb of newly built houses on the edge of Birmingham. From my parents' bedroom window I could look across the fields to the church spire of the nearest country town. At eleven, I passed an entrance exam and won a scholarship to King Edward's School, Edgbaston—academically the most prestigious school in the city. The school was rife with social snobbery, which was painful for an adolescent from my family background, but it opened windows onto new intellectual and cultural worlds. I've been coping with the ambivalence of that experience ever since. At seventeen—after an accelerated school career—I won an entrance scholarship to Queens' College Cambridge. For a few months I taught English in a language school in a small town in Spain—an experience which left me with an indelible love of the country and its language—and I went up to Cambridge in the autumn of 1970 to read English.

So I began by studying literature, not philosophy. I was good at English at school, and my favourite teacher advised me to apply to read English at Cambridge. But this was the early 1970s, and at that time the approach to literature at Cambridge was quite narrow, still in the shadow of Leavis and the New Criticism—it was all about responding to texts, without much consideration of the historical or political context

of literature. For example, one exercise we had to perform was to date an anonymized piece of English prose, taken from any time since the Renaissance, to within twenty years, on the basis of vocabulary and stylistic features. I found that whole approach quite unsatisfactory. The only lectures I bothered to attend were those of Raymond Williams and George Steiner.

What took you to philosophy?

After I finished my undergraduate degree, I wanted to engage in a kind of study that was more connected with politics, with sociology. I was also beginning to get more interested in philosophy. I guess those theoretical interests were inseparable from my interest in what was going on in the world, particularly the Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam War and the anti-colonial struggles. I had followed the Parisian May events keenly as a schoolboy—I remember reading Daniel Cohn-Bendit's tract, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, on the bus to school—and had briefly got involved with some radical students at Birmingham University, which was right across the road from my school, leafletting, screening anti-imperialist films, that kind of thing. In 1975, after two years doing odd jobs, and travelling in North and Central America, I went to the University of Essex, where I would later teach for thirty years, and began a Master's degree in sociology of literature. I think I already thought of this as a bridge to philosophy. Even then, in the back of my mind, I knew philosophy was what I really wanted to study.

The MA in sociology of literature at Essex was one of the first Master's degrees in literary theory in the UK—possibly the very first. We read a lot of Marxist literary theory, authors like Lukács and Lucien Goldmann, but also Saussure, Barthes and a little Derrida, who was just becoming known at that time. Our teachers included Gabriel Pearson, who had been involved with *New Left Review* in its early years, and Stanley Mitchell, the roving academic and translator who was the University's first lecturer in Russian. He had also written for NLR and had been active in the 1968 student protests at Essex. Towards the end of his life he published a wonderful translation of *Eugene Onegin*. What really excited me while working for the MA was French literary theory and philosophy, and I decided I wanted to write a doctoral thesis about Derrida. However, I was determined to do my research on Derrida in a philosophy department, something that was basically unheard of at the time.

How did that work out?

Luckily, I managed to find a sympathetic supervisor at the University of Southampton. The head of department, Anthony Manser, was an Oxford-trained philosopher, who had developed a maverick interest in thinkers like Sartre and Hegel. He'd published a book on Sartre in 1966, which was an *outré* thing for a British philosopher to do at the time.[1] Tony must have seen something in my application, because he wangled me a three-year PhD scholarship from the University. When I arrived, he did not really understand what I was doing, but he was a kindly man and he just let me get on with it. When I began my research, I had to teach myself a great deal about the history of philosophy, since it was not my original field. I just sat down in the library and began reading Hume, Leibniz, Kant, Wittgenstein. I also tried to familiarize myself with some of the then-influential analytical philosophy—Donald Davidson, for example. I can't remember when I first read Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but it was clear to me that this was a towering achievement of human intelligence and insight. I only gradually came to appreciate its amazing systematicity.

In the autumn of 1977, the second year of my doctorate, I went to Paris and enrolled as a visiting student at the 'experimental' university, Paris VIII, which had been set up in the aftermath of May '68, and was then located in the Bois de Vincennes. Deleuze and Lyotard gave weekly classes there, and there was a whole department devoted to Lacanian psychoanalysis. I began to read Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard and Lacan, as well as Derrida, and became interested in the whole constellation of French philosophy known as poststructuralism. But I had always also had an interest in social theory and particularly in Frankfurt School critical theory—ever since trying to read *One-Dimensional Man* as a schoolboy—and I decided I wanted to compare these two currents of thinking. My essential idea was that poststructuralism was really one way of criticizing aspects of modernity, of modern subjectivity and modern forms of experience, but that it lacked the sociological reflexivity of the Frankfurt School. If we put the two together, we could read poststructuralism as a kind of critical theory, but a less self-conscious critical theory than that of the Frankfurt School. This was the basic idea of my PhD, which became my first book, *Logics of Disintegration* (1987). It was actually the first systematic

[1] Anthony Manser, *Sartre: A Philosophic Study*, London 1966.

comparison between poststructuralism and the Frankfurt School. At the time that was a very unusual parallel to draw. Poststructuralism and the Frankfurt School were two mutually alien traditions. People who were interested in Foucault or Derrida were ignorant of—if not antagonistic toward—the Frankfurt School and vice versa. The doctorate, then, was an attempt to show that a critical dialogue between these two traditions was possible. Though I didn't disguise the fact that my sympathies were ultimately on the Frankfurt School side.

Were you teaching at this stage?

During and after the PhD, I taught philosophy part-time at different universities in London for several years. This was the high era of Thatcherism, and university posts in philosophy were few and far between. In 1986, thanks to the initiative of someone who became a firm friend, Andrew Bowie, I got a two-year temporary position at what is now Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, teaching on an unusual degree course called 'European Thought and Literature'. We were crazily overworked: I would rush from a seminar on Balzac or Flaubert to one on Pascal's *Pensées* or Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and then on to a discussion of *Mother Courage* or *The House of Bernarda Alba*. But finally, two years later, I got a permanent job in the department at Essex. Perhaps it was the only such department that could have employed me: at that time British philosophy was dominated by analytic philosophy—which is still very much the case. Essex was an exception. Right from its foundation, in the mid-1970s, Essex had a different trajectory. The founding professor, an American called Frank Cioffi, was an eccentric and charismatic teacher who did not publish all that much—a Wittgenstein scholar obsessed with bashing Freud. But perhaps we owe it to his eccentricity that he was determined to start a different kind of department, encompassing different traditions of continental European philosophy, as well as the standard analytical fare. Even so, I was a very unusual candidate. My first degree was in literature, and I had never been trained in mainstream analytical philosophy. In a way, I was lucky to get the job. But Essex was the right place for me—there was an elective affinity.

What directions did your work take, once at Essex?

When I started working there I became increasingly interested in German Idealism, though I'd already briefly touched on Fichte,

Schelling and Hegel in *Logics of Disintegration*. I came to believe that we have to go back to Kant and then to the intellectual explosion we know as German Idealism to understand the basic problems and orientation of recent continental European thought. I was forming the view that a lot of the reception of contemporary French philosophy, which was then in full swing in Britain and the USA, was jejune, because of a lack of interest in those roots. One of my main concerns ever since has been connecting modern or contemporary developments in French and German philosophy with their forerunners in post-Kantian thought. Many of the essays in my second book, *The Limits of Disenchantment* (1995) make these connections between contemporary European thought and German Idealism.

My third book, *The Idea of Evil* (2008), was a bit of a departure. I was still doing something similar in the sense that I begin with Kant, Schelling, Fichte and Hegel, and I track the problematic of evil through those thinkers, and then through Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and into the twentieth century, ending with Levinas and Adorno. The title of the book may have been unhelpful, because when people think of the problem of evil, they usually think of the problem of theodicy. How can we justify or believe in God in view of all the evil and suffering in the world? I began with a rather different problem. If you look at the history of philosophy and political thought, people who are pessimistic about human nature tend to be right-wing, while left-wing thinkers tend to be optimistic about human nature—often overly or naively so, in my view. I wanted to disrupt that alignment. I was interested in thinkers with progressive commitments in ethics and politics—who ultimately believed in the power of reason, if you like—yet who were not naive about the kind of evil human beings are capable of. That was the key philosophical tension which the book revolved around. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were illuminating as counter-examples: they raise the question, how can you *live* modernity, if you give up on any notion of social and moral progress?

You describe the ironic fact that poststructuralism, in opposing any philosophy centred on a totalizing consciousness, regresses to its own primitive form of totalization, based on an abstract notion of difference. The result is an immersion in fragments and perspectives, an ontology that is just as absolute in its own way as the unity which it claims to combat. Could you comment a little on these issues?

As I said, I was interested in reading the poststructuralist thinkers as involved in a critique of modernity. The case of Foucault is perhaps the most obvious: he was the most directly political, historical and sociological of those thinkers. In a way, I was sympathetic to the critique of the subject developed in poststructuralism. But very early on, when I was doing my doctoral research, I read Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, which was a book almost nobody read at that time. I realized immediately that there were very close similarities between Adorno's way of thinking and the poststructuralists' way of thinking, and I wrote about that in the first chapter of *Logics of Disintegration*. Those parallels were also the basis for my essay, 'Adorno, Post-Structuralism and the Critique of Identity', which I drafted in a day, in a flash of inspiration.[2]

To put it most simply: I came to the conclusion that the poststructuralist critique of the subject was, from Adorno's perspective, undialectical. As an expression of disillusionment, it had a valid critique of the rigidity of a self-monitoring bourgeois subjectivity. But it had no alternative to offer. All it proposed was just a disintegration, a dispersal of subjectivity, and it therefore didn't open up any kind of progressive political perspective. That is a main reason why I always had reservations about poststructuralism, despite also having a certain sympathy for it—because of its urge to break down rigid ways of thinking and constraining conceptions of identity, which I regarded as potentially emancipatory.

If we look at the history of the reception of poststructuralism, it was in part a reaction against Marxism, particularly in Britain, where Althusser and Althusserian Marxism had been fairly influential for a while. Much more influential, certainly, than the Frankfurt School. Not many people then read the Frankfurt School, but a lot of people were interested in Althusser and structuralist thinkers like Lévi-Strauss. A factor you have to consider here is that most educated British people, if they have a second language, speak French rather than German—I had studied both at school. So to some, the shift to Foucault and his peers seemed like an obvious next step. Poststructuralism looked like a radicalization of structuralism—it said you could have the same anti-subjectivism or 'anti-humanism' while jettisoning the constraint of boring claims to scientificity (and Althusser had soldered in many people's minds the link

[2] Dews, 'Adorno, Post-Structuralism and the Critique of Identity', NLR I/157, May–June 1986; collected in *The Limits of Disenchantment*, London 1995, pp. 19–38.

between Marx and his own idiosyncratic conception of scientificity). But, as I've made clear, I always had reservations about the undialectical character and political implications of poststructuralism.

In your first book, you appreciate the analysis of the 'logic of disintegration'—and its ambivalent consequences—that is underpinned by Adorno's critique of identity. But you see the lack of an intersubjective component as a limitation of his thought, one which would be overcome in different ways by such authors as Lacan and Habermas. How do you assess today the demands of a theory that takes into account the problems of intersubjectivity without neglecting the critique of ideology and reification of the first generation of the Frankfurt School?

It's very common for people to set up a conflict between the first, in actual fact the post-1930 generation of the Frankfurt School, and the second generation, led by Habermas—and maybe also the third generation, exemplified by Axel Honneth. I was always resistant to that way of thinking; that either you had to be a supporter of Adorno or you had to be a supporter of Habermas, and that there was a deep conflict between those two conceptions of Critical Theory. I've always been interested in the development of the Frankfurt tradition as a whole, and more interested in emphasizing continuities rather than believing there is some sharp divide between the first and second generations.

But I'm inclined to think that there *is* a kind of blind spot about intersubjectivity in the first generation of the Frankfurt School. So in my view thinkers like Habermas and Honneth were right to say that Adorno was still thinking in terms of a subject-object paradigm or a subject-object model, and that this could be a limitation. You could argue that, with concepts like mimesis, Adorno was trying to think about intersubjectivity, about relations of empathy and reciprocity between human beings. But he doesn't have an explicit set of categories for theorizing this, and his tendency is to suggest that society has become so reified and objectified that it would be naive to place any hope in the dynamic of intersubjective relations and the potential of intersubjective relations. So I agree there is a problem with Adorno in that respect. I think that Habermas was right to suggest that there is a dynamic of democratization—of communicative reason—built into modernity, which the thinkers of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, partly because of their experience of fascism and totalitarianism, had not really appreciated.

On the other hand, one can argue that the later Frankfurt School thinkers, who put so much emphasis on intersubjectivity and the democratic potential of intersubjective relations, became too complacent about capitalism and essentially social democratic in their outlook. I think there are strengths and weaknesses on both sides. After thirty or forty years of neoliberalism, and the impact that it's had on democratic structures and processes, we can see now that one has to draw a distinction between emphasizing the fact that we need categories for thinking about intersubjectivity, and holding to a questionable trust in the protection against market forces offered by democratization, regarded as part of the guaranteed advance of what Hegel called 'existing reason'.

So, in that sense, I often think that Adorno's theory of reification and instrumental reason is a very good description of the contemporary world, in some ways much better than Habermas's account. One objection levelled at Adorno is that he sometimes talks about the total nexus of delusion, or he talks about the administered society in a very totalizing way. My suggestion would be to read such talk as exaggeration for rhetorical effect, as pulling the alarm cord. We don't have to take it literally, but he was certainly highlighting very fundamental tendencies in contemporary capitalist society, which have only been reinforced under neoliberalism.

You have re-examined the traditional division between the various generations of the Frankfurt School. But don't you think that the positions on capitalist society are quite distinct in the different generations?

Yes, I understand what you mean. I think that's quite a complicated question. For example, the early Habermas, the Habermas of the 1950s, 1960s, up until the middle of the 1970s, was still pretty much Marxist in his outlook. You could even in some respects reverse the received wisdom on this issue. For example, in the middle of the 1970s, Habermas published a collection of essays called—in German—*Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism*.[3] You might say that Habermas made a much more serious attempt to reconstruct a Marxist theory of history than Adorno did. You could instead ask the question, 'Is what Adorno and Horkheimer say in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* really a

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus,* Frankfurt am Main 1976. Four essays from this collection appeared in English in Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, London 1979.

contribution to a Marxist theory of history?' They seem to trace the problems of instrumental reason and reification back much further than capitalism. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not really a theory of capitalism, it's a theory of the dominance of instrumental reasoning in the whole of human history.

Again, I think there are strengths and weaknesses on both sides. In the light of the development of capitalism in the past period, we can see that Habermas was overly optimistic about the potentials of liberal democracy. In his favoured scenario, innovative impulses stemming from civil society were supposed to put pressure on institutionalized politics, and feed into parliamentary processes of democratic will-formation. But I think he would now admit that things are not exactly going that way, that liberal democracy is being eroded by the forces of the global capitalist economy. Unfortunately, he doesn't really have an answer to those problems within the immense edifice of theory he's constructed, any more than Hegel knew what to do about the 'underclass' within the supposedly rational economic and political order portrayed in his *Philosophy of Right*. I read Habermas's recent praise of Emmanuel Macron, as the putative champion of transnational solidarity within the EU, and by implication as the defender of a spectral European 'social model', as more a sign of despondency than anything else.[4] Perhaps we could say that, for a period after the Second World War, it was not unreasonable to think that capitalism could be tamed by social democracy. But the notion that the underlying aim of the EU was to reinforce that trend already required an act of faith. Adorno never really believed in that potential of social democracy, or was always suspicious about it. So maybe history has vindicated Adorno rather than Habermas. To give just one example, he clearly foresaw the merging of politics and entertainment—the development of that trend in the UK, the televised prostitution of politicians, angers me immensely—and the suborning of entertainment itself by advertising. The current scandals around Facebook, and the harvesting of personal data for surreptitious campaigns of psychologically targeted propaganda, would not have surprised him in the slightest.

Could you comment on the reception of French poststructuralism in the Anglophone countries?

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[4] Jürgen Habermas, 'Are We Still Good Europeans?', *Zeit Online*, 6 July 2018; see also 'Habermas: "ce fascinant Monsieur Macron"', *Les débats de l'Obs*, 26 October 2017.

The reception of poststructuralism in the Anglophone countries was, I think, very much connected with the rise of new social movements; with the rise of identity politics. In the United States, even more than in Britain, thinkers like Foucault and Derrida were seen as providing the 'natural' theoretical resources—so to speak—for thinking through the increasing fluidity of social identity and the character of new social movements outside of the traditional conflict between capital and labour. There was a certain post-Marxist or anti-Marxist dimension to that thinking as well, in the later work of Ernesto Laclau, for example.

There *was* a certain rationale or a certain logic to that development, and in fact poststructuralism developed in a much more political way in the English-speaking world than it did in France itself. For example, when Derrida started going to the United States, he was expected to make political pronouncements. He was obliged to start making much more explicit statements, I think, because of the way his philosophy had been taken up in the Anglosphere. So he started writing about racism, about Nelson Mandela, about nuclear weapons, about the notion of 'rogue states'—you can see the change immediately if you look at Derrida's bibliography. To be honest, I don't think that shift encouraged his best work. For good or ill, deconstruction is not just a form of critique—and things start to go wrong when even Derrida himself seems willing to erase the distinction, as he does in *Specters of Marx*. Personally I prefer the early, bracing—even potentially nihilist—Derrida to his later ostensible signing up to the 'classical emancipatory ideal' or his numinous talk about the infinitely other: at least there's a challenge.[5] As Lacan once said somewhere, 'Do not use "the Other" as mouthwash'. However, my main concern was that there were important elements of Marxism which were being forgotten in this fusion of poststructuralism and identity politics, and I think we can see that in retrospect.

One of the striking developments in the United States and the UK has been an upsurge of interest in Adorno, in tandem with the decline of poststructuralism. I find this intriguing, because when I wrote my first book, as I explained earlier, Adorno lay unread on the shelves. I felt that Adorno had many of the insights, so many of the intuitions of the poststructuralists, but he expressed them in a more dialectical—in other

[5] See respectively Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, London [1994] 2006, p. 112; Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 11, nos 5–6, July–August 1990, p. 971.

words, not purely reactive—way, and he never forgot about the social and historical problem of capitalism. In a way, this move, almost a move from poststructuralism to Adorno, is oddly reminiscent of what I was thinking at the beginning of my career. With all due modesty, it's hard for me to avoid regarding it as a kind of confirmation. It's amazing the way Adorno has become a very influential, central figure in the last ten, fifteen years, whereas back in the 1960s and 70s, almost nobody read Adorno in the English-speaking world, he was almost completely unknown.

We have two questions about this. First, do you have a hypothesis as to why poststructuralism had more political consequences in the US than in France? Secondly, how do you think that Adorno was linked with the reception of post-structuralism in the United States or in the UK by your work? Politically, too, how was the Frankfurt School linked with poststructuralism?

I don't think those two currents *were* linked in people's minds by my work—at least not in a productive way. I think maybe the most I achieved was to arouse interest in the possibility of comparisons, but these were invariably of a polemical character. The Rhine also denoted a mental barrier; as a PhD student, I got harshly attacked at one of the 'Sociology of Literature' conferences at Essex, when I gave a talk daring to suggest that Foucault could be seen as kind of Weberian. Nowadays, that's a platitude. In fact, I don't think I can even claim much credit for provoking the polemics. Because the English translation of Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, with his evaluations of Bataille, Foucault, Derrida, came out in the same year as *Logics of Disintegration* (the German original had preceded my book by a year), and that *really* poured fat on the fire.

As regards your first question, I think it was because identity politics really began in the United States. I'd conjecture that this has to do with the historical depth and severity of the country's racial issues, the weakness of organized labour, and other socio-cultural, political and legal factors I'm not competent to evaluate. Obviously, Britain and many other countries around the world had their own autochthonous developments—in the first instance the feminisms that came out of the student and protest movements of the late 1960s. But it's certainly the case that British protest movements have had a tendency, not always beneficial, to take their cue from the USA—two recent examples are Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement. That is not always the case with France, where the difference of language doesn't so readily permit what is often

the illusion of a shared protest culture. To that you have to add the fact that philosophy—even avant-garde philosophy—has a specific kind of dignity within French culture. There's a resistance to operationalizing it politically in too crude and blatant a way, as it were.

You are critical of the poststructuralist approach to the issues of identity and non-identity, because, to a certain extent, it obscures the historical process of repression of the non-identical. To what extent do you see this style of philosophy as an ideological result of the contemporary world, or rather as potentially critical of the present?

This raises another aspect of the reception of poststructuralism, which we haven't really talked about so far: its ambivalence. This is connected with the ambivalence of the heritage of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, we might say, and the way that these new, more fluid, more individualistic conceptions of identity could also be very advantageous for neoliberalism. This was a profound ambiguity within poststructuralism and one which helped to make it so popular: although it looked critical in one respect; in another respect you could see the celebration of diversity, of the pluralization of lifestyles and so forth, as just a reflection of the neoliberal developments within capitalism—the philosophical echo of niche marketing. We can understand why it became so popular from that perspective.

In a certain way, identity politics does not threaten neoliberalism at all. I remember reading an article by Jackson Lears in the *London Review of Books* a few years ago, which began with the statement: 'The rise of identity politics in America was a tragic necessity'.[6] It was a tragic necessity, Lears went on, because 'no one can deny the legitimacy or urgency of the need felt by women and minorities to have equality on their own terms, to reject the assumption that full participation in society required acceptance of the norms set by straight white males.' The problem was that, as a result, 'critiques of concentrated power, imperial or plutocratic, became less common. Indeed, the preoccupation with racial and gender identity has hollowed out political language . . . '

That formulation, 'tragic necessity', stuck in my mind, since it confirmed what I had experienced as one of the organizers, throughout the 1990s,

[6] Jackson Lears, 'We came, we saw, he died', LRB, 5 February 2015.

of an annual Critical Theory conference meeting in Prague. Despite the broadly Frankfurt School allegiance of most of the participants, who came mainly from the USA and various parts of Europe, people stopped talking about capitalism, and—with few exceptions—the language of rights and of identity politics seemed to sweep the board. The basic conflict between labour and capital, and the whole economic dimension of social problems, which of course also impacts disproportionately on women and minorities, became almost repressed. We can't hold poststructuralism responsible for that shift, but it certainly fed into it.

Of course, since the financial trauma of 2008, and the subsequent rise of right-wing populisms, the whole political-theoretical constellation has been changing. Identity politics is now being berated by some American liberals for provoking the rise of Trumpism, while on the left the current exemplified by Bernd Stegemann, Sahra Wagenknecht and *Aufstehen* has started challenging what is seen as the collusion of 'political correctness' and neoliberalism. So the sign posts are shifting. I think it's too early to evaluate what is emerging.

On subjectivity, how would you distinguish classical bourgeois subjectivity from its contemporary forms, in the sense of a replacement of the traditional repressive superego by the 'imperative of pleasure'?

Amongst the thinkers of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse had one really powerful idea, which you perhaps don't find so clearly articulated in Adorno, and that's the concept of repressive desublimation. Marcuse's thought was that the imperative to enjoy, the imperative to indulge oneself in pleasure, sexual pleasure, physical pleasure, could be far from emancipatory, could simply be another way of controlling and diverting people's energies. I think that was a very powerful concept, repressive desublimation, and in a way you could use it to encapsulate what was wrong with poststructuralism, in so far as it theorized simply a kind of dissolution of subjectivity into impulse and spontaneity, undermining any capacity for purposeful agency or resistance.

I find Marcuse's notion still very relevant today. I've experienced this kind of paradox of emancipation more or less every day in my university in England because, in the ideology of the university, there is a tremendous emphasis on women's equality and lesbian and gay rights, on the rights of ethnic minorities—all vitally important questions. There's a whole

discourse of 'equality and diversity' which is very pervasive throughout the university. But at the same time, the organization of the university is becoming more and more hierarchical, more and more neoliberal; we are subjected to more and more forms of assessment and control and monitoring. So there's a real contradiction, in my mind, between these two discourses which are going on simultaneously. I experienced that in the university, but I think it's happening in many areas of society. And I think the Frankfurt School, including Marcuse, had really important insights into that process.

What do you see as the continuing effects of poststructuralist thinking on contemporary academic debate?

As we've already discussed, I think poststructuralism as such has been in decline for a considerable time now in the English-speaking world. It is no longer hegemonic in the humanities. For example, in cultural theory there has been a shift in some quarters away from the idealist and constructivist tendencies of poststructuralism towards a stress on the 'materiality' of the object. That dimension is already there in Adorno, of course, and Adorno is one thinker who has become important as a kind of replacement (or advance, if you like). But don't forget that there was a deep interest in aspects of poststructuralism in Frankfurt. Christoph Menke and, in some of his later writings, his teacher Albrecht Wellmer, have engaged productively with Derrida, and have taken to heart his lessons regarding the lure of idealization—indeed, Wellmer directs them against Habermas. For many years Axel Honneth and his circle were downright fascinated by Foucault. Totalizing anti-totalization is just too contradictory a stance to last for very long, but the impulses of poststructuralism could enter into more constructive forms of critical theorizing in the form of what Honneth calls a 'genealogical proviso'—in other words, a reminder not to get overconfident about the rationality, the lack of hidden determinants, of our own perspective.[7] I think that will to integrate a variety of apparently conflicting intuitions and perspectives, including elements of French thought, while also not being taken in by the illusion of pure integration, accounts for the continued relevance and capacity for renewal of the Frankfurt School tradition. Taking the long view, it's an inheritance of the German Idealist conception of system.

[7] Axel Honneth, 'Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of "Critique" in the Frankfurt School', in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, New York 2009.

Among theorists more focused on the French tradition, some have switched their allegiance to Alain Badiou. I think Badiou is a symptomatic figure because in many respects he represents a return to the classic philosophical tradition. This was already the case to a certain extent with Deleuze, the last major poststructuralist to invade the humanities in the Anglophone world. Deleuze—when not being dragged downmarket by Guattari—was as much a constructive metaphysician as he was a celebrator of difference. But Badiou goes even further. He revives the concept of the subject and the concept of truth, for example, and in fact intimately links them. Like Lacan, Badiou's not going to tolerate any Nietzschean nonsense about truth being an indispensable illusion, and so forth. The reference to Lacan is fundamental—Badiou calls him somewhere 'our Hegel'. Lacan was always the exception among the thinkers classified as 'poststructuralists'. He was different because he never stopped talking about the subject, he never tried entirely to eliminate or dissolve the subject, as I think some of the other French thinkers of that period did. What's more, he had a deep interest in the dialectics of intersubjectivity or the dialectics of recognition, stemming from Kojève and Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. He really didn't fit into the mold of the other poststructuralists, though most commentators in the English-speaking world didn't realize that at the time.

Badiou differs from Lacan, however, in his claim—to put it in simple terms—that genuine subjectivity arises out of commitment. That's a kind of revival of existentialist themes. One of my main reservations about Badiou is that, although he pits himself against the poststructuralists in many ways, he also inherits many of their faults. So although he talks about truth and truth events, he has a pretty arbitrary notion of what constitutes a truth event, combined with an arbitrary list of domains in which such events can occur: art, science, politics and love. He simply fails to provide the mediations which would enable you to connect his abstract, set-theoretical account of radical innovation with specific historical occurrences or socio-political contexts. The result is decisionism and fideism. He draws on the prestige of the concept of truth, but—as far as I can see—only to apply an approbatory label to his own preferences. I made these points in more detail in my review of *Being and Event*.[8]

[8] Dews, 'Review of Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*', *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 18 February 2008.

Badiou is a profoundly ambivalent figure. He rejects any hint of post-modern relativism, but he also wants to see himself in the grand tradition of the post-war avant-garde *maîtres à penser*. There's something fusty—in French they would say *ringard*—about his way of thinking. His militant atheism has more in common with the Marquis de Sade than with Nietzsche, or even Sartre. At the same time his simplistic model of politics—basically, once you strip away the set-theoretical fancy-dress, order versus the transgression of order—perpetuates some of the worst tendencies of poststructuralism.

Recalling the notion of the mirror-phase, would you like to say something more on subjectivity in Lacan?

The interesting thing about Lacan is that he retains an emphatic concept of the subject—but it is a subject that is not self-conscious or fully centred. The self-image constituted through the mirror relation he calls the ego, or equates with the Freudian ego, and he sees that aspect of the subject or dimension of the subject as rigid and belonging to the domain of the imaginary. But then he has a different subject, the subject of the unconscious, which is mobile, restless, only ever *coming into* being. The antecedents, I think, are Sartrian—he's engaged in an immensely subtle elaboration of the distinction between the reflective and the pre-reflective *cogito*, enriched by a psychoanalyst's understanding of the dynamics of intersubjectivity.

I would add that many of the poststructuralists had a parodic conception of how the subject had been theorized in the whole tradition of modern philosophy. Over and over again, the poststructuralists, and even more so their followers in the English-speaking world, would portray their target as the Cartesian subject or the totally transparent, self-centred subject. However, if you actually look at the history of modern philosophy, there are very few, if any, thinkers who had that conception of subjectivity. If you take, for example, the British empiricist tradition, David Hume certainly does not think of the subject in that way: the self dissolves into a flux of ideas or impressions. For Kant the subject is inaccessible, noumenal, which entails, amongst other things, that we can never know whether we have behaved morally or not—our own motivations are ultimately obscure to us. And Hegel regards human subjects as always within a social and ethical system that decentres them, so that they are never fully aware of the dynamics of the world in which they

belong. It's actually very difficult to find any philosopher who portrays the kind of fully self-transparent subject which the poststructuralists thought they were attacking.

In your most recent book, The Idea of Evil, *the question of the subjective experience of freedom and moral responsibility is related to the problem of evil. How would you relate a phenomenology of morality to the critique of ideology?*

One of the questions I was interested in is the relation between social determinations and individual responsibility. I always had the feeling that however much we may talk about ideology, about social and historical determinations, we can't entirely abandon the idea of individual responsibility. Maybe that was one of the problems with the poststructuralists' dismantling of the subject—everything was dissolved into linguistic processes or relations of power. This clearly became a problem for Foucault at a certain point in his development. By the mid-1970s he'd reached the view that the subject was pretty much entirely constituted by relations of power—but then he found he needed a site of reflection and resistance which was more than just corporeal impulse. I wrote an article called 'The Return of the Subject in late Foucault', in which I tried to show that, in the final phase of his thinking, Foucault was obliged to reintroduce a quasi-existentialist concept of the subject, and associated notions of freedom and self-constitution.[9] I hear a screeching of brakes and grinding of gears at that point, whereas Foucauldians manage to persuade themselves that it's all part of the master plan.

Here, again, Adorno is very informative, because he sometimes uses language which suggests that everything is determined. When he talks about the administered society he uses the German word *Verblendungszusammenhang*, which is usually translated as 'context of delusion'. He also uses the image of a 'spell': there's a silent bewitchment—ultimately more effective than material compulsion—which has captured everyone, which has entranced everyone. But if you read the text of *Negative Dialectics* carefully, he never completely denies the notion of individual responsibility. As well as *Verblendungszusammenhang*, which I render as 'nexus of delusion', he

[9] Dews, 'The Return of the Subject in late Foucault', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 51, Spring 1989.

also uses the word *Schuldzusammenhang*, or 'nexus of guilt'. Sometimes he uses these terms right next to each other. It is as if he is saying, 'Yes, we do need to think about ideology, we do need to think about social compulsion, but we can't completely drop the notion of guilt. We can't completely drop the notion of responsibility. We can't say that we don't have to answer as individuals for what happens in society.' So that was one of the problems I was trying to think about in *The Idea of Evil*.

Adorno is also very helpful when he talks about a sense of revulsion, a spontaneous, almost corporeal feeling that this is wrong, this *absolutely should not be happening*. At such moments he is not relying on moral principles or rules, but on a raw sense of the intolerable, and I think that he's insisting on a very valuable insight. That even given the force of ideology, or delusion, or whatever you want to call it, people can have these feelings of moral repugnance and rebellion, which surge up from a level deeper than consciousness. One observation that I read in Zygmunt Bauman's book about the Holocaust always stuck in my mind: during the Nazi period in Germany, when the Jews were being persecuted, people from different social classes and backgrounds, women and men, people varying in educational level and religious affiliation, helped Jews to escape from the Nazis.[10] There was no sociological common denominator. There is no category, no social category, which explains why certain people did that. There seems to have been something purely individual that made some people feel, regardless of their class or social position, 'Despite the danger, I have to help my Jewish neighbour or the Jewish person that I know.' That fits very well with Adorno's account of what he calls *das Hinzutretende*—the impulsive addendum that pushes us over the edge into moral action.

At the same time, Adorno knows very well that imputations of individual moral responsibility can easily become punitive. We see that every time there is an outbreak of rioting or social unrest—as there was in Britain in 2011—and the right-wing press and politicians stridently deny the relevance of socio-economic conditions, the impact of their policies, while the judges hand down grossly disproportionate sentences. There are no theoretical, no philosophical answers to this conundrum. After all, the dilemma also cuts the other way. How many people on the left, for example, are going to excuse Harvey Weinstein—or even many lesser offenders—for being trapped in patriarchal ideology? Even

[10] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge 2000, p. 5.

ideology-critique—at least in the Frankfurt School tradition—involves connecting up with the interest of human beings in living in a world where the freedom of each is the condition of the freedom of all, no matter how profoundly buried and distorted that interest may be. It's not simply a matter of replacing one viewpoint with another, cognitively superior one. Admittedly, it's often almost impossible to believe that such an ultimate interest exists, within each human being. But what basic choice do we have, politically, except trying to eliminate, as far as possible, the conditions in which people are obliged to say, along with Brecht in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 'Terrible is the temptation to do good'?

You mentioned Adorno in the previous question. Do you believe that we could think of some kind of transcendence being evoked in Negative Dialectics*?*

I think that's an interesting connection. I was always struck by the fact that the final chapter of that book is called 'Meditations on Metaphysics' because, in the history of philosophy, certainly for someone like Hegel, and indeed for Plato, dialectics is opposed to metaphysics, in the sense of speculation about transcendent matters. Many people would say that Hegel is not a metaphysical thinker, on the basis that metaphysics means making transcendent claims, making claims about what lies beyond objective knowledge, whereas dialectics involves only following an immanent dynamic of contradictions and the resolution of contradictions.

I think you're right if you're suggesting that Adorno is trying to say, 'Well, no matter how consistent or logical our thinking may be, there always has to come a point where we just have a realization, where we have a revelatory experience'. That may sound dangerously mystical, but what he means is that tracking the unfolding and resolution of contradictions can only take us so far, because the energy of contradiction is itself parasitic on the compulsion of identity. As he puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, 'In the face of the concrete possibility of utopia, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things.'[11] To get a motivating glimpse of the *right* state of things we would have somehow to transcend dialectics.

In the final chapter of the book Adorno uses the term 'metaphysical experience' to refer to such glimpses. He gives only a few hints as to what he means by this term. But my way to understand it would refer to his argument that the emancipation of the subject has always been at the

[11] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, London 1973, p. 11.

cost of the object; has always been developed in terms of the domination of the object. Adorno wants to say that's not a real emancipation. A true emancipation of the subject, genuine human fulfilment, would also allow the object its own being. That's what metaphysical experience means: subjectivity freeing itself by jumping over its own shadow. As Adorno puts it, 'Subjectively liberated and metaphysical experience converge in humanity.'[12] As philosophers it may be hard for us to accept that the refined conceptuality of philosophical thinking itself can become a kind of barrier that we have to try to look beyond. But I think that's what Adorno is trying to express in that final chapter.

And would you say that in this approach of Adorno's and also your book, The Idea of Evil*, there is a utopian element that is the ground of your intention, something like that? How would you correlate your book with a 'hopeful' element?*

At one point in the final chapter of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno says that the secret of Kant's philosophy is the unthinkability of despair. That has always struck me as being a significant statement. What does he mean by the unthinkability—*Unausdenkbarkeit*—of despair? We can get a clue from what he says about Schopenhauer in the same part of the book. I'm of the view that Adorno takes a lot from Schopenhauer—which is not always a popular connection to make, given Schopenhauer's deeply reactionary attitudes. But it's hard to deny that Adorno's conception of 'metaphysical experience', for example, is in part inspired by Schopenhauer's vision of the radical suspension of compulsive willing. However, Schopenhauer totalizes despair, he totalizes a negative view of the world. And for Adorno, any totalization is problematic. It's just as much a mistake to totalize despair as it is to totalize optimism.

But that argument only gives us an equilibrium—it doesn't give us any reason to incline towards hope rather than dejection. Here I'm tempted to say that hope is something like a condition of agency—but that's a complicated and contentious argument that I can't really develop here. The crucial point is that hope is not the same thing as a calculation of probable outcomes. To some, that may make it look 'irrational' and dispensable. To my mind it shows—as does trust, another indispensable feature of human life, with which of course hope is connected—the limits of an overly rational conception of agency.

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[12] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 397.

In a way my book, *The Idea of Evil,* might have been more suitably called *The Idea of Hope,* because its central question concerned the relation between hope and agency, in particular agency directed towards emancipatory goals. If we look at the history of humanity, if we look at what human beings are capable of doing to each other, not just in the past but also in the present, how do we sustain hope for the future? Kant was profoundly interested in that problem, 'How do we sustain hope given everything that we know about the world, everything we know about human beings?' His answer was the theory of what he called the 'postulates of practical reason'. Kant's postulates are still shaped by Christianity, but even in a post-Christian world the problem has not gone away. Moral agency requires more than just good, communicable reasons—it requires a horizon of meaning. How are we to characterize that horizon of meaning? How pared down can it be—how secularized can it be, if you like—without disappearing altogether?

I mentioned that *The Idea of Evil* concludes with a discussion of Levinas and Adorno. Amongst his adherents, Levinas is often acclaimed as offering an 'ethics without theodicy'—in secular terms, an ethics that has austerely, even masochistically disposed of any horizon meaning or any concern about a horizon of meaning. I try to show that that's simplistic, a misreading. If you look carefully, you can see that Levinas is no less concerned about the issue than Adorno—they are both still grappling with the legacy of the Kantian postulates of practical reason. But hope, in this context, is not like Badiou's 'fidelity'. Badiou just wagers on his preferred events—and, given his Maoist history, he's made some dubious choices. The line of thinking I try to retrieve in *The Idea of Evil* is concerned with the conditions of possibility of ethical-political commitment in general.

How could poststructuralism and the notion of hope be correlated? That is, once the idea of hope is tied to the notion of 'meaning', could this be a limit to poststructuralism?

There is a big debate about the philosophical trajectory of Derrida. Some people refer to an 'ethical turn' in Derrida's work. I guess you would have to locate this somewhere in the 1980s, when the reference to Levinas starts to become more and more prominent in his work, and he begins to make startling claims such as that 'Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond the law, is not deconstructible. No more than

deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists.'[13] Many Derrida enthusiasts—if that's not too derogatory a term—deny that there is any turn, with its implication of discontinuity. And it has to be said that Derrida himself also rejected any suggestion of a *tournant éthique*. But then stellar French philosophers seem allergic to admitting they have ever changed their minds about anything—the contrast with Anglophone, and indeed contemporary German, philosophical culture is striking in that regard.

To put my cards on the table, to my mind it's incontestable that some quite dramatic change of orientation occurs in Derrida's work in the 1980s. Let me put it like this. The early Derrida is determined to show that *any* stabilization of meaning, any limitation of the play of the text, is ultimately based on an illusion—albeit a transcendental, or structurally unavoidable illusion. That's because any ultimate ground of the play of the text will turn out to have been posited *by* the play of the text. As far as I can see, there's not much we can do, according to the earlier Derrida, than abandon ourselves to this play—for the reason just given, there's certainly no point in trying to find an ultimate point of orientation *outside* it. But that argument also has political and ethical consequences—for, by the same argument, there can be no value or moral principle which is itself anything other than contextual. '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*', as Derrida famously said.

But now we can ask: what do we call the *fact* of unavoidable contextuality? Surely, that can't also be called contextual, for then Derrida's basic claim would cancel itself out—contextuality would not be total. On the one hand, if we *deny* that that fact is contextual, then we are equally conceding—in a different way—that contextuality is not total. That question points to a dilemma. And Derrida, in his later work, tries to resolve it by explicitly mobilizing the notion of the 'undeconstructible'—a notion that plays no role at all in his earlier writings. In other words, if deconstruction is all-pervasive—as Derrida claims it is: there are no pockets of pure identity—then the *condition of possibility* of deconstruction cannot itself be deconstructed. Derrida gave no thought to that condition of possibility in his earlier writings—he didn't think he needed such a thing, although we've just seen that it was always implied. It was implied because Derrida needed to protect deconstruction from the paradoxes of self-reference, so he could use those paradoxes to trip up everyone

[13] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 945.

else. Nonetheless, that's a surprising move, the overt evocation of the 'undeconstructible', a move which you might think would at least give the champions of the continuity of Derrida's enterprise pause for thought.

The next question is: what makes the 'undeconstructible'—or whatever accounts for the pervasiveness of deconstruction—different from the old, disreputable 'transcendental signified'? Derrida needs an answer to that question, and the one he gives is that the undeconstructible is not an object of knowledge—not even of what might be thought of as a special kind of philosophical knowledge. Rather it's an imperative, an unconditional imperative which we experience through being caught up in constantly shifting contexts, through the awareness that we cannot remain honestly within any delimited frame. We can see how this argument could take on an ethical colouring in Derrida's later thought, how he can propose—for example—that 'Deconstruction is justice'.[14] For any concrete, specific realization of justice will always fall short, will always leave more to be done. But if we can realize that there's been a failure, a falling short, even a betrayal, we can't be entirely determined by the play of finite, contextual forms. There has to be some kind of encounter, which drives our dissatisfaction, with an ethical transcendence—the absolute, non-deconstructible imperative of justice, for example—as strange as that may sound.

You can see that we are not so far from the problematic of hope, as Adorno develops it in the final chapter of *Negative Dialectics*. Indeed, as I'm sure you're aware, late Derrida uses a range of resonant terms for that absolute point of orientation—'democracy-to-come', 'messianicity', and so forth. It's the question of a horizon of meaning as the condition of moral agency that I talked about earlier. My basic point is that deconstruction, when it first came on the scene, was supposed to have 'liberated' us—I use the word ironically—by dismantling *any* horizon of meaning. That's why I think there's a rupture in Derrida's thinking. At the same time, we can see why the disruptive, illusion-puncturing work of deconstruction in its earlier phase was *obliged* or *driven* to tip over into something more constructive, and why Derrida and his acolytes were inclined, as a result, to see *only* continuity. But what is the force of that obligation or drive? How far does it mark a switch, and how far does it mark an extension? If I had more time I would try to explain how

[14] Derrida, 'Force of Law', p. 945.

Schelling—in the 1830s and 1840s—was already trying to think about those questions in his account of the transition from 'negative' to 'positive' philosophy. But I'll have to develop that theme elsewhere.

How do you assess the relevance of German Idealism, especially given your concern with Schelling's philosophy, to the contemporary debates in social theory?

I said earlier on that at a certain point my interest began to focus on the relation between contemporary thinkers and German Idealism. Derrida certainly connects to German Idealism. He knows he's profoundly indebted to Hegel, but—as I've just hinted—I think he's also connected to post-Kantian thought in ways that he doesn't fully realize. However, most people interested in Derrida—Rodolphe Gasché is a notable exception—had no interest in the extent to which his problems and his questions were problems and questions already explored intensely in the wake of Kant. They did not think there was anything to learn. In the German-speaking world, the big exception to that rule was Manfred Frank, who knows the German Idealists and Jena Romantics—not to mention Schleiermacher and the hermeneutic tradition—inside out. Manfred responded enthusiastically—though not without critical reservations—to the French philosophy of the 1960s, and wrote in penetrating detail about the web of interconnections and correspondences with post-Kantian thought. The English translation of his main book on the topic should have had a much bigger impact, but I think the title, *What is Neostructuralism?*—a straight replica of the German title—must have puzzled a lot of potential readers.[15] As far as the Frankfurt School is concerned, one could almost define Frankfurt Critical Theory as the project of enriching the Marxist tradition by going behind Marx to draw on the whole development from Kant to Hegel.

German Idealism is one of the great periods in the history of European philosophy *tout court*—an explosion of system building, but also of philosophical experimentation. In fact the term 'idealism', if not exactly a misnomer, can be misleading for the uninitiated. There's no question of the world being constructed in the mind, out of dabs of subjective experience, or anything like that. All it means is that you can't separate being and normativity—so, admittedly, that does put them in opposition to the

[15] Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, Minneapolis 1989.

forms of mechanistic and deterministic thinking that—in modernity—constantly threaten to invade the human world.

What is innovative about the German Idealists is that they are not just doing ahistorical metaphysics, though their philosophical acumen is second to none, but thinking in a self-conscious way about their own time—about modernity, and about the fundamental problems of modernity. Just to give a few examples, they ask: what is the relation between human subjectivity and nature? That's a fundamental issue, and one which has enormous political and social consequences in the contemporary world, with climate change, pollution and the destruction of the environment. The question of the relation between human activity, human consciousness and nature is absolutely central to German Idealist thinking. Another major problem for them is the relation between morality, on the one hand, and self-realization on the other. Again, this is a basic issue—not just in an abstract sense, but as a set of dilemmas we all confront in living our lives. We've already touched on this in relation to Marcuse, to Adorno, to the question of impulse versus principle, to the notion of repressive desublimation, and so forth. What is the relation between the modern idea of finding individual self-realization and fulfilment as a unique person, and committing to what we know to be morally right, to what represents justice? Is it a mistake to think that—deep down—there has to be any conflict between these things at all? If not, how do we determine our priorities? Once again, what is the role of art and aesthetic experience in the modern world? Does art transfigure the world, thereby reconciling us to it? Or does it rather disrupt our everyday consciousness and inspire us to change it? Has art achieved its modern autonomy, its freedom from pre-set frames of meaning such as religion, at the cost of degenerating into a form of ultimately inconsequential play? German Idealism and, I should add, the Jena philosophical Romanticism closely connected to it, were a kind of laboratory where thinkers were experimenting—trying out different possibilities, different answers to these basic questions, which remain fundamental today.

How would you differentiate the theory of identity in Hegel and in Schelling, in view of the debate over non-identity in Adorno?

This is a very complicated question, so I'm not sure whether there are any simple answers. On the one hand, defenders of Hegel will always

say, 'Well no, Hegel is not trying to repress non-identity. Hegel includes difference, includes non-identity within his system, it's absolutely fundamental to his way of thinking. So, it would be a parody to suggest that Hegel ultimately overrides difference or non-identity.' On the other hand, the later Schelling comes to the conclusion that there is still a limit to Hegel's way of thinking. And if we're talking about connections between Schelling and Adorno, in Schelling there's also an experiential dimension, as well as a dialectical dimension, which bears on his approach these issues.

I published an article about this aspect of Schelling quite recently. It dealt with the famous treatise on freedom from 1809, and I wanted to show that in the *Freiheitsschrift*, Schelling has a kind of double methodology; he has what you might call a 'meta-dialectical' methodology.[16] He doesn't deny at all the rational imperative to fit the concept of freedom into our whole system of concepts, but also thinks that freedom is fundamentally elusive, that it resists conceptual or dialectical articulation. So there's also an irreducible phenomenological dimension or experiential dimension of freedom. In the *Freiheitsschrift* he's trying to understand how those two ways of proceeding relate, the experiential approach and the dialectical or conceptual approach. That's how he sets up the problem on the very first page of the text.

Obviously, he's creating difficulties for himself—by saying that freedom is both *inside* and *outside* the system. But this dual perspective is very typical of Schelling's way of thinking. Later on, the experiential dimension of his philosophy was picked up by thinkers like Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was listening to Schelling's first lecture cycle in Berlin, in 1841–42, and it's clear that—despite his rapid disillusionment with Schelling's performance—the proto-existentialist aspect of Schelling fed into his own later work. But for Schelling, that's only the one side. You can't just have the experiential aspect or the phenomenological aspect, you also have to have the dialectical, systematic aspect: you can't just shine the spotlight on human existence and leave everything else—nature, human history—in obscurity, as the later existentialists tended to do. There's a whole world out there that freedom both does and does not fit into. That means, then, that you have both *to integrate* and *not to*

[16] Dews, 'Theory Construction and Existential Description in Schelling's Treatise on Freedom', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2017; and F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, Albany, NY 2006.

integrate the two dimensions. It's enough to drive you crazy. But you can see how Schelling's approach is echoed in Adorno's struggle with the question of identity, for example when he states that 'the non-identical is indeed identical—as itself mediated—and yet not identical, the other over against all its identifications.'[17] In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno claims that this is a basic Hegelian insight, which Hegel himself failed to live up to—to my mind, it's the position Schelling reaches, in trying to look beyond Hegel.

Could you speak a little bit about Habermas's criticism of Hegel and how it connects with his view of Schelling?

Habermas published a long essay about Schelling in 1963, in his collection of essays *Theorie und Praxis*, drawing on arguments he had already developed in his 1954 doctoral thesis, which was devoted to Schelling.[18] He makes two basic criticisms of Hegel in the essay from 1963. One is concerned with the cyclical character of Hegel's system. Hegel himself often describes his system as a circle of circles, and in a way you can understand what Hegel wants to do. He wants to overcome the problem of foundations, which is a permanent problem in philosophy. Where do you begin? How do you justify your beginning? If you have a circular system in which every end is also a beginning, and every beginning is also an end, you seem not to have that difficulty.

But Habermas then wants to say, 'But how you get into your circular system in the first place?' Once you're within the system, everything's fine. It works. But how do you get inside, how do you get started? He thinks that this is a problem for Hegel. People don't generally recognize Habermas's talent for aphorism, but it puts it very nicely: '*Systematisch ist ein Anfang des Systems nicht denkbar*.' There's no systematic way of thinking the beginning of Hegel's system. You can see how this connects with Schelling, because of what we were saying a moment ago about the experiential dimension that has to connect with—without being reducible to—the systematic or the dialectical dimension.

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[17] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 120.

[18] Habermas, 'Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the Philosophy of History', in Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman, eds, *The New Schelling*, London 2004; Habermas, *Das Absolute und die Geschichte: Von der Zwiespältigkeit in Schellings Denken*, Bonn 1954.

The other criticism Habermas then wants to make is that, even though Hegel claims fully to confront suffering and pain and negativity within his philosophy, if the system—if Hegel's way of thinking—has this cyclical structure, then suffering and pain and negativity simply become an inevitable, repetitive aspect of reality. To go back to what we were discussing earlier about hope and the utopian dimension, it seems as though Hegel has eliminated that dimension, that aspiration for a more emancipated future. Again, this is a criticism that Habermas derives from Schelling. So, Schelling thinks that there was some event in the past of humanity which put us on the wrong track and has produced an inversion, what he calls a 'false unity', in which the particularistic material basis of human existence dominates its expansive spiritual dimension. Habermas takes the view that Schelling must be right against Hegel in this respect—that's what makes him, rather than Hegel, the proto-historical materialist, which is a main contention of the essay. If you want to have hope for the future or a hope for emancipation, you have to have an actual beginning of the wrong state of things. Only if there is a contingent basis of the wrong state of things, is there any possibility of putting them right again.

So, another point of connection with Adorno is that, as we've said, he has something like this thought in *Negative Dialectics*—in the face of utopia, 'dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things.' In Adorno the quest for a degree of human control over nature is not inherently illegitimate—on the contrary, it's rational. But Adorno portrays the domination of nature as leading to social domination. The two seem to be inseparable. And we could ask the question, 'Well, why? Why couldn't human beings have collaborated to gain control over nature? Why does the mastery of nature produce social division and social domination?' It seems to me that there's no necessary, inevitable connection between those two aspects of domination. And in fact, in *Negative Dialectics*, there is at least one point where Adorno says that there must have been something comparable to the theological Fall, there must have been some irrational catastrophe in the beginning which set humankind on its disastrous course.[19] Of course, once social domination begins, then it has its own momentum, it perpetuates itself almost irresistibly.

This argument forms part of Adorno's critique of orthodox Marxism. He thinks that Marxism is too indebted to Hegel, too attached to the idea of

[19] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 323.

a kind of necessary process, albeit one which will lead to emancipation. You might take the view that there's nothing inherently problematic about thinking that, although human history is a sequence of stages of domination, of oppression and suffering, if we go through these stages there will be a positive result, an emancipatory result. But Adorno resists that way of thinking, even though you could say it's Marx's way of thinking. He wants to say, 'No, there was a contingent beginning of domination. It did not have to happen with unavoidable necessity.' You might respond that this is a morally motivated objection, rather than a theoretical objection. Undoubtedly there's a moral dimension. But I think it also connects with the thought in Schelling that a necessary process cannot produce freedom or result in freedom. There's a sense in which freedom can only be its own product, can only bring itself into being. Indeed, one could say that this is an insight common to all the German Idealists. But from Schelling's standpoint, the circularity of Hegel's system betrays that insight. Levinas, who connects with Schelling's *Spätphilosophie* via Franz Rosenzweig, puts the point succinctly: 'Beginning and end are not ultimate concepts in the same sense.'[20]

For Schelling freedom is like the blank screen which is inscribed with the necessary dialectic of the vectors of being, or what he calls *Potenzen*. They're inscribed to such an extent that the screen itself almost disappears. That primordial freedom is what he annotates as A°, while the potentialities—material contingency, conceptual necessity, and their resolution—are notated as A^{1}, A^{2} and A^{3}. This reminds me of Adorno's lectures on *History and Freedom*, in which he argues—and again, this is a kind of anti-Marxist point—that freedom could have irrupted at any moment, as it were.[21] Adorno seems to be saying, 'I don't want your wretched freedom at the end of history, after we've been through all the pain, through all the suffering, through the cycles of domination, as if it were a kind of reward.' No, he wants to suggest that there's always an anarchic possibility of freedom, that freedom could break out at any time. That reminds me of Schelling's A°—the primordial freedom always implicit in the background as a possibility, as the potentiality of the three dimensions of potentiality.

On the relationship between theory and practice, how would you assess Lukács's portrayal of Adorno as dwelling complacently in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss'?

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[20] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh 1969, p. 99.
[21] Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, Cambridge 2006.

That's a rather complicated question. Adorno wasn't completely an ivory-tower thinker. When he returned to Germany after the Second World War, he gave lots of talks on the radio, he was very concerned with what he called education for maturity or autonomy—the German word for it, *Mündigkeit*, is difficult to put into English. He was concerned with how the educational system—the school system—could be changed in order to increase the ability of students to think for themselves and to think critically; and he used psychoanalytical concepts to expose the repressive dynamics of existing forms of pedagogy. In a paradoxical way, he was both a utopian and a reformist. So it's not quite true to say that Adorno had no interest in practical social transformation. At the same time, I wouldn't want to defend Adorno all the way down the line. His fastidiousness, which could teeter over into reaction, can easily get tiresome. In a way, there is something much more appealing about Marcuse's positive engagement with the anti-imperialist and protest movements of the 1960s—even though there's now a painful naivety about some of what he wrote at the time. Habermas once said to me that he found that activist, political side of Marcuse very congenial—they were good friends.

Could you tell us a little about your projects at the moment?

I'm writing a book about the relation between Schelling and Hegel. It's mostly about Schelling's late philosophy, and the critique of Hegel he only begins to develop fully after Hegel's death in 1831. This phase of Schelling's work is still almost completely unknown in the English-speaking world, even amongst people who would regard themselves as experts in German Idealism. The texts themselves are not exactly easy—there are almost no publications, only Schelling's own written-out lectures, some of which were published by his son in the *Sämmtliche Werke*, and various transcripts by auditors; added to that, the argumentation is formidably complex, and in a way represents Schelling's retrospective engagement with the whole arc of German Idealism from Kant onwards, including his own youthful role in its inception and development. The central preoccupation is one we've been approaching from different directions all along. Is there a limit to reason? Is there a dimension which escapes reason? And, if so, how can one articulate that dimension without giving up on philosophy, without ceding ground to unreason? Those are some of the most fundamental philosophical questions there are. They are intimately connected with the problem of

freedom, the question of whether freedom itself is ultimately just the manifestation of reason, and it's immensely instructive to observe the divergent answers that Hegel and Schelling give to them.

As we see it, there is a kind of integration between your studies of Schelling at this moment and your earlier studies of poststructuralism. In a sense, both are concerned with the problem of the non-identical.

Adorno's the pivot. I find it hard to avoid returning to him. He was immersed in German Idealism—and not just Hegel—of course, but he also had a kind of poststructuralist sensibility. 'Non-identity' is his word for that dimension of the non-conceptual and the non-rational—as opposed to the irrational—which we have no choice but to open up to, if we are to be fully human. Unlike some contemporary philosophers, I'm not averse to drawing on the heritage of Western metaphysics in order to approach that dimension, albeit with a due sense of historicity—and neither was Adorno. I can't do better than conclude with that lovely sentence from *Negative Dialectics* I quoted earlier: 'Subjectively liberated and metaphysical experience converge in humanity.'

This is an expanded version of an interview conducted in São Paulo by Talita Cavaignac (MA in Philosophy, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais) and Thomas Amorim (doctoral student in Sociology at São Paulo University) in January 2018.