

Adorno and the Concept of Genocide

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Adorno and the Big Chill: The Cold Intimacy of Genocide and Culture Industry

Tom Huhn

For Jeanne Silverthorne



There's no gentle way to begin, nor should there be. No pleasant way to begin to talk of genocide. This is the first problem we encounter in trying to approach some of Theodor Adorno's various remarks on what has come to be called the holocaust. The rubric under which I'd like to approach this particular problem is the theme of human coldness. The question I pose is whether we might rightly fault nature, and especially our fear in relation to it, as the source of our unrelenting chill toward others as well as toward ourselves. The holocaust is taken to be the absolute expression of human coldness.

A key difficulty of the subject reveals itself in the very hazard of approach: we feel the prohibition that we ought not *warm* ourselves to the subject. That is, the subject requires, mimetically, that we harden and steel ourselves in the face of it. It's as if our understanding, our thinking approach to the idea, demands that we likewise become changed by it. For this is what the movement, the dynamic of thinking, yields: transformation. Thinking, à la Hegel for example, is best described as beginning in the very transformation of what is given into something else. For such thinkers as Adorno and Benjamin, to come near an object or an idea is mimetically to fashion and to transform oneself into a likeness of that same thing or idea, regardless of course of the existence of any objective standard of likeness. Let us leave aside all weak formulations of thinking as some mere surveying of things, as the calculation and administration of objects or effects. That kind of thinking is what we might call thinking in its mere housekeeping function, the keeping track of things. In relation to the holocaust this exclusively administrative thinking would include all the aspects that Hannah Arendt famously called the banality of evil: the tabulating and record keeping of bureaucratic organization. Rather, the thinking I'm interested in trying to draw near in order to understand is the thinking whose very nature it is to alter and to transform.

Here then we come into contact with fear. It's around this term that we will gain the most insight into Adorno's characterization of how thinking mis-orient itself. Fear, on his account, displaces the activity in which thinking transforms itself—recall that thinking begins in the transformation of things—by fear transforming, instead, the very activity of transformation into a rigid, non-transformative reflex. Adorno's schema is remarkably simple, akin we might even say to those rather straight-forward sketches of primitive life drawn by both Freud and Rousseau. It begins with the slightest of assumptions, which is that nature includes, first and foremost, the inevitability of suffering. And indeed in this Adorno might well be echoing Freud's account of how our lives are *measured* in relation to suffering. Recall that for Freud there are three sources of suffering. The first is the inevitability of the decline and decay of the body: we will be betrayed by our bodies, and this is an unavoidable source of suffering. The second is that nature will also bring suffering from disasters like floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc. And while the first two sources are natural, the third and most powerful source of suffering for human beings lies not in nature but rather originates in our relations with other human beings. And Freud is not imagining here that human beings cause suffering to one another primarily through malicious intent—though there is certainly plenty of that to go around—but rather, the specification he gives is that we will suffer primarily from the disappointments that other people cause in us. Now we know exactly what we most have to fear: one another. Still, please note that the logic of this supposed continuity in the sources of suffering, from nature to one another, has happened too readily. We have neglected to consider why fear has entered the picture so dramatically. We have displaced our fear of nature onto our fear of one another. And, curiously enough, in this rather opaque displacement we have greatly—if unwittingly—expanded the scope of our fear. We have, obviously, more to fear, and to hope for, from one another than from any other source. In this nexus of suffering and fear we also encounter the dynamic which now pervades each of us most thoroughly: *self-preservation*. Suffering, fear, self-preservation—it is the peculiar configuration of these things that continues to make us cold.

But here's what appears lopsided: if we need fear, in effect, only for the disappointments that others will occasion in us, then why have we developed such a profoundly *assertive* form of self-preservation? What is it that might have prompted the overdevelopment—if indeed it is an overdevelopment—of this aspect of our being in the world? Our vulnerability toward others appears greatly exaggerated, but is it in fact so? Is our self-preservation a form of overcompensation for the relative safety we have achieved in our relation to nature? Our fearful comportment toward suffering becomes a strategy that likewise makes suffering enlarged and all-pervasive. Fear, in other words, calls forth terror. Why are we overdetermined toward fear? Why does fear invade us

so deeply? Why does fear become an orientation and, one might say, a way of life?

Psychoanalytically speaking, we might say that fear is mimetic of the rigidification that gives rise to the ego as a firmly bound object. Human objectification is not only a response to the orientation of fear; it is also the exemplification of it. Fear is, in this regard, the resistance to the dissolution of the self made into a permanent force. But this dialectic of fear thus comes to mean that fear likewise also rehearses and indeed practices the very dissolution against which it supposedly arms itself.

Again we find fear at the nexus of our orientations towards self and others. And so too is this an apt place to find a surprising kinship between Adorno and the philosophy of Lucretius. Lucretius, perhaps the most eloquent follower of Epicurus, writing in the first century BCE, echoes Epicurus's overarching concern with the inordinate influence that fear is often allowed to play in human lives. For Lucretius, fear is what allows what he calls the fable-mongers to construct their religions and ideologies, which serve in turn to distract us from the otherwise simple life of the body and its needs, but so too from the simple pleasures of friends and conversation. Fear is the great engine of over-protection. It is fear that not only responds to but also generates all the inordinate images of an afterlife of suffering, which thereby put us in an unbalanced relationship to the *fact* of our own mortality. Fear—and this is perhaps the most difficult aspect of this idea to adjust to—is not the reaction of the body to its environment—or we might say: of the psyche to nature—but is, instead, the intellectual and emotional mis-characterization of the relation of the individual to its environment. Fear is, as the contemporary sloganizing might put it: all mental.

Here's the slippage that seems to occur: because fear often feels like a fear for the sake of the body—a fear, we might say, on the part of the body—it thus appears as though it arises *naturally* out of the situation of embodiment. In short, that we fear for our bodily suffering seems to mean that fear arises out of the nature of the body and its relation to life. But Lucretius is at pains, so to speak, to help us understand that the body and even its sufferings are not the source of fear. Fear is instead for him the product of our relationship to how we *imagine* the fate of the body. If we could only come to *know* the body as a thoroughly material thing, composed exclusively, like all things according to him, of some combination of atoms and void, then we could likewise come to *know* that there is, literally speaking, no place within the life of the body for fear. Fear, in other words, occurs not within life and its bodily vessel, but only in our strategic, ideational relationship to life. Just as there can be no room within matter and void for the existence of fear, so too, then, ought there be no room within the *knowledge* of what is for fear. Lucretius and Epicurus are therefore interested in the knowledge of what is, not for the sake of knowledge, not for

the sake of knowing, but rather for the sake of life, which is better positioned to be itself—whatever it is or is to become—when it comes to know there is no quarter within it for fear.

The whole goal of knowledge is purportedly to serve a life that disallows any quarter to fear. This bears repeating as it has profound consequences for this particular brand of materialism: the conviction that only matter—or only matter and void—exist is less a metaphysical conviction about what truly exists, than it is the far more important denial that human life includes a natural, constituent component of fear. (Recall Rousseau's speculation in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, when he is attempting to explain how civilization—which is to say something profoundly unnatural—arose out of that which was only nature [it's a kind of logical impossibility], he then speculates—because he acknowledges that we can never know since knowing is itself on the side of the unnatural—that the great chunk of artifice and un-nature that we call civilization begins perhaps in our coming to be *aware* of death. In effect then, all of civilization is, for Rousseau, a great scheme to distract us from this awareness.) For Lucretius, we are haunted, or better: we spook ourselves, not with the knowledge of death, but only by way of the *fear* of it.

And this in turn brings us to the supposedly *natural* orientation of self-preservation. To put it as *bluntly* as possible: *it is not life that clings to life*. Or put differently: that there is a *doctrine* of self-preservation, that we have an *orientation* of self-preservation is itself the best evidence that self-preservation is less an expression of life and more the expression of what we might call the *ideology* of life. And what I want to suggest, following Adorno, is that it is primarily from the point of view of fear that life comes to encase itself—entomb itself we might say—in an ideology of self-preservation.

This is an interesting place to understand just how thoroughly Lucretius and Epicurus have been misread as somehow advocating some version of a pursuit of pleasure. This particular misreading is also symptomatic of the ideological character of self-preservation. What I have in mind here is that the supposed pursuit of pleasure is of a piece with what I'm calling the ideological nature of self-preservation. That life might pursue something called pleasure is as mistaken a characterization as whatever it is that purports to claim that life's primary motion is toward self-preservation. Pleasure is the name we give to the *hope* that life might for once become fully one with itself; in other words, pleasure—or happiness—is the image of life fulfilled, just as self-preservation is the image of life sustaining itself. But this is just the opposite of what Epicurus and Lucretius aim toward, which is instead a human life composed exclusively *according to its own terms*, which is to say, matter and void. Pleasure and pain might well be measures according to which one assesses the success or

failure of life—or, we might say: the feeling of life—but pleasure and pain are not themselves the goal. (See, for example, Freud's *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*.) Pleasure as the goal of life is a bit of sophistry, the mere reverse image of the acknowledgment that life inevitably includes suffering. And the whole philosophical enterprise, at least from the point of view of Lucretius and Epicurus, is to have us respond *appropriately* to the knowledge of our own suffering—whatever its source—and demise. The most inappropriate response, the response out of all measure to the reality of pain and suffering, is the response of fear, and so too, of course, is anything that enhances or extends that fear. Self-preservation, I'm suggesting, is but the *rationalized*—or perhaps we might say: *administrated*—form of fear.

Let us return, then, to our contention that fear does not arise from the body, from matter and void, and add to it Adorno's surmise that fear is a product of reason, the very capacity that owes its existence to the goal of banishing fear. This is central to the dynamic of the enlightenment's dialectic: though enlightenment seeks to eradicate fear, it is nonetheless responsible for the production of fear as an image of nature, the very thing which it purports to replace. Fear is the image of a nature that requires an ongoing opposition and indeed eradication. Were nature but a single static thing, it could be readily vanquished, triumphed over, defeated. But in order to construct an ever-vigilant subjectivity, that is, to be a subjectivity continuously called into existence, a nature of similar stature and stamina is likewise called forth. Fear, or better: a particular kind of fear, was thus conjured into existence in order to provide just the right target against which the self might aim and fashion itself. Fear, in other words, has taken on the character of an absolute command. The holocaust, I'm suggesting, is the absolute expression of—the proactive response to—the absolute command within fear.

The absoluteness of the command is reflected in the completeness of the threat of annihilation—as Adorno writes, “behind every social, socially approved, socially required mode of behavior there is, however *distantly*, something like direct physical force, in other words, the threat of annihilation” (Adorno 2003, 199; *my italics*). And it's the implication of this term, “distantly,” that I'm interested in investigating here, in an attempt to understand and appreciate what it is we feel most often from others and from ourselves that still bears the traces of what was once called nature. The threat of annihilation, at a distance, is the feeling of coldness, of whatever is human in us not being near enough.

We are doubtless creatures who feel warmth as well as coldness from one another. Adorno's psychoanalytically informed surmise as to the locus of human coldness is surprisingly akin to that of the Christian point of view: coldness in humankind is the product of an insufficiency of love. We are, Adorno

avers, none of us loved sufficiently. Whence this insufficiency? And is the world—which is to say here: nature—insufficient for human care and nurturing? Adorno's answer to these questions is to suggest that the world is in fact deficient in its love for each and every one of us, but only because each of us is similarly aware that not a single one of us has it within ourselves to love another sufficiently. Our knowledge that we cannot ever love another completely leads, in turn, to the inescapable acknowledgement that no one could ever love us in a way that would do full justice to our needs. Coldness, however, is not simply the registration of this insufficiency; coldness is also the result of our *resentment* (shades of Nietzsche here) toward a world that fails to meet our needs. Christianity is perhaps the most symptomatic expression of resentment in terms of the insufficiency of love, even if Christianity also expresses most deeply the attempt to rectify and overcome that very same resentment.

This is not (only) an exercise in blaming or celebrating Christianity (no doubt it is well deserving of both), but rather an attempt to appreciate the fact that the principle and the absoluteness of the command to love could lead to resentment at its failure. At the very least, we might say that Christianity helped bring to a head resentment at the failure of the command to love and its implicit promise: to be loved in turn. The sacrifice of Christ, in this light, is thus at once both the demonstration of the deadliness of the absoluteness in the command to love—in other words, the command is not entirely humane, even though it purports to be entirely in the service of human beings alone—as well as a sacrifice indicating the most thorough resignation in the face of the failure of the command to love.

We find ourselves to be a thoroughly cold people. For Adorno, our coldness comes in large part from failure to be loved enough. But so too is our coldness a product of our having to acknowledge our complicity in being unloved insofar as it also represents our inability to love sufficiently. What we lack is both the experience of being loved enough as well as the experience of loving enough. The Christian principle of loving thy neighbor as thyself is too powerful a demand on those who can't help but fail at loving themselves. Resentment in the face of this failure becomes as absolute as the command it voices.

The absolute coldness of genocide is the reverse side of the absolute command to love; they share the absoluteness. This is not to suggest that Christianity somehow caused genocide, but rather to try to recognize, with Freud, that Christianity's civilizing dynamic perhaps goes too far, at least for those creatures who have not yet become capable of loving—even simply loving themselves—sufficiently. Freud's suggestion in this regard is that the command to love thy neighbor is in fact a disservice to the character of love, which, he implies, has a large share of freedom at its disposal in the choice of whom

we love as well as how much, and indeed whether we love. To command that we love (even that we are to love ourselves), and indeed to make it apply equally to all, is an evisceration of one of the key features that make human love an expression of our freedom. What kind of love asks us to sacrifice our freedom? Well, the only kind of love, perhaps unfortunately, that we know, which is to acknowledge that the command to love, in that aspect that expresses bondage, is at the same time a recognition of the unfreedom that we submit ourselves to when we submit to the supposed freedom of loving.

The *command* to love, the duty and obligation to love, are symptoms—indeed reproductions and reflections—of that which remains *unfree* in human love. Such loving as humans are capable of thus far moves simultaneously toward both freedom and bondage. But for Adorno the unfreedom of love, the bondage that it also embodies, is not so much a product of love per se as it is rather the residue, in love, of the key feature of our relationship to principle and law in general: that they work by overreaching whatever is local and particular, that they leave the warmth of intimate contact and familiarity for the cold sweep that applies to all in their path. This is the problem, not of love, but of human overreaching, and recall that the place where that overreaching shows itself most vividly is in the very dynamic of the thinking that proceeds by leveling whatever it encounters to a mere unit or cipher of its own mechanism. This is the brutal, destructive thinking that remains a dynamic of transformation, and has, unfortunately, always only the same goal: the reduction of all transformation to instrumentalization. Let me be clear: this is not an argument against thought, it is not anti-intellectualism, but a reminder of the need to try to recall whatever it is that is left behind in experience by that thinking whose efficiency proceeds by moving past it. It is this very motion, at the core of this thinking, of a coldness towards what is that, in order to move beyond it, reduces all its objects to instruments, that we find replicated and expanded in genocide. For Adorno, we have placed ourselves under a kind of spell in relation to the events that compose our lives, or better: we are in thrall to the clean cold principles that elevate us out of the sticky warm intimacies of all that we undergo.

Genocidal coldness errs exclusively on the side of the coldness of principle transferred then to the cold bondage of what is unfree in human relations, as we saw in the case of love. Genocide betrays a bondage and commitment so absolute that it exceeds what is properly human. We human beings are historical artifacts who have made ourselves into vehicles for principles that exceed us; we might well say that is both our glory and our damnation. Consider instead how the proper, and Kantian, question is to ask, in regard to all such overreachings by means of principles—and hence most importantly:

our *relation* to them—whether we *ought* to come to recognize ourselves in just these principles, which is also to ask whether there is anything remaining of us within some principle or another. Every principle, like every thought, exceeds us; this is what is most salient in the character of principles, and, ideally, every principle ought to provide us with the opportunity to reflect upon—and decide—whether we can truly find ourselves within and by means of this or that principle, we might even say: of principledness.

Genocide is the result of the embrace of the absolute *otherness* of principle and law in general. It repeats and reconstitutes the cold inhumaneness of principle, which is to say, of the absolute. Let us understand it this way: genocide is best understood here not as the product of having chosen this principle or that—for example, racial purification or retaliation for supposed injuries—but rather as that which ignores the content and meaning of every principle by becoming instead the vehicle of principle in general, the coldness of human becoming that leaves absolutely everything behind. To put it bluntly: genocide is the epitome of principledness in its reflexive absolute inhumanity toward itself. Absolute coldness.

Key to acknowledge here is how this absolute coldness of genocide arises out of the transformation of life into self-preservation. We might say that self-preservation, especially when understood as an overabundance, is an overabundance, not of life but, again, of principle over and against life. This is the core of the dynamic of how principle functions: it comes to oppose life by having opposed expression; again, genocide is the most extreme case of what comes to oppose that out of which it arose. An interesting alternative way to picture this is along the lines suggested in the transcript of Adorno's conversation with Elias Canetti in regard to the latter's *Crowds and Power*. One of Canetti's grand insights provides a striking example of Adorno's contention that the roots of thinking and principle lay in our relationship to the particularities of experience. Canetti puts his finger on that particular moment of experience in which the individual's fear of the proximity and what we might call the unwelcome warmth of others is transformed into something else. For Canetti the name of this phenomenon is crowd. That is, the human and defensive and creaturely fear of being touched is reversed in the crowd. *Crowd* names the place and product of this fear of being touched having been overcome, turning indeed into its opposite, the giddy celebration of the overcoming of just that fear. Here is how Canetti himself describes it:

it is a truly remarkable fact that human beings are able to lose themselves completely in a crowd. This is a really important paradox. A person loses his fear of being touched only when he finds himself packed in a crowd,

when he is surrounded by other people so tightly that he doesn't know who is pushing him. At such a moment, he loses his fear of physical contact with other people. The fear of being touched turns into its opposite; and I believe that one of the reasons why people like to become part of a crowd, to join a crowd, is the relief they feel at this process of reversal.

ADORNO 2003, 185

Canetti goes on to speculate, quite brilliantly I believe, that all of the major religions, and especially each in its primitive origins, contain images of crowds, whether of spirits, gods, demons, etc. In other words, religions owe a large share of their power and appeal to the images of crowdedness—especially if invisible—that allow believers to be relieved of the burden of the fear of physical contact, which is of course the concrete experience that nourishes the ideology of self-preservation.

It is illuminating here to trace the fate of self-preservation in civilization, or better we should say: in culture. What I have in mind is the centrality that the principle of self-preservation holds in the aesthetic theories of Burke and Kant, and in particular in their respective doctrines of the experience of the sublime. For both thinkers, sublime aesthetic experience provides the opportunity for the principle of self-preservation to be at once acknowledged and, in its acknowledgment, disempowered. We might say that Burke and Kant's sublime represents the *domestication* of self-preservation, its transformation from a principle of our nature into the *cultivation* of our judgment and sensibility. The aesthetic of the sublime is an attempt to break the spell of fear by transforming fear into terror in the hope that it will then collapse under its own weight. (Note the kinship here with Canetti's description of how the crowd expands the fear of being touched until the point of its collapse and transformation into something wholly different.)

Burke and Kant prescribe the sublime as a therapeutic, indeed homeopathic, exorcism of the absoluteness of the principle of self-preservation, and the transformation of it into what Burke designates as the relative pleasure of "delight." In other words, it is precisely the transformation of self-preservation into something less deadly toward the self (not to mention toward others) that is the central momentum of the civilizing dynamic.

Christianity, perhaps akin to the aesthetic attempt to have self-preservation implode, would ostensibly like to protect us from suffering, but instead doubles down on it, preserves and extends the spell of the *inevitability* of suffering, of resignation in the face of it. Christianity's seeming advantage over self-preservation is that it more directly addresses the coldness of human life. Its gesture is to warm up to suffering but thusly, unfortunately, so

too does it warm up suffering. (This is Nietzsche's complaint regarding the Christian—and earlier, Socratic—commitment to pain, suffering, and death.) Christianity acknowledges that suffering is at once entirely human and more than human.

Genocide is self-preservation run amok. Genocide might be viewed in its mimetic orientation as the mirroring reflex of a world gone entirely cold. It is indeed an act (phenomenon) that arises from, or out of, rationality, which is to say arises from the dynamic of a thing transformed into an absolute principle. But what kind of thing here? An experience made into a non-experience, an experience made into an occasion to ward off future experience—this is a key element of reason, one which we find even in Hume's account of mental life, where thinking is not so much the organization of experience into patterns but more the constitution of genuinely human experience by means of its standardization. This is what Adorno means by *spell*: the bewitchment we allow principles to put us under, not because principles or reason or standardization are in any degree not fully human inclinations or capacities, but rather because these inclinations have not shed their origination under the sign of fear. With this fear comes our concomitant vulnerability, which is nothing but fear raised to the status of principle. One understands the modern version of this under the rubric of anxiety, that fear which is a suffering due in part to the glimmer of acknowledgement that the fear within anxiety is itself illegitimately founded and without real basis.

Finally, I'd like to now pursue one particular thread in relation to our pervasive coldness, and this has to do with the manner in which we are continuously adjusted to the supposed necessity of the coldness of everyday life. For I see this constant administration of coldness, of our being over and over again adjusted to it (coerced really), as the flip side of the coin whose obverse insists on the naturalness of self-preservation. The name for this massive machinery of adjustment, which pervades nearly all the sounds and images we encounter, is the culture industry, or more simply put: popular culture. What of pop culture and its coldness? Perhaps it is best seen as therapeutic in its continuing efforts to adjust us to the cold. We find cold, not so much the world, as ourselves; this is the coldness that requires a constant vigilance—instructed here by popular culture—in order to maintain. Here is pop culture's affinity to self-preservation—the principle of life rather than life, whatever the latter might actually become. Why is life denied us; why do we continue to deny it to ourselves? We are not capable of it, or better put, we have not yet made ourselves capable of it. It would mean that we must first alter the equation of how we have come to live: we would have to stop being those entities in service of the preservation of self, and life, and instead become live things. Not the means

to or vehicles of life, but alive. This means lowering our fear of being alive, of death, whatever those terms might mean.

In this light, when I think of the sit-coms of pop culture I see a continuous program for relieving us of the burden of self-preservation—doesn't all light entertainment help us forget that we are alive? (and thereby forget the vigilance to preserve oneself)—and, at the same time, underlining just how thoroughly each of us is potentially at the mercy of devastating humiliations from which none of us will ever be safe? Cold comfort, that. The warmth projected and induced by the culture industry functions not unlike the way Canetti formulates the phenomenon of the crowd. That is, the culture industry's insinuations of intimacy provide the feeling of our all being huddled together, crowded into warm dens of a shared vulnerability. We are to warm ourselves by means of the shared exposure that we are, paradoxically, also made to celebrate. Every situation comedy becomes an object-lesson in how thoroughly vulnerable each of us cannot help but become in the face of the barrage of humiliations that every sit-com character suffers in place of each of us. The price we pay for the pleasure we take in the situation of the comedy is the barely absorbed realization that the crowd we thus constitute has made us more rather than less vulnerable. Though the crowd, à la Canetti, is supposed to be the premier mechanism by means of which our very individuated vulnerability is transformed into a shared power, the crowd constituted by the culture industry works in the opposite direction. It makes our vulnerability all-powerful, and in so doing ignites the tinder of our self-preservation into an infernal conflagration. The genocidal insanity of the holocaust is thus a rationally measured response to our now absolutized vulnerability. The ideology of self-preservation has no limit.

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