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From a high enough altitude, the philosophers of culture Theodore Adorno and Ernst Bloch can look similar. Politically, both are situated on the anti-capitalist Left. Philosophically, both were influenced by Hegelian rationalism and also by Nietzschean irrationalism. Stylistically, both developed highly personal and self-consciously esoteric forms of expression. Thematically, they were largely occupied with probing the significance of phenomena that a Marxist would call “superstructural,” especially aesthetic practices, commodities, and ideologies, and most especially music and its contexts of production and consumption.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Adorno and Bloch sit on opposite ends of several relevant spectrums. Bloch was a committed Marxist and Leninist (aptly labelled “the German philosopher of the October revolution”), a sympathizer with at least some aspects of Stalinism, (though his relations to the regime were, like Lukacs’s, fraught and complex), and after World War II voluntarily resettled in the DDR, where he occupied the chair of philosophy at the University of Leipzig. On the other hand, Adorno criticized the Russian Revolution early and often, was an implacable opponent of what he saw as the irredeemable and unmitigated totalitarianism of all forms of “actually existing socialism,” was at most a casual admirer of Marx (not a Marxist, nor a claimant to any great expertise in Marxian political economy), and returned from exile in Los Angeles to Frankfurt (in the BRD) after the war to help re-found the Institute for Social Research (from which, notably, Bloch was actively excluded during his years in asylum in the United States). There is also a great divide temperamentally and methodologically between the two thinkers. Adorno is recognized as late modernity’s great *negative* dialectician, as a purveyor of the most exquisitely refined strain of pessimism since Schopenhauer’s, as a champion of the philosophical *modus operandi* of “ruthless critique of all that exists” (not counterbalanced by any sustained attempt at constructive theory-building), and as a principled skeptic about the revolutionary historical role of the working class. Bloch’s writings, famously and contrastingly, form an extended meditation on the necessity and possibility of radical hope and optimism in the face of the unremitting calamity and unfulfilled revolutionary projects of the 20th century. His steadfastly uncynical philosophy aspires to systematic grandeur and presents itself as an amplification of the core tenets of Marx’s Marxism, essential among which is the belief in the emancipatory mission of the proletariat.

But if we narrow our focus still further, limiting it to Adorno's and Bloch's theories of music, the two figures again converge. Their conceptions of music's nature and its capacities are largely congruent--a surprising correspondence, perhaps, given that these conceptions lie entrenched within normative frameworks that were developed at least partly in deliberate opposition to one another. In this talk I want to identify in Adorno's and Bloch's treatments of music some fundamental points of accord. I think these these can be traced to a shared organicist outlook, and I'll argue that this is problematic, given the political gravity both thinkers wish to impute to music, and given their grounds for this imputation.

The cornerstone of Adornian and Blochian musical aesthetics is the hermeneutic claim that music has a meaning that is socio-historical. But their stress on musical *content* (in defiance of formalistic theories of various stripes) has little to do with the recognition of programmatic subject matter at the level of the individual piece, or of semiotic practices and affective codes operative at the level of musical style. Rather the claim is a general one--historically sweeping, if not fully transhistorical--about what kind of thing is semantically contained in music, alone and as such, in abstraction from the individuating properties of individual works and paradigmatic style traits. Adorno and Bloch share an eccentric view of what it is that music *per se* makes cognitively available to the historically attuned listener-interpreter, quite irrespective of the communicative intentions of the music's original producer(s) and the symbolic and referential customs of its original consumers. In broad strokes, the idea is that in the modern era (commencing roughly with the inauguration of capital accumulation in the 15th century) it becomes a pervasive feature of music *überhaupt* that it is somehow representationally connected to, stands in some kind of relation of aboutness with, a determinate and distinctively capitalistic form of social organization, i.e. a historically specific method of structuring communal life around the production of commodities.

I use these vague formulations ("representationally connected," "relation of aboutness") in order to be as imprecise as is customary in Adornian and Blochian circles about what the exact semantic link is that supposedly gets us from music to society, from (in Marxist terms) "superstructural" cultural product to the "relations of production" (broadly: the status and ownership dynamics that structure the making of things) that lie at the economic "base" of society. Adorno, Bloch, and their commentators help themselves to a bewildering variety of designations for the semantic relation that mediates between music and society: music, they indifferently maintain, represents, expresses, signifies, reflects, refracts, alludes to, semiotically realizes, embodies, sonically reproduces, is a simulacrum of, is a metaphor for, wordlessly bespeaks, analogizes, is an aesthetic precipitate or sedimentation of, presents a sound-image of, allegorizes, sensuously

enacts, communicates, is a cipher of, encodes, invites us to imagine, is a mimetic presentation of...a system of social relations manifested in the foundational interpersonal behavioral modes that organize and are organized by society's production and reproduction of itself. One way or another, that is, music puts us in mind of, maybe even teaches us something we didn't already know about, the structure of society. "History," Adorno says in this connection, "may be called the content of works of art. Analysing them is the same as becoming conscious of the immanent history stored in them." Thus, Adorno tells us elsewhere in a remark about the affinity between the self-contained drama of the modern period and the sonata-allegro form, the right kind of analytical contemplation of artworks reveals that

the sense in which a drama, a sonata-like product of the bourgeois era, is said to be crafted - i.e. composed of tiny motifs that are objectified by dynamic synthesis - has echoes of commodity production. The link between technical-artistic procedures of this kind and material ones belonging to the industrial era is obvious, although it has remained obscured thus far.

Where Adorno hears in music the echo of history, Bloch hears it issuing a call from the future. Bloch is persuaded that music stands in a privileged connection with *utopia*--in other words, with non-actual, optimal social circumstances, with a chapter of human history that has yet to be written. Music, as it were, operates at the level of the optative subjunctive, by expressing a wish for a world without alienation. Wayne Hudson encapsulates Bloch's musical aesthetics thus:

For Bloch, music is the most utopian of the arts. It is speech which men can understand: a subject-like correlate outside of us which embodies our own intensity, and in which we experience an anticipatory transcendence of the existing interval or distance (Abstand) between subject and object. 'Identity', the 'last moment', 'a world for us', 'utopia' is present in music: as the anticipatory presence and pre-experience (Vorgefühl) of the possibility of self ... Music expresses something 'not yet'. It copies what is objectively undetermined in the world. There is a human world in music which has not yet become actual: a pre-appearance of a possible regnum humanum. (Hudson 1982, 175)

Unlike Adorno, for whom there is an inexorable and unignorable accretion of historical meaning taken on by sonic forms, musical devices, and compositional techniques as they persist through and evolve over time, Bloch conceives of music's utopian function as a *use* to which music might be put by music's listeners in purposeful, and perhaps purposefully unorthodox, acts of listening. If I may be permitted to use some Marxist sectarian lingo: Adorno is a determinist, maybe even an economist, about music's capacity to bear witness to historical truth, whereas Bloch is a voluntarist, maybe even a spontanaeist, about its capacity to stimulate our imaginings of the end of history, the

supercession of class struggle. Blochian musical voluntarism is exercised in and through the performance of what he calls “visionary hearing.”

[S]hould visionary hearing of that kind be attained through successful musical poesis a se, then all music we already know will later sound and give forth other expressive contents besides those it has had so far. Then the musical expression perceived up to now could seem like a child's stammering by comparison, a language of an ultimate kind that is seeking to take shape but has come close to doing so only in a few, very exalted places. Nobody can understand it yet, although it is occasionally possible to surmise its meaning. But nobody has as yet heard Mozart, Beethoven or Bach as they are really calling, designating and teaching; this will only happen much later, with the fullest maturation of these and all great works.

My own sense is that Bloch's and Adorno's commentators get so exhausted by the task of figuring out what is being said in passages like this that they have little energy left over with which to be dubious about what might entitle someone to say such a thing. Let me inject some dubiousness into the conversation now by asking: by what mechanism could music, alone, occasion robust reflection upon the distinguishing features of a social formation or cultural settlement, actual or possible, utopian or dystopian?

The standard Adornian answer appeals to part-whole whole relations--musical mereology--as the basis of a formal analogy.

Adorno's treatment [of]...the isomorphism between society, language and art at the level of part-whole relations is key to his sociological perspective, and especially to his claims for the 'function' of works of art as modes of knowing or understanding. Not only do works of art participate in and derive from social praxis generally, but they can serve as a means of understanding social reality - of knowing and perceiving society - because in their structural relations they inscribe its likeness. (Witkin, p. 109)

The appeal to homology or isomorphism as the enabling grounds of music's possession of sociological content becomes especially attractive when the task is to account for the alleged utopianism of that content:

In musical details Adorno heard the subject speaking, willingly bending toward the musical object (the whole) in order to make possible the work, a whole larger than the sum of its individual parts. Something, in other words, like a utopian society. Musical details, bending and blending their expressive character toward the whole, while retaining their own specific character, permitted the reenactment of reconciliation between subject and object, for Adorno the artwork's highest goal. (Leppert 2005, 116)

This should be recognized for what it is: a recycling and political repurposing of Romantic organicist aesthetics. Bloch, more cryptically but in an equally organic frame

of mind, says that music is evocative of the “tree of life of intended perfection” and that it thereby aids in the attainment of proletarian class consciousness, a process of *Selbsterkennung* he characterizes as the communal emergence from “the forgetfulness of the organic.” Music’s supposedly organic structure, then, lies at the root of its sociological referentiality for both Adorno and Bloch. Adorno’s exaltation of “structural listening” is an offshoot of precisely that semantic thesis:

“Not only does the musical synthesis preserve the unity of appearance and protect it from falling apart into diffuse culinary moments, but in such unity, in the relation of particular moments to an evolving whole, there is also preserved the image of a social condition in which above those particular moments would be more than mere appearance.” (Adorno 2002, 290)

It is not an overstatement to say that the organic metaphor is the seed from which grows the dense and tangled thicket of Adorno’s and Bloch’s political hermeneutics of music. Effectively all of their contentions concerning the political character and political utility of music depend upon, and are referable back to, the conviction that music can have or lack the mereological property of part-whole organic reconciliation in a way that is unproblematically demonstrable and socially referential.

Adorno and Bloch are usually challenged on political grounds--for being either too Marxist or not Marxist enough--or are judged, in relation to musicology’s institutional values, as eurocentric, chauvinistic, unversed in jazz and world music, etc. These things are worth worrying about, but I think there are simpler reasons to reject the hermeneutic project in question, if one is looking for reasons to reject it.

Let me try to distill down to a few tenets what I take it one would have to believe, at minimum, if one were to have motivated sympathy for Adorno’s and Bloch’s interpretive projects.

1. A given piece of music can determinately have or lack the formal property of organic unity, and can be conclusively shown to do so.
2. The distinctive way in which a piece has or lacks organic unity is what endows it with its political content, in other words, is what grants it a semantic connection to the way in which class society produces or reproduces itself at a given point in its history. This connection is founded on a relationship of analogy: music is representationally related to the societal configuration whose distinctive mereological characteristics it analogously possesses (*mutatis mutandis*)
3. Music’s mereologically-determined political content is what makes it politically important (as a symptomatic phenomenon of political trends) or politically efficacious (as a political instrument), and, correspondingly, is what decides

whether the music is deserving of political condemnation (as regressive/reactionary) or political endorsement (as progressive/radical).

As regards the first commitment, it seems to me that most who have spent a bit of time reflecting on the methodological questions surrounding how to parse a musical work into its elemental constituents, and surrounding how to relate those constituents back to one another, are bound see Adorno as harboring a credulous and uninterrogated notion of organic unity. Even Schenkerians, who are in the best possible position to offer principled reasons for their attributions of organic unity, are nowadays unlikely to think of their own analytical dialect as a thoroughgoingly matter-of-factual discourse. Quite rightly, they see themselves as articulating optional modes of hearing for which one might have a principled preference, not as uncovering the standpoint-independent *truth* about music. To the extent that the decision to engage in an organicist mode of hearing is, at the end of the day, a matter of taste (not a matter of moral obligation or rational/evidentiary compulsion), Adorno's political judgmentalism about progressive and non-progressive styles of music itself resolves into a matter of taste and has none of the categorical, universalizing force he presents it as having.

Even if we grant the objectivity of organicism, there are ample reasons to reject Adorno's and Bloch's notion of social allegory. Bloch's basic point seems to be that music can and should be treated as a utopian allegory because of the political fortitude that will redound to those who so treat it. This can be challenged on the grounds that anyone disposed to try hear music in the Marxist-utopian way Bloch proposes probably already has the political convictions and allegiances that are themselves supposed to be the payoff and motivation for undertaking this manner of listening. Adorno, on the other hand, seems to have thought that music allegorizes society because and inasmuch as society's underlying organizational form is somehow *causally* responsible for music's form. Typical of him, for instance, is the assertion that the rational administration of commodity production can be appealed to as an explanation for the existence of twelve-tone and serial compositional techniques. Arnold Hauser's devastating criticism of this kind of just-so story must have been written with Adorno in mind:

"There is nothing easier than to construct striking connections between the various styles in art and the social patterns predominating at any particular time, which are based on nothing but metaphor, and there is nothing more tempting than to make a show of such daring analogies."

Actually, as I've argued, things are twice as bad as Hauser says: Adorno and Bloch have recourse to a metaphor (an overly facile cross-domain mapping between musical structure and

societal structure) in which one of the terms is itself a metaphor (the conceit of organic musical unity). If Marxist music analysis can find no firmer foundation than that, it deserves its current insignificance.