The Concept of the Anthropocene and the Jargon of Authenticity

Anders E. Johansson

Mid Sweden University
anders.e.johansson@miun.se

Abstract

In *The Jargon of Authenticity* Adorno criticizes the jargon he argues is to be found amongst followers of Heidegger. He describes it as displaying a fetishizing of understanding as belonging, and as a ground for authenticity, meaning and identity. This article develops the idea that Adorno's critique also allows us to understand certain aspects of contemporary discussions concerning phenomena such as global warming and the Anthropocene. A common reaction to these phenomena is that we have to make them graspable through stories that make facts comprehensible, and that tie us together in unity and enable understanding. But if we were to follow Adorno, we might, instead of continuing to believe in meaning and communication within a community of understanding that has proven itself to be the part of the problem, try to create poetry that imitates "the dead speaking of stones." Understanding could then, perhaps, be something else.

Keywords

Anthropocene, jargon of authenticity, understanding, community

In the first pages of *The Jargon of Authenticity* Adorno describes what he claims to be the core of a jargon that was to be found amongst "anti-intellectual intellectuals," precursors and followers of Heidegger and Jaspers, in what he calls their "positive theology." The core is not to be found in a certain content or a particular truth, he states, instead it takes the form of a "conviction."[1] What is supposed to be "authentic" is not some inner essence or identity. Instead it is the subject's way of relating, its intentionality, that can be authentic.

Another aspect of the jargon that Adorno points to is that this assumedly authentic way of relating is seen as grounded in a community based on agreement, and also on the exclusion of those who are not part of a shared understanding, or in the words of Adorno: "They confirmed their mutual understanding on a higher level by excluding one who did not pronounce the same credo they repeated to one another."[2]

Elements of this description is recognizable in the critique Adorno directs against Heidegger in several texts from the 1930s and in *Negative Dialectics*, especially the insistence on the latter's thought and language as situated in and mediated through a concrete historical situation, but it is not his interesting relation to Heidegger that interests me here. Instead I am concerned with his reading of the *jargon*, his analysis of how epistemological and philosophical matters take part in our common ways of being in the world, as situated, and how such an analysis might help us acknowledge that when an everyday plastic bag, in an *uncanny* way, becomes a

synecdoche for the Anthropocene, it might also have implications for how we understand understanding.

Adorno makes it clear that it is the jargon he is dealing with, and not Heidegger, when he says that the latter "did not foresee that what he named authentic, once become word, would grow toward the same exchange-society anonymity against which *Sein und Zeit* rebelled" (that is, become "small talk").[3] One may say that Adorno tries to uncover how Heidegger's thinking is related to common sense as jargon. Or, as he writes: "How deeply rooted are the societal elements in Heidegger's analysis of authenticity is involuntarily revealed by his use of language."[4] An interesting aspect of *The Jargon of Authenticity* is, however, that it does not merely investigate how philosophical discourse is situated in common history, but that it also maintains that assumptions of everyday life are filled with philosophical indications.

Adorno's description of the jargon as a hermeneutics of community, as a fetishizing of understanding as belonging, is, by this relation to *common* sense, also applicable, I want to claim, to the ways that truth, today, is grounded in *our* knowledge, *our* subjective point of view, putting content and object between brackets. The strength of this philosophical common sense-view, no matter how productive and contradictory it is, is shown by the way it motivates both the legitimate claims for justice of various repressed groups, *and* populist movement's claims to their right to privileges (as well as neoliberal forms of administration without content, one might add). Therefore, Adorno's critique of the jargon of

---

[1]   T. W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.
[2]   Ibid.

[3]   Ibid., 13.
[4]   Ibid., 92.

authenticity also allows us to understand certain aspects of contemporary discussions concerning truth, objectivity and facts; discussions linked to the understanding of phenomena such as global warming and the Anthropocene.

The Jargon and the Community of Understanding

So, the jargon depends on the very society it seeks to transcend in the name of authenticity, according to Adorno: "While the jargon overflows with the pretense of deep human emotion, it is just as standardized as the world that it officially negates [...]."[5] The search for authenticity takes place through the use of words as affective effects, taken out of a thinking context, according to Adorno. In short: the words have become jargon. It is easy to see this as just another attack on a Heideggeresque use of words, but, as mentioned above, one could also read it as an analysis of a discourse that ultimately grounds its truth-claims in belonging, and through this, as a discourse that, borrowing some of Adorno's phrasing, "posits its message automatically," uses words as "effect connotations," "at the expense of the sentence, its propositional force, and it's thought content." Participation in "collective agreement" hence becomes crucial when it comes to claims of truth.[6] Truth becomes consensus.

When Martin Jay, in his reading of *The Jargon of Authenticity*, lists Adorno's objections to the jargon he remains with the meanings of the words that are used as effects (value, origin, integrity, absoluteness, concreteness, immediacy, aura, authenticity) without paying attention to Adorno's remark

that the falseness does not reside in the words themselves, but in how they are being used within a practice of communication.[7] Their value depends on the assumed authenticity of communication, and not the other way around.

According to the jargon, as it is described by Adorno, belonging is assumed to allow the individual subject to transcend the inauthentic and become capable of relating authentically, to genuinely communicate and understand. And if so, there would be no contradiction between subject and society. They would fit together, communication would imply reconciliation. But, in Adorno's words, this is an illusion: "The jargon pretends that, as a close-at-hand manner of communication, it is invulnerable to dehumanized mass communication."[8] The assumedly authentic community, with its "I-thou relationship as the locale of truth," and its contempt for "the objectivity of truth as thingly," has placed transcendence within a certain kind of communication, from which the authentic subject is supposed to rise, according to the way Adorno pictures the jargon.[9]

Although this describes a jargon associated with phenomenology, it is obvious that it also has bearing on Habermas's or Wellmer's pragmatic ideal of communication, and *The Jargon of Authenticity* could very well be read as an anticipatory criticism of their tendency to make truth dependent on communicative understanding. From Adorno's perspective all attempts to see communication as a ground for authenticity or truth become dubious, since they lose the

---

5   Ibid., 3.
6   Ibid., 3, 5 and 6.

7   Martin Jay, "Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno's Critique of Genuineness," *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 25.
8   Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 10.
9   Ibid., 10 and 11.

object out of sight, letting human language replace the lost object with pragmatic conceptualization. Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson are also affected by this criticism, as is the very idea of a linguistic turn.

From this perspective *The Jargon of Authenticity* diagnoses a strong current in philosophy, and it manages to point out how this current is mediated through a wider social context. To attest today that communication is everything, that everything is communication, is to state the obvious. Adorno's description of the jargon as grounded in communicative understanding is without doubt valid for our time, as is his way of connecting it with, in his words

> [...] the universal ideology of a society which mistakes itself for a unified middle-class. They let themselves be confirmed in this attitude by a uniform speech, which eagerly welcomes the jargon for purposes of collective narcissism.[10]

Adorno also relates this reliance on a community of self-confirmation to a formalism that suits not only the jargon, or, in my words, the hermeneutics of belonging, but also neoliberal administration without content:

> For this reason all content is "bracketed," as it goes in administrative Germany. At the same time the appearance of content must not be renounced; those who are addressed, again in the same German, must "toe the line." The purpose, the intention, contracts itself into an intentionless underworldly language,

truthful to the objective determination of the jargon itself, which has no other content than its wrapping.[11]

What is interesting here is not Adorno revealing the jargon as being, let us say, inauthentic. The point is rather that he sees the fetishization of the *community of understanding* as its most important feature. The object as well as the content are not only lost, but seen as unimportant, since the communicative agreement amongst those who belong is the main objective. Adorno could be read as describing the way neo-liberal self-reflexive government replaces political content with assessments and evaluations, that is, with understanding as (narcissistic) self-reflection.

Adorno connects this fetishization of understanding with what he calls "liberal theology,"[12] within which a certain hermeneutics is seen as shaping the liberal subject, and the society to which it belongs, grounded as it is in a decision concerning who understands and therefore belongs, or, rather, who belongs and therefore understands.

Such a decision is also part of what Jacques Derrida has termed the original violence that constitutes communities like the national states, a decision that conditions the whole, but is not seen as part of it.[13] Adorno, on his part, argues that, in the

---

[10] Ibid., 14–15.

[11] Ibid., 75.

[12] Ibid., 24.

[13] On original violence, see Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Metaphysical Foundation of Authority," in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992). In the first chapters of *The Beast and the Sovereign* Derrida connects the thought of original violence to the line being drawn between

jargon, the divine has been relativized into the individual's authenticity while it simultaneously maintains mythic transcendence in the form of relations, connections, roots, that creates a belonging.[14] One might therefore say that the jargon rests on the myth, or, perhaps rather, fetishization of a certain notion of understanding, as depending on a community, a common language, a given belonging. The constituting violence remains hidden because the community is understood as something already given, as if created by a god.

The similarity between the two thinker's analyses of "liberal theology," or the concept of liberal sovereignty, thus consists in the way both of them assert that there is a theological remnant within it, that is expressed in the pre-legal decision that grounds rights in determining who belongs and who does not belong. And as Derrida's seminars on the sovereign and the beast, as well as Adorno's discussion of the jargon, demonstrate, belonging depends on the line drawn between those who understand and those who do not understand, and, in extension, those who can be killed and those who should not be killed, or those who should live and those who may be left to die – even if sovereignty and borders, within liberal theology, is legitimated solely as socially constructed.

The fact that understanding has been a central concept for creating the community of liberal nation states has also been underlined by Michel Foucault and Friedrich Kittler.[15] The importance of schools, education and pedagogy in creating an individual that is freely disciplined into normalized belonging is of course obvious. But when Kittler describes the way pedagogy, in the 18th century, replaced the image of the pupil as a parrot with the idea of genuine, personal understanding, and made alphabetization an initiation into community through the authenticity of the mother's voice (the center of the bourgeois family) pronouncing the sounds of the mother tongue, and authorized literature as the model for an inner hermeneutics of belonging, then he proves that what may be seen as most authentic is also part of disciplining and control, is also inauthentic. Or rather, authenticity is aporetic. There is, thus, a deep affinity with how Adorno emphasizes that art is part of domination and not an altogether positive alternative to it, although art negatively, at the same time, being authentic by being aware of its inauthenticity, exposes scars that indicate that things could be different. Reading Foucault and Kittler together with Adorno makes it clear that the concept of understanding, which may seem so unambiguously positive, harmonious, and opposed to positivist science dominating and exploiting nature, is not all that innocent after all, since it is also complicit with human instrumental control.

---

man and animal, between the one who understands and the one who "does not respond." And he (reading Hobbes) also claims that the modern idea of political sovereignty rests on a theological model: "[…] so-called modern political sovereignty gets its irreducible originality, i.e. its artificial, conventional, if you will, techno-prosthstatic nature, only by grounding itself in a profound ontotheology, or even in a religion." Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*, eds. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 56 and 47.

[14]   Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 24.

---

[15]   See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); Michel Foucault, *"Society Must be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003); Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990).

In *The Jargon of Authenticity* Adorno describes how notions that appear to stand in opposition to scientistic rational control of nature are in fact part of enlightenment reason as well, controlling inner nature. The subject's belonging to a community of understanding – seen as a ground for authenticity, meaning and identity – is a vital part of the hermeneutics of discipline investigated by Foucault and Kittler. Adorno's description of the jargon places it within the same context.

Anthropocene and the need for a poetry like the dead speaking of stones

"The Anthropocene" designates the period during which mankind has left measurable geological imprints on a global scale. But it also places human knowledge in front of the unpredictable and uncontrollable. It might no longer be possible to tie oneself to the mast in order to be in control when confronting the song of the sirens. And yet, the most common answer to the question of what is to be done is that we have to tie us tighter to the mast of reason, understand more, so that *we* may come together. Apart from deniers of climate change – who not only tie themselves harder to a reason that has become unreason in the shape of a radical version of theological liberalism and its claim to "*our* truth" – there are also a lot of concepts which in more reasonable ways offer means to stay tied: technical development, sustainability, economic instruments, concepts that appear sound but nevertheless imply that the solution consists of more of the same reason, knowledge, community, identity thinking. Maybe there are no reasons to be *against* that. *But* you can problematize. Perhaps a consequence of the Anthropocene is

that both the wax in the ears of the rowers and Odysseus being tied to the mast stand out as misdirected strategies for relating to the other, uncontrollable, non-identical? At least it forces a continuous investigation of what the will to control (or risk management) leads to, right now, right here, in these historical circumstances.

The debate concerning the concept of the Anthropocene has stretched all the way from concerning measurements and time spans, over discussions about the relation between history and geological time, to questions concerning power and responsibility. In a recent book, Swedish historian Sverker Sörlin, who has participated in the international discussion of the Anthropocene from the beginning, argues that the Anthropocene implies that our usual measuring standards do not work anymore. The insight concerning the climate crisis and the Anthropocene has opened to a *scale* and a *sum* of human actions that we cannot understand:

> One word became important: scale. Crises were about scale, they moved in several dimensions, no forces could hold them to one place […] the sum of these ordinary, innocent, human actions (lighting a fire, riding a motorcycle, coal plants…) became something which we now were going to have to take care of together. […] The humans together caused it [the crisis] but nobody knew.[16]

This insight is, according to Sörlin, the very content of the concept. Let's say that it means that the ordinary proves to

---

[16]   Sverker Sörlin, *Antropocen: en essä om människans tidsålder* (Stockholm: Weyler, 2017), 65. The translations from this book are all made by me.

be *uncanny*. The threat is now humanity itself, both as that which causes the crisis and that which has to "take care" of it. The "we" is shaped as a "we that now knows." We did not know, but now we know. And then we can, together, try to control the seemingly uncontrollable.

A problem is that the "we" that has to gain insight does not coincide with the "we" that causes the climate changes. Sörlin underlines how, amongst others, the anthropologist Kathleen Morrison and the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty have pointed to how the concept of the Anthropocene carries a strong eurocentrism. It is European models of thought and European views on history that form its starting points.[17] But criticism has also been directed against another kind of eurocentrism implicit in the concept, as Sörlin makes clear, namely that not everyone is part of the "we" that causes climate change, although they are supposed to be part of the "we" that takes care of the consequences.[18]

This, let us say, postcolonial criticism is taken most seriously by Sörlin, and he returns to it several times. One chapter is, for instance, called "Who does what to whom?" and is concerned with relations between different agents, with different degrees of power. What is interesting, however, is that each time that Sörlin approaches the political dimensions of the concept of the Anthropocene – he by no means avoids them – the same figure returns in his argumentation. After having stated the injustice of the fact that not everybody is part of the "we" that causes climate change, he maintains that the only solution is a community that *understands* how to take

care of the crisis. The insight would hence be that the Anthropocene makes a community on a planetary scale necessary.

In the part of the book where Sörlin develops the idea of the planetary as the scale in which it becomes apparent that everything on earth is connected, he again states the fact that human power structures stand in the way of these connections being equal:

> The critical researchers point to the fact that billions of the world's poor, now living and already dead, have done almost nothing at all to exceed the planet's limits concerning emissions of phosphor or nitrogen. They have never extinguished a species. It is the world's big consumers, especially the richest ones, that pushes earth into the Anthropocene and stands for a lifestyle that threatens the limits of the planet.

But then comes the turn:

> All this is true and important. But it does not stand in the way of what is central for my argument here.[19]

The argument Sörlin develops, and that he assumes will not be substantially affected by the criticism, is, then, that the recognition of the Anthropocene leads to the insight of the planetary as a scale within which everything on earth is connected, and therefore that *all of us together* must take care of what a few of us have caused. The fact that there are different "we:s," so to speak, that there are differences, antagonisms, contradictions, has to be left aside.

---

[17]   Ibid., 56.
[18]   Ibid., 43 and 108–109.

[19]   Ibid., 99.

My intention is not to criticize Sörlin. I do not have solutions to the problems he brings to the fore. But I think that it is important to acknowledge that his line of reasoning rests on a belief in the idea of a hermeneutic community, which, in one of its shapes, Adorno calls the jargon of authenticity. Sörlin sees the unity of this community as more important than the differences, inequalities and contradictions within it. The solution for Sörlin is understanding:

> A pattern begins to appear. Knowledge is not enough. Concepts are not enough either. Both are necessary. But for a new understanding to emerge and become established there has to be something more – a situation, an event, a visualization. And there has to be a *story* that connects different observations and elements of knowledge to a new whole. The new understanding has to, with a word that I have already used several times, be *graspable*. The more concrete and suggestive, the better and the easier to understand. Both for the scientists, who get help to tie together knowledge which is not part of their primary expertise (that was how the Great Acceleration was born during the first years of the 21st century), and maybe even more for culture and society. There you live by stories; isolated facts are not enough. That is the big challenge: to form stories that tie facts together (and never are at odds with facts), and that are compatible with the values of society.[20]

A story is needed, Sörlin argues, a story that will enable understanding, and make the Anthropocene "*graspable*."

Knowledge has to be made understandable through the story's way of bringing it into the societal context of understanding. In a similar manner as the vocabulary of the jargon of authenticity, words like "pattern," "connect," "whole," "tie together" turn into that which holds together this community through which we understand each other. Another similarity – if it is not actually the very jargon of authenticity we meet here – is that knowledge is not enough and that the story has to create a more, let's say, authentic understanding. Most important is the subject's *way* of understanding within a given "we," which in the last sentence of the quoted passage explicitly is stated as society, *our* society with *our* values. Admittedly, Sörlin does highlight the importance of facts, but besides that he says little about what kind of story he has in mind, he only accentuates the importance of creating consensus within a community through the story, concretely, suggestively and comprehensibly.

If one would like to make a cheap point through malicious reading one could say that it has to be a story that fits in a genuine community, with authentic humans who understand each other. But let us not be malicious. I do not want to criticize or dissociate myself from the thoughts of Sörlin in a too simplistic manner. It is also a fact, that in order to gain political impact in a society built on the idea that understanding depends on identity and belonging within a unified community, stories might very well be necessary. Neither do I want to question his argument through any *guilt by association*, although I believe that sometimes we share discursive traits with jargons we really do not want to be a part of.

---

[20]   Ibid., 92–93.

Exactly that is an aspect of the problem that Adorno formulated with his famous but enigmatic remark that it is barbaric, and therefore impossible, to write poetry after Auschwitz. A saying that could be read as maintaining that we, in front of "the most extreme consciousness of doom," as Adorno puts it, no longer can pursue poetry as "self-satisfied contemplation,"[21] or, in my phrasing, as something *we understand*. Writing and reading *meaningful* poetry is in itself to become part of a belief in the possibility of a whole that has been proven barbaric. Poetry therefore has to be determinately incomprehensible, a determinate negation of a comprehensible but barbaric society. Robert Kaufman has formulated it like this:

> If Adorno's comment about barbarism at some basic level initially implies that the continuation of any kind of recognizable, and to that degree affirmational, poetics would be, after Auschwitz, grotesque, he also means that a truly critical poetry, after Auschwitz, must be barbaric, in the sense of immersing itself and its readers in a somehow "aesthetic" experience "of "that which happened," that is, of dehumanization.[22]

Being barbaric means literally to be outside of a community of understanding, and poetry has to dialectically place itself outside by not being graspable, because the very community of meaning has proven to be barbaric, meaningless, and to imply death. Martin Jay has described this

as how culture "registers the impossibility of culture as a meaningful whole."[23]

The poet who, according to Adorno, manages to leave the human community of understanding is Paul Celan:

> Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars. The last rudiments of the organic are liquidated; what Benjamin noted in Baudelaire, that his poetry is without aura, comes into its own in Celan's work. The infinite discretion with which his radicalism proceeds compounds his force. The language of the lifeless becomes the last possible comfort for a death that is deprived of all meaning.[24]

We could not write poetry anymore, that is, poetry 'as we *know* it'; instead art has to acknowledge human dependency on nature by being just as incomprehensible as nature, guarding its secret. Understanding in its traditional form repeats the difference between subject and object, but also between us and the other, which in itself is the problem. The mere survival of the Holocaust makes us confirm with "coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz."[25] In this way, all of us who are part of and accept the order of the world carry guilt,

---

[21]   T. W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
[22]   Robert Kaufman, "Poetry's Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion," *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 113.

[23]   Martin Jay, "Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity," 27.
[24]   T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 422–423.
[25] T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1983), 363.

according to Adorno, who rephrases his question as "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living."[26] The denial of the way we in this way, by being part of the performative fetishization of an understanding that depends on belonging and distance to the other, carries guilt has, according to Adorno, hollowed us out so that we nowadays only live dreamed wishes:

> [...] this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.[27]

Hanging on to life, surviving, means hanging on to a life that is no longer life. Instead of believing in meaning and communication within a community of understanding that has proven itself to equal death, poetry has to imitate "the dead speaking of stones."

Nature and Jargon

Why bring the jargon of authenticity together with the crimes of Nazism, as well as with liberalism, as I do here, following Adorno? And then, on top of that, maintain that doing this is important for thinking about the Anthropocene? It is not about relativizing or equating – the differences are important, relevant and obvious. Instead it is about detecting unexpected connections. When it comes to Auschwitz and Hiroshima it is genuinely frightening how these events have become figures of the Anthropocene. Ever since they took

place it has been clear that modern, enlightened, technological and scientist reason is a *pharmakon*, cure and poison in one, that it is *autoimmune*, riven by contradiction, that it together with its enlightening capacity endangers what it tries to save. Although the concept of Anthropocene may not be apocalyptic in some great sense, but rather take the form of everyday plastic bags and cars that *uncannily* turns into *slow violence*,[28] it raises similar questions as those stated by Auschwitz and Hiroshima. And Adorno's warning is still relevant: we should be aware that we might be hiding in the understandability of our community, that we might be denying our guilt by thinking that we can contain the incomprehensible through stories. According to Adorno, we might then even strengthen that which keeps us from seeing that it could be different.

The concept of nature has, at least since romanticism, been a synonym for authenticity, and hence also for the kind of dwelling propagated by not only Heideggerians but environmentalists of many kinds. And this fact makes it, as I have tried to show, possible to read *The Jargon of Authenticity* in the light of contemporary issues that are related to the Anthropocene. Adorno has also in other contexts pointed to the fact that understanding nature as authentic is perhaps equal to identifying it with inauthenticity: "[...] in the unthinking language of everyday (a language I had always rather disliked) a man is thought to speak naturally if he speaks like everyone else [...]."[29]

---

26   Ibid.
27   Ibid.

28   Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
29   T. W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 121.

The very concept of nature is part of the domination of nature, and that is true whether it is thought in terms of positivist subsumption to a category or as a construction within a relativist community of understanding. But it also exposes – and the Anthropocene underlines this in a hyperbolically ironic way – both human dependency on nature and the very discrepancy between its appearance and how we conceptualize and categorize it. Nature as non-identical, always escaping our categories and concepts, questions our search for control by its mere existence. In front of nature's inarticulate screams against domination, increasing domination is not a cure. Graspable nature is nature as part of socialized, culturally normalized knowledge, which has turned into second nature since it is experienced as just as given and unchangeable as nature is viewed. Nature as authenticity is thus probably the most inauthentic definition of nature, the most mythic, and at the same time it creates the impression of the Anthropocene as destiny.

When Sörlin hopes that stories can create a new whole, that is, an understanding of the Anthropocene, he relies on a belief that culture's relation to nature is to be thought in terms of wholeness and graspability. According to Adorno this means instead that we forget nature, and that we impose totalizing human understanding as a model for the notion of nature. In the same way as there is a risk that the Holocaust becomes graspable, and hence falsified, through meaningful poetry.

The aporetic situation of having to approach the incomprehensible language of stones in order not to repeat the forgetting of nature that is inherent in anthropocentric understanding, does not, however, demand of critique to be negatively clean, placing itself outside of the concrete historical

situation. The point is not to prove Sörlin wrong, but to open for the thought that it could be different through problematizing what is being taken for granted. Everyday decisions, impregnated with philosophical, political and ethical presumptions, have to be made. Katherine E. Young uses Adorno to penetrate contemporary, well-meaning, ecological discourses of eating as a "jargon of gastronomic authenticity":[30]

> Contra the negative dialectical model that Adorno offers, what the jargon of gastronomic authenticity generally assumes, in the Heideggerian sense, is the self-disclosure of continuity between human beings and their world.
> […]
> For the petit bourgeoisie, the jargon of gastronomic authenticity offers an illusively better lifestyle and the assuaging of liberal guilt. For the majority of the world, however, food is a scarce resource and not a luxury good and food security is a matter of life and death.[31]

For Young this jargon of the possibility of an authentic, ecological, relation between man and nature is an illusion that hides how capitalist economy forces us to endorse the opposite. As we remember from the analysis of Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno traces this system even further back in history, and Timothy Morton has proposed that we have to go all the way back to the agricultural

---

[30]   Katherine E. Young, "Adorno, Gastronomic Authenticity, and the Politics of Eating Well," *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2014): 389.
[31]   Ibid., 400 and 404.

revolution.[32] But still, decisions have to be made in front of a steak or a cauliflower. Philosophical thinking is always, as Adorno often reminds us, deeply ingrained in history and nature, and hence unclean, inauthentic (except in being aware of it). One cannot avoid being complicit in some way or another. And one cannot not agree with Sörlin's main argument: that we have to do something, together.

When Adorno wrote *The Jargon of Authenticity* he revealed how something which opposes modern capitalist commodification and dominance might nevertheless share roots with what it criticizes. Although it does question naïve scientist belief in facts in the name of a hermeneutics of understanding, it simultaneously accepts meaning and identity as something *given*. Whether meaning, identity or facts are seen as (mysteriously) produced by the black boxes of science or consensual community (which they, of course, to a certain extent are) does not really alter the fact that they in both cases are seen as matters of fact, as second nature, and hence as something that cannot be changed. One of the most important lessons to be drawn from Adorno's analysis of the jargon of understanding as belonging is, thus, that scientist facts and communicational relativism are not opposed at all – in fact they go well together.

Today this connection appears even clearer since fact fetishism has embraced criteria of consensus as a measuring device freed from content and truth, replacing disciplining with control over autonomous networks whose substitutable nodal elements evaluate (control) themselves through competition. It might seem that authenticity has become outdated, but instead the jargon has just accepted itself as the jargon Adorno said it was, by becoming a cynically floating consensus. Even though one sees through the concept of authenticity, belonging still depends on understanding what counts as authentic, and on cynically accepting it as part of the game. Somehow the revealing power of capitalism has showed what understanding has already been: recognition, consensus, belonging, identification, rules … a machine – at the same time as it has turned this state into something apparently inescapable. Adorno's way of connecting the jargon of authenticity with the formalism of administration shows the substitutability of each individual – obvious in the way that assessments are not interested in content but only in criteria and goals – and how this exposes that understanding become part of a technology of control and dominance.

Thus, the hermeneutics of belonging has become instrumental to an even larger degree today than when Adorno wrote his book. Understanding or not understanding, belonging or not belonging, being a citizen or not, have become criteria which makes anyone eminently identifiable and countable (or simply not identifiable or countable, and therefore excluded), and through this it has become possible to replace judgment with algorithms – which are treated as undisputable truths. And this goes together with stories repeatedly telling us that belonging is what creates meaning for all of us, that understanding together is what will save us, that counting and stories tie us together and make us understand.

In an interesting way something called postmodernism often gets the blame for the relativism of our time. This

---

[32]   Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

blaming is, however, nothing but scientistic rationality projecting its own blindness onto its critics, asking how it could be that facts are seen as relativistic commodities free for use, without the ability to see that the reason for this lies within its own blind rationality. The irony of this is that the critique of blind enlightenment performed not only by Adorno, but also by Derrida and others, is essentially a warning against basing truth, knowledge and science on communicative belonging to a community, which is exactly what late capitalism has accomplished. So, even if it is hard to see any alternative to Sörlin's hope for a reconciliation with nature through facts and understanding, Adorno has at least taught us to be aware of the dangers of letting this aporetic situation turn into the mythic rigidity of a destiny, a second nature. Understanding could, perhaps, be something else.

Works Cited

Adorno, T. W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

–. *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

–. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Translated by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will. London: Routledge, 2002.

–. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1983.

–. *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981.

Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

–. "Force of Law: The Metaphysical Foundation of Authority." In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson. New York: Routledge, 1992.

–. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. *Volume 1*. Edited by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.

–. *"Society Must be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.

–. *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*. Edited by Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2003.

Jay, Martin. "Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno's Critique of Genuineness." *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 15–30.

Kaufman, Robert. "Poetry's Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion." *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 73–118.

Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Translated by Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Sörlin, Sverker. *Antropocen: en essä om människans tidsålder*. Stockholm: Weyler, 2017.

Young, Katherine E. "Adorno, Gastronomic Authenticity, and the Politics of Eating Well." *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2014): 387–405.