CHAPTER 1

Adorno’s “The Answer is False”: Archaeologies of Genocide

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Like the Pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is a fact. It is the sign of the human. The image of man is from now on inseparable from the gas chamber.

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Günther Anders insists upon the difference, as did indeed Gabriel Marcel, between being and having. Still, Anders’ point is closely aligned with Heidegger inasmuch as, for Anders, the question has to do with the sheer facticity of having done what has been done, like Goethe’s sorcerer’s apprentice, or else like Goethe’s own theodistically confounded Mephisto (though this is not Anders’ parallel): “Teil von jener Kraft Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft” [“Part of that Power which would/The Evil ever do, and ever does the Good”]. How, given what has been done, can we face the fact of the same, what Nietzsche called the es war [it was] of the past, let alone its consequences? Thus the force of asking whether poetry as such could ever be possible again, whether poetry or art or music or philosophy or even ratiocination itself makes any sense at all, to speak in Adorno’s words, “after Auschwitz?”

Adorno, who began his work in philosophy by concerning himself with the theory of knowledge, articulated what would become the ground plan of critical theory itself—even if today’s Frankfurt School practitioners no longer hold onto this question (as a question): How do we know what we suppose

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ourselves to know? In other words, and as Nietzsche also reflected: How are we as sure as we are that what we take to be true is true? In truth? How so? There have been many answers offered in response to such epistemological reflections—the bulk of which fall into the flat thoughtlessness of an uncritical realism that (unintentionally and) ironically calls itself ‘critical thinking’ in Anglo-American philosophical parlance (for the sake of what is surely ‘bare-foot’ expediency, having the benefit it does of easing the burden of thinking “positivity” or “positivism,” to use Adorno's generic terminology for what can be just as generically designated 'analytic' philosophy: the same style of thinking that continues to preempt other modes and styles of thought with such efficacy that it dominates the philosophical mainstream to this day—even so-called ‘continental’ philosophy, including critical theory à la Habermas or Honneth, to the extent that today’s critical theory is itself articulated in terms of this restricted schema). The bits that remain are vapors gathered under the weasel name of metaphysics.

Adding the question of genocide to Adorno’s own original philosophical question of a critical epistemology, including what he called the “crisis of causality,” the later Adorno’s enigmatic “the answer is false” raises the question of genocide itself as a question. For my part, I will attempt to raise this question by excavating certain genealogies of the concept, the word, the practice, and the act of genocide. Yet if it is right to raise this question, it is certain that the answer cannot but be “false.” In addition to promulgating a false answer, false from as many perspectives as there are eyes, there are also many feet to be stepped on and there will also be the indignation of egos seeking to have their own and only their own distinctions heard above the fray.

“Genocide studies” has a canon, complete to be sure with canonic disputes, all duly settled on the terms of its practitioners. Thus Mark Levene, in a book on The Meaning of Genocide, offers a definition, set off in an epigraph to his eponymous central chapter:

Genocide occurs when a state, perceiving the integrity of its agenda to be threatened by an aggregate population—defined by the state as an organic collectivity, or series of collectivities—seeks to remedy the situation by the systematic, en masse physical elimination of that aggregate, in toto, or until it is no longer perceived to represent a threat.

As cited in Levene 2005, 35; see also Straus 2011, 366

This definition could also be named with the word Auschwitz; or what would, for Levene, be better termed the Holocaust. By contrast, the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide defines genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national,