

# Une critique historicomatérialiste : Réflexions d'Adorno sur la phénoménologie de Husserl dans *Contre l'épistémologie : Une métacritique*

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**Résumé:** Adorno examine la phénoménologie de Husserl dans son ouvrage *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie* (Contre l'épistémologie : une métacritique). Il affirme que la phénoménologie de Husserl, qui semble contredire le positivisme, a réalisé implicitement des conceptions positivistes. La phénoménologie de Husserl adopte une position d'absolutisme logique, rejetant les processus socio-historiques et acceptant la validité logique comme "fait" au sens positiviste. Il s'agit d'une méthode de réification qui ignore la fonction de l'homme et des relations sociales, donc la conception positiviste de l'objectivité est finalement un subjectivisme qui ignore la réalité. L'essence de ce subjectivisme est un système de domination fondé sur le prototype du contrôle scientifique, dont l'incarnation philosophique est l'argument phénoménologique de Husserl pour l'origine de l'ego pur. Le paradigme positiviste reflété dans la phénoménologie de Husserl est l'idéologie correspondant à une société fautive, une fausseté incarnée dans la contradiction entre la société et ses membres et elle-même, selon le matérialisme historique. En réfléchissant de manière critique sur ce conflit dans la réalité, c'est-à-dire en pensant sur le mode de la médiation dialectique, le matérialisme historique révèle cette contradiction.

**Mots clés:** Contre épistémologie, Phénoménologie, Positivisme, Matérialisme historique

# A Historical Materialist Critique with Adorno's Reflections on Husserl's Phenomenology in *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*

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**Abstract:** Adorno examines Husserl's phenomenology in his *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie* (*Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*). He claims that Husserl's phenomenology, which appears to contradict positivism, has been carrying out positivist conceptions implicitly. Husserl's phenomenology takes a position of logical absolutism, rejecting socio-historical processes and accepting logical validity as "fact" in the positivist sense. This is a method of reification that ignores the function of humans and social relations, therefore the positivist conception of objectivity is ultimately a subjectivism that ignores reality. The essence of this subjectivism is a domination system founded on the prototype of scientific control, whose philosophical embodiment is Husserl's phenomenological argument for the origin of the pure ego. The positivist paradigm reflected in Husserl's phenomenology is the ideology corresponding to a false society, a falsity embodied in the contradiction between society and its members and itself, according to historical materialism. By critically reflecting on this conflict in reality, that is, by thinking by way of dialectical mediation, historical materialism reveals this contradiction.

**Keywords:** *Against Epistemology*, Phenomenology, Positivism, Historical materialism

As far as social theory is concerned, positivism has always been the most important theoretical opponent to the Frankfurt School theorists, including Adorno. In the 1960s, there was a famous "positivist dispute" in the field of German sociology, which was a heated exchange on social research methods between the Frankfurt School represented

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by Adorno, and the positivists represented by Karl Popper. In fact, Adorno's disagreement with positivism did not start only from this dispute; early in his turn to Marxism, Adorno had already launched a critique of positivism, which is presented in the book *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies* (hereinafter referred to as *Against Epistemology*). The book is based on his manuscripts about Husserl's phenomenology during his Oxford period (1934-1937) and is supplemented by his reflections during the following two decades. Although the book only mentions the word "positivism" in a few instances, we can still see how Adorno reflects on the hidden positivist conception of Husserl's phenomenology in the spirit of historical materialism. In order to present this reflection, four keywords are chosen as the starting point of analysis in this paper: genesis, forgetting, origin, and recollection.

In everyday usage, "genesis (Genese/Genesis)," which focuses on the process of forming things, is not very different from "origin (Ursprung)," which emphasizes the starting point of forming things. Both can be regarded as the past of things in a broad sense. However, once the two concepts entered Adorno's field, the nuances between them became the hallmark of opposing methodologies. In a conversation with Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Adorno suggested that "the constitution of the categories, the reflection of the abstraction of exchange as philosophy, requires the renunciation (forgetting) of their social genesis, of genesis in general. Historical materialism is an anamnesis of genesis."<sup>2</sup> Here, Adorno puts forward two methodologies around "genesis," one is the "recollection" methodology of historical materialism that he identifies with, and the other is the "forgetting" methodology that is the opposite of this. In the latter, the space created by the forgetting of "genesis" is usurped by an "origin" that cannot be further analyzed. Phenomenology, as the philosophical representative of this methodology, and the positivist conception it contains, must face the criticism of historical materialism.

### 1. Genesis: A Socio-historical Process

In *Against Epistemology*, Adorno's discussion of genesis focuses on a pair of concepts, namely, genesis and validity, which is proposed in reflecting on the logic in Husserl's phenomenology. For logical propositions, logical laws, and even human knowledge in general, their objective validity or truthfulness is the primary question that must be addressed. For this reason, Husserl advocates pure logic.

At that time, in response to a popular psychological view of logic as the "psychological unity," Husserl argued, "But once one had passed from the psychological connections of thinking, to the logical unity of the thought-content (the unity of theory),

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit: zur Epistemologie der abendländischen Geschichte*, Weinheim: VCH, 1989, S, 223. The translation is the translator's own.

no true continuity and unity could be established. I became more and more disquieted by doubts of principle, as to how to reconcile the objectivity of mathematics, and of all science in general, with a psychological foundation for logic.”<sup>3</sup> In his view, psychologism treats the laws of logic as arising from human mental activity, that is, it bases them on individual, contingent mental processes. Obviously, the subjectivity of this genesis argument does not lay the foundation for the objectivity required by the laws of logic. Further, Husserl questioned the historicist interpretation of logic because this historicism is similar to psychologism, which is also a form of relativism. He pointed out that logic is to study the conformity of current empirical science with scientific ideas or standards, which “separates itself off from the comparative mode of treatment which tries to conceive of the sciences, according to their typical communities and peculiarities, as concrete cultural products of their era, and to explain them through the relationships which obtain in their time.”<sup>4</sup>

In response to what he saw as relativism, Husserl provided the solution of using mathematics as a model to prove logical purity, thus forming what Adorno called logical absolutism. “The mathematical form of treatment is in their case the only scientific one, the only one that offers us systematic closure and completeness, and a survey of all possible questions together with the possible forms of their answers.”<sup>5</sup> The key reason why Husserl valued mathematics so much lies in the characteristics of mathematics itself: purity and unconsciousness. On the one hand, mathematics itself uses the deductive logic of reasoning, and the number itself is highly abstract, which makes mathematics in the process of deduction exclude as much empirical clutter as possible and achieve purity. On the other hand, mathematical operations are carried out according to a series of objectively valid axioms, theorems, rules, etc., thus constituting a coherent and rigorous system, whose process, though humanly undertaken, requires the exclusion of subjective and arbitrary human interference. These two aspects are necessary for pure logic. The purity of mathematics is consistent with the certainty of the exclusion of contingencies and the innate independence from the empirical world sought in proving logic; the unconsciousness of mathematics allows it to be free from the arbitrariness of the user’s consciousness and contributes to proving the objectivity of logic.

Husserl opposes explaining logical validity purely from the point of view of mental activity, and in this regard, Adorno agrees. Adorno also believes that the error of the psychological approach is that it derives “the validity of logical propositions immediately from the psychic-factual, though this validity has become autonomous of

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<sup>3</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.25.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.159.

factical psychic 'realization'."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, Adorno argues that Husserl here commits the error of conceptual generalization, that is, of treating both the application of logic in the process of mental activity and the development of logic in human social history as relativistic, thus excluding the latter in a seemingly logical way. The result of this is the severance of genesis from the validity and the fixation of this severance.

Adorno points out that Husserl's logic presents "the dualism between the actual development of a science and its 'essence'."<sup>7</sup> According to Husserl, science should have an intrinsic clarity and rationality, which constitutes the form or essence of science, the "being-in-itself (An-sich-sein)" of science, independent of the actual development of science and its dissemination. In other words, for Husserl, in order to make "philosophical clarification" of all sciences, including logic, it is necessary to exclude the various tortuous processes that occur in the actual development of science, and we only need to arrive at the final and most definite "absolute knowledge." Thus, according to Adorno, Husserl's phenomenological account, instead of stating the path of consciousness to science, as Hegel's phenomenology does, is satisfied with the elaboration of the endpoint, which is eternal and without history, and what this account fails to see is that "clarity and rationality are by their own essence laden with history... they first appear as results."<sup>8</sup>

As a result, Husserl's phenomenology exhibits a "positivistic ideal of the sheer acceptance of irreducible facts, i.e., 'givens'."<sup>9</sup> The emergence of positivism is closely related to the development of modern natural science. With the development of natural science, the connotation of theoretical knowledge has changed dramatically; it no longer points to something eternally unchanging and sacred, but more to something that can be expressed quantitatively and stated with precise laws. Positivism was acutely aware of this change and became a strong proponent of it. In doing so, positivism abandoned the question of how knowledge is possible, which constitutes the core of epistemology. In the positivist view, with the development of modern empirical science and its practical utility, this question has become meaningless, and one can form proper knowledge about empirical objects by adopting empirical observation, experimental verification, and other methods. At the same time, positivism is not satisfied with the explanation of natural phenomena, but extends it to the socio-historical sphere and uses the proven ways of

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<sup>6</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, pp.77-78.

<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.60.

<sup>8</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.61.

<sup>9</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.57.

natural sciences as the methodological paradigm of social sciences. It was thus that positivism became the rival of the Frankfurt School, not as a natural science theory, but primarily as a social theory. Thus, it appears on the surface that, unlike Husserl's phenomenology, positivism not only abandons epistemological problems in a metaphysical context but also attempts to understand socio-historical factors that are excluded by pure logic. In this way, is Adorno's attempt to reveal the positivist element in Husserl's phenomenology illegitimate?

The key here is in the understanding of "fact." The key to Adorno's view that Husserl's phenomenology embodies a positivist ideal is that it accepts logic as a given, in-itself, objective fact, without reflecting on its genesis. For positivism, "fact" is a core concept, and positivism is "positive" in the sense that facts are used as a yardstick to corroborate knowledge. Although positivists of different periods have understood facts differently, for Adorno the basic meaning is consistent, i.e., that a fact is an empirically observable phenomenon with objectivity. Thus, positivism upholds a non-historical view of history, focusing only on the observable facts that are eventually presented to them, ignoring both the history of the genesis of the facts and their connection with other facts in the process of their genesis, as well as the fact that these facts, which seem to be directly presented to the subject, have been more or less processed by the subject and have been subjectively branded (especially in the social theory sense).

In this regard, both Husserl, a phenomenologist who claims to oppose positivism, and the theorists who call themselves positivists, have committed the mistake of forgetting genesis. Adorno has repeatedly mentioned that this forgetting is a kind of reification. In essence, a methodology that upholds the spirit of positivism is a kind of reification thinking, and therefore "a dialectical critique of positivism finds its most important point of attack in reification, in the reification of science and of unreflected facticity."<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Forgetting: Mechanism of Reification

Adorno was deeply influenced by Lukács's theory of reification, and in *Against Epistemology*, Adorno utilizes Lukács's concept of reification as a scaffold for his critique of forgetting. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács outlines the phenomenon of reification in modern society in terms of both subject and object, and similarly, Adorno argues that forgetting genesis also has both subjective and objective manifestations. Here, we may take Adorno's reflection on Husserl's position of logical absolutism as an example.

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<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction," *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1977, p.63.

From the subjective side, logical absolutism forgets the role of the real subject, the human being.

In *Logical Investigations* (vol.1), Husserl devotes a chapter to positivism, specifically to Mach and Avenarius's principle of the Economy of Thought. He notes that this principle's "concern is to conceive science as the most purposive (economical, power-saving) adaptation of thought to the varied fields of phenomena."<sup>11</sup> Simply put, it means that thought controls as many objects as possible at as little cost as possible. This principle, according to Husserl, opens up an instructive field of study, namely, by recognizing and clarifying the finite nature of the intellectual structure of humans, and by "a careful analysis of the naturally dominant circumstances and motives of the ordinary man's ideas,"<sup>12</sup> to understand the most effective and economical way of thinking, and to illustrate "how a procedure which has had such success could and must have issued spontaneously out of purely natural causes."<sup>13</sup> These methods arose historically and individually and were refined under the principle of the Economy of Thought so as to become universally valid. However, Husserl still disagreed with this positivist principle, arguing that this notion "relates, as we saw, to certain biological facts: ultimately we are dealing with a branch of the theory of evolution."<sup>14</sup> For Husserl, the Economy of Thought relies on the fact that there are experiences of thought and emotions, which is not fundamentally different from psychologism. Ultimately, for this positivist principle, the production of the "most economical" way of thinking remains an incomprehensible and accidental "miracle."

Adorno undoubtedly agrees with Husserl's above critique, but he does not consider that Husserl has thus transcended this positivist conception. As Husserl argues, the principle of the Economy of Thought sees only certain subjective experiences and emotions of the thinker, but what Husserl does not further point out is that the real error of this principle lies in forgetting the socio-historical processes that are shaped through the practice of real subjects. Yet Husserl makes the same mistake. Here, Adorno refers to a metaphor used by Husserl in his analysis of the principle of the Economy of Thought - the "thought-towers," which means the connected body of ideas. For Husserl's requirement of logical purity, this tower of thought is objective, independent of the subjective thought that uses it, and independent of the mathematician's arithmetic process. Adorno, on the contrary, argues that thought-tower is in fact a man-made object, except that it appears to Husserl and to Mach and Avenarius as natural, i.e., it excludes

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<sup>11</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.123.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.128.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.128.

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.129.

the process of human social practice. “Thus – to continue the image – an old bit of masonry is perceived as an element of the landscape, for its social origin and purpose have been forgotten. But the tower is not a crag, even though it was constructed from the stone which colours the landscape.”<sup>15</sup> On this basis, Adorno believes that “for Husserl, logical absolutism and anti-positivism are quite simply the result of more insistent positivistic research.”<sup>16</sup> Husserl’s criticism of the principle of the Economy of Thought can be understood, in essence, as an internal dispute within positivism.

From the objective side, logical absolutism forgets social relations.

The core of mathematics is the number. Therefore, for Husserl, who adopted mathematics as a model to prove the purity and absoluteness of logic, the principle of “number” is undoubtedly crucial. In Adorno’s view, this principle is actually a principle of identity, that is, “neglecting their changing content, the sheer form of their unity can be established.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in some sense, it can be said that the principle of identity is actually also reductionist, i.e., the reduction of qualitative differences to quantitative differences. For Husserl, this reduction ensures the purity of logic and its universal validity independent of all objects. And this reductionism is what positivist social theory employs, and Husserl’s mathematical model can be seen as a demonstration of the spirit of positivism in epistemology. Positivism adopts the experimental method of observation, which is the basis of the natural sciences, to treat its object, requiring the researchers to exclude their own subjective tendencies, to uphold the ideal of value neutrality, and to make the object as “publicly observable” as the experience of the object of natural science. Thus, in the view of positivists, although there are differences between phenomena, these differences “can be overcome by establishing objective criteria, such as the establishment of uniform standards and measures. Since perceptual experience is publicly observable for most people and can be quantified through measurement, the objectivity and precision required by science can be established.”<sup>18</sup> However, neither Husserl nor the positivists reflected on the principle of identity itself, not realizing that this principle comes from society, but considering it as in-itself. And they take the above as the core of their theory.

In this regard, Adorno points out that the principle of identity “takes its cue from the form of commodities whose identity consists in the ‘equivalence’ of exchange values.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.65. Original was slightly revised.

<sup>16</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.192.

<sup>17</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.69.

<sup>18</sup> 张庆熊, *社会科学的哲学——实证主义、诠释学和维特根斯坦的转型*, 上海: 复旦大学出版社, 2010, p.12.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, pp.69-70.

This was Adorno's consistent view. In the later *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno expressed it clearer that "the barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle, there would be no barter; it is through barter that nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total."<sup>20</sup> Exchange relations are an important aspect of economic relations, and it is on the basis of the dominance of economic relations in the ensemble of social relations, and the consequent objectivity of the ensemble of social relations in relation to individual subjectivity, that we consider social relations here as an objective aspect.

Based on the above-mentioned intrinsic relationship between the principle of identity and the principle of exchange, as well as the objectivity of the principle of exchange itself as an economic principle, even if the illusion of its in-itself nature is denied, it seems to satisfy the positivist ideal of value neutrality, because the premise of exchange is the objective "equivalence" of exchange values, which has nothing to do with, or even to exclude as much as possible, the subjective value presuppositions of each party to the exchange, and both parties to the exchange are equal in the sense of exchange values. However, in Adorno's view, there is a much deeper hidden inequality here, "Above and beyond all specific forms of social differentiation, the abstraction implicit in the market system represents the domination of the general over the particular, of society over its captive membership. It is not at all a socially neutral phenomenon, as the logistics of reduction, of uniformity of work time, might suggest. Behind the reduction of men to agents and bearers of exchange value lies the domination of men over men. This remains the basic fact, in spite of the difficulties with which from time to time many of the categories of political science are confronted. The form of the total system requires everyone to respect the law of exchange if he does not wish to be destroyed, Irrespective of whether profit is his subjective motivation or not."<sup>21</sup> Thus, although the principle of identity is necessary for human awareness and for commodity exchange (at least for the present historical stage), once it is eternalized and neutralized, i.e., its historicity and dominance are forgotten, it inevitably leads to a descent into the ideology that justifies it, whether this justification is conscious or not.

In summary, Husserl's phenomenology has forgotten both the subjective and objective factors. This seems to be a contradictory conclusion. And in Adorno's view, this contradiction comes from the spirit of positivism itself embedded in Husserl's phenomenology, that is, its pursuit of so-called objectivity is actually a subjectivist

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<sup>20</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Translated by E.B.Ashton, London and New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004, p.146.

<sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Society*, Translated by F. r. Jameson, in *Salmagundi* , FALL 1969-WINTER 1970, No. 10/11, pp.148-149.

intention that has forgotten reality. How, then, should we understand this subjectivism?

### **3. Origin: The False First**

Excluding the role of real persons and the social conditions, Husserl still needs to find an Archimedean point for logic. Husserl used mathematics as a model to prove the absoluteness of logic, but if it were to stop at that, Husserl's logic would not be fundamentally different from traditional formal logic and would still be likely to be regarded as dogmatical. In this regard, Husserl realized that the construction of pure logic required not only mathematicians but also philosophers. So what role should the philosopher play? This brings us to another important concept: evidence. It is the philosopher's job to examine the relationship between evidence and validity.

According to Husserl, "A theory therefore violates the subjective conditions of its own possibility as a theory, when, following our example, it in no way prefers an inwardly evident judgement to a blind one. It thereby destroys the very thing that distinguishes it from an arbitrary, unwarranted assertion."<sup>22</sup> How then can evidence guarantee the objective validity of pure logic? Although evidence is classified as a "subjective condition," it is not just about the certainty of the subject, but about the direct presentation of the object to the subject, in this case, the direct presentation of logic itself to the subject. From this point of view, Adorno's critique of Husserl from the subjective aspect mentioned above does not seem to be valid, because Husserl sees subjectivity in the field of logic. However, the subject here is concerned with "objects in general" and not with "individual objects." Nor is this subject a "realistic individual" in the Marxist philosophical sense, but a universal field of subjects with the ability to construct objects. This is the pure self, i.e., the first (Ersten) as the origin. The "pure ego," as the "ego-pole," is the subject pole opposite to the "object pole" and becomes the performer of intentional activity and the functional center. Thus, the pure ego often plays a role in all "cogito" as background. However, this role cannot be substantialized, otherwise, it would fall into Descartes's "absurd a priori realism." It can be said that the pure ego is the abstract form of "ego" embedded in the "cogito" and that it is the polarization of the "ego" in the respective "cogito." At the same time, in order not to fall into dogmatism, Husserl argues that the pure ego can be grasped, not as a real object, of course, but as the ego's own grasp. The pure ego is not only capable of grasping itself, but all real objects are objects constructed by the pure ego.

In Adorno's view, Husserl's account of the pure ego prominently embodies the principle of identity, for the pure self as origin requires that the objects constructed by it

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<sup>22</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol.I, Translated by J. N. Findlay, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p.75.

be homogeneous with itself. In fact, this requirement is a kind of tautology, because what is different from it has already been excluded from the system it constructs, and thus the construction of such a system is nothing but a self-play of the origin itself. On the surface, this false first seems inconsistent with the positivist conception, for as a critic of the metaphysical tradition, positivism advocates the abandonment of all previous metaphysical problems, and the idea of origin or the first, as one of the central building blocks of the metaphysical tradition, should naturally be among those discarded. However, in Adorno's view, positivism has not really escaped this idea. He argues that positivists consider themselves victorious over idealism, but actually "those who regard themselves as victors over idealism are far closer to it than critical theory. They hypostatize: the knowing subject, not as an absolute subject or a source, but as the topos noetikos of all validity — of scientific control."<sup>23</sup> And this is the essence of Husserl's pure ego.

According to positivism, the object of research must be neutralized, although, in terms of the research process, it is based on a certain conceptual schema to select and understand the object under study. Thus, whether the material that is included in the research plays a role in the theory depends on how well it fits into the latter. Naturally, under the empirical falsifiability requirement of positivism, theories also engage in self-reflection when they contradict their objects, i.e., by optimizing their theoretical frameworks to better control the latter. Thus, Adorno points out that "the positivist position, where pathos and influence are inherent in its claim to objectivity, is in turn, subjectivist."<sup>24</sup> Pathos is the pathos of scientific control, which points to the ultimate purpose of human self-sustainability, but of course, this pathos has its rational connotation, i.e., instrumental reason. This reason, according to Horkheimer's definition, "is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question of whether the purposes as such are reasonable. If it concerns itself at all with ends, it takes for granted that they too are reasonable in the subjective sense, i.e. that they serve the subject's interest in relation to self-preservation."<sup>25</sup> But reality presents a paradox: "Humans use instrumental reason for self-preservation, but this use can lead to self-destruction."<sup>26</sup> The key here lies in the fact that it is the principle of identity that governs this pathos of scientific control as well as instrumental reason. Under this principle, objects are identified when they enter the positivist theoretical system, and the non-identical content is rejected, while the heterogeneous objects, which may completely subvert the theoretical system, are often left helpless or even ignored

<sup>23</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction", *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1977, p.5.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction," *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1977, p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, London & New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> 谢永康, «启蒙辩证法与理性批判的潜能», *中国社会科学*, 2006, No. 7, p.99.

once they are encountered. Worse still, although the person originally considered as an end is still considered as an end, this end itself suffers from the operation of identification and becomes abstract, and the calculability of means becomes the real end in fact. Thus, the so-called control over the object eventually becomes a prisoner of the subject itself.

For Adorno, Husserl's pure ego is likewise an expression of this subjectivist pathos of manipulating objects by virtue of the principle of identity and suffers from a similar paradox. This can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the pure ego is not really origin; as an idea, it does not have a truly independent reality, much less a foundation, and the predicates given to it, such as absoluteness, immediacy, unconditionality, firstness, etc., are the "merits" of the abstract thought of reification, just as the subject is abstracted under the positivist principle. On the other hand, and more importantly, like the thought of reification, this notion of origin corresponds to the "false society," or it can be said that the former is an ideology based on the latter as the social existence. The falsity of society does not mean, of course, that it does not exist, but that it "contradicts the interests both of its members and of the whole." And in such a society those who "readily subordinates itself to the rules of this society that are congealed in science, participates in its falsehood."<sup>27</sup> This contradiction is precisely what historical materialism should "recollect."

#### **4.Recollection: Revealing Inherent Contradictions of Society**

Adorno pointed out that "the sphere of the factual and the sphere of thought are involved in such a way that any attempt to separate them altogether and to reduce the world to either of those principles is necessarily doomed to failure."<sup>28</sup> In terms of conceptual demarcation, genesis as a socio-historical process can be understood as "the sphere of the factual" due to its objectivity. According to Adorno's own definition, mentioned earlier, historical materialism should be a recollection of this field. However, if we follow Adorno's statement here, wouldn't historical materialism necessarily fail? Obviously, we cannot make such a simple understanding. There is one key point worth noting in Adorno's above statement, namely "reduction." Husserl's phenomenology, while repeatedly claiming mastery of the facts, ultimately moves toward the subjective or ideological side in a reductionist manner. Historical materialism's recollection is certainly not toward its opposite, toward a reductionist mechanical materialism. And there is a keyword that can serve as a clue to understanding this recollection, and this is mediation

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<sup>27</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction," *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1977, p.19.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jan. 4, 1940), p.11.

(Vermittlung). The notion of mediation is incompatible with reduction, and it addresses the aforementioned complete separation of the realm of facts from the realm of ideas and reduction to one side. In contrast to reductionism, we can understand the notion of mediation as a method. However, Adorno also declares that the dialectic “utterly refuses to be committed to the distinction between matter and method.”<sup>29</sup> In this regard, if the notion of mediation is appropriate as a method, it must be because it is appropriate to the object, a grasp of the object as it really is. For epistemology, there is no more fundamental problem than the relationship between the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge. Thus, in *Against Epistemology*, Adorno’s discussion on mediation focuses on this relationship.

Husserl is said to have an “uncritical assumption of the positivistic principle, and the cult of the given and of immediacy,”<sup>30</sup> while in fact “the first and immediate is always, as a concept, mediated and thus not the first.”<sup>31</sup> This mediated nature is reflected first of all in the fact that this so-called first is always mediated by the object it tries to grasp, which we can see in the relation between the One and the Many. For Husserl’s phenomenology, the first as origin is the One, yet the One itself is not directly comprehensible, “One is comprehensible only in its relation to the Many that it negates.....without the Idea of the Many, that of the One could never be specified.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, from the point of view of cognition, it is not the One but the Many that really takes precedence. In fact, not only the first but also any concept, regardless of its content and its relation to the object it tries to grasp, is the product of abstraction by the human mind in the face of concrete objects as the crystallization of cognition. This process of abstraction follows the principle of identity, and it is for this reason that the philosophy of origin, which is the fiction of the first, is necessarily inseparable from the domination of the principle of identity. The mediated nature of the first thus takes on a second meaning, namely that it is itself, and the system that has it at its core, produced by real thought, and is therefore not first and direct, but derivative and indirect. Husserl’s phenomenology forgets this, and the abstract path of real thought becomes the so-called constructive or generative path of thought to being, doing violence to the object with a fictional first.

In Adorno’s view, violence is inflicted because of what Husserl’s phenomenology expresses “advanced bourgeois self-consciousness can no longer be satisfied with that fetishizing of abstracted concepts.....This consciousness would have to grasp the things

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<sup>29</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.115.

<sup>31</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.7.

<sup>32</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.9.

themselves.”<sup>33</sup> It is also for this reason that the positivist spirit of phenomenology demands that the object be accepted as in-itself or self-given. The heterogeneity of the object itself determines that this in-itself is difficult to be accepted by the origin with its subjectivist core. Thus, the phenomenological approach “must constantly do violence to unfamiliar things, though it exists only so that they may be known. It must model the other after itself. This is the original contradiction (Urwiderspruch) in the construction of freedom from contradiction in the philosophy of origins.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, the real object is not known, and the origin itself remains empty, although it appears to construct a content-rich system. For Adorno, to resolve this original contradiction is to realize that in the process of knowing, the object is mediated by the subject, and the direct self-giving of the object to the subject is not possible.

In fact, at this point in the essay, we have moved from a purely epistemological perspective to an understanding of socio-history, to an understanding of the contradictions of social-historical reality. According to the spirit of historical materialism, the solution to epistemological problems cannot be confined to the epistemological context in the traditional sense but must go deeper into the socio-historical epistemology. This is precisely Adorno’s thinking. In his view, historical materialism recollects critically the contradictions of social-historical reality in order to discover the contradictory roots of concepts and theories in the field of cognition and to penetrate the ideologies that obscure reality. To accomplish this, it is necessary to understand reality in a way that is truly consistent with it, i.e., dialectical thinking such as mediating thinking.

Any society is undoubtedly constituted by people, and in this respect, it is mediated by its members; at the same time, for the individual subject, the established society is its precondition. Therefore, society and its members are mutually mediated, and no party can consider itself as in-itself and unconditional. However, in positivism, this mediating relation is eliminated, and with the double forgetting of human roles and social relations, the individual and society become static poles: the former becomes a so-called solid fact, while the latter becomes unknowable thing-in-itself (and seemingly needless to know). In fact, not only those who are governed by the positivist conception, but all those who fail to see through this mediation, submit to this dualism, a false consciousness imposed by the reified society, which facilitates this society’s manipulation of its members. In other words, the spirit of positivism, including Husserl’s phenomenology, faithfully reflects this reified false society. “Totality is society as a thing-in-itself, with all the guilt of reification.” For members of society, this society exists as in-itself in totality, “since it is the sum of individuals’ social relations which screen themselves off from individuals, it is also illusion—ideology. A liberated mankind would by no means be a totality. Their

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<sup>33</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.190.

<sup>34</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, Translated by Willis Domingo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.12.

being-in-themselves is just as much their subjugation as it deceives them about itself as the true societal substratum."<sup>35</sup> This society is thus, for its part, an administrated world, whereas society is supposed to be the condition for the free and comprehensive development of man as envisaged by Marx. This is the irreducible objective contradiction of this society. A more detailed critique of this society is more brilliantly presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored by Adorno and Horkheimer, and will not be repeated here because it is not the subject of this paper.

A review of Adorno's intellectual life shows that after his return to Frankfurt from exile, and especially after he began to head the Institute for Social Research, a large part of Adorno's work was devoted to sociological research, and it was during this period that *Against Epistemology* was published. This work was based on materials twenty years earlier, and its publication at this time was clearly not motivated by a simple academic interest or a simple review of his earlier Husserlian phenomenological research. After twenty years of work, the line of criticism based on his epistemological research, i.e., the four words "genesis," "forgetting," "origin," and "recollection," has been implemented and gradually matured, forming a theoretical front to compete with the positivist concept, which also profoundly influenced the development of the social critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

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<sup>35</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction," *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1977, p.12.