

The Antinomy of Antinomies

Christian Thorne

I want to begin by calling to mind a certain, special type of theoretical project—the type of project of which I think Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* is still the finest example.¹ There are a number of different claims one would want to make on behalf of this text, a number of different ways to account for its continued consequence. One might want to say, for a start, that Williams’s most evident accomplishment in *Culture and Society* was to identify a distinctively British discourse on culture, one that stood in principled opposition to the humiliations of a new industrial society. This is true, no doubt, but perhaps only incidentally so, because more important to Williams than the unified national character of this discourse was its motley political character, the ease with which the concept of culture seemed to pass, throughout its history, from Right to Left and back again. Perhaps one can say, then, that the purpose of *Culture and Society* was to interrupt that history by shoring up the Left’s title to the concept of culture. Isn’t that exactly what you need to do before something that will be called “cultural

1. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958). *boundary 2* 32:3, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by Duke University Press.

materialism” can get off the ground? You have to take the concept of culture back from Eliot and the Leavises.

But perhaps this isn't quite right, either. Williams, it is true, wrote his book at a moment when the British Left was returning, systematically, to the concept of culture—Williams's argument is both symptom and cause of that shift. It seems to me, however, that *Culture and Society's* singular insight is that a transition such as this onto new political and intellectual terrain—a transition, in this case, beyond the old Marxist preoccupations with the economy or the state—brings with it a special kind of conceptual burden: it demands that you survey the complicated topography of your new concept, which will turn out upon review not to be so very new after all. Before the Left could put the notion of culture to use, Williams suggested, it would have to spell out the contradictory and contending valences of its new favorite concept—and it would have to do this without suggesting that culture was, once clarified, plainly left—that the Left had some kind of exclusive claim to the concept, as though the word *culture* carried its politics along with it like a membership card.² *Culture and Society*, I would suggest, remains a crucial piece of scholarship because it shows us one way of giving the history of a concept, to think of a concept not merely as a concept—not as some inert analytical tool or untethered generalization—but as a historical problem of a special kind, something that helps organize our experience of new institutions and new social relations.

For such a project, clearly, it is no longer simply a matter of keeping your concept safe from the Right. On the contrary, *Culture and Society* is in large part an acknowledgment that the Right pretty much held the mortgage on “culture” to begin with, and that anybody wanting to use that concept on behalf of the collectivity would have to expropriate it in complex and cunning ways. We might also think here—lest we conclude that Williams is really sui generis on this score—of Terry Eagleton's *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, which is basically just *Culture and Society* with a German accent.³ Williams and Eagleton both set out to examine traditions of inquiry that provide the protocols for the Left's critical thought, traditions that have fed the Left's political imagination, but which in crucial ways seem to muddy their own promise.

2. Thus Williams, in *Keywords*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): “I do not share the optimism, or the theories which underlie it, of that popular kind of inter-war and surviving semantics which supposed that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms and often evidently confused by them” (24).

3. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

Their works have offered reminders that our own concepts come with prior social histories over which we cannot exercise retrospective control. And they have sought, in the wake of this realization, to temper and make precise the Left's enthusiasm for its own vocabularies by teasing out a chronicle of the paradoxical and peripatetic concepts at hand.

My question here is, in this light, a simple one: Would it be possible to carry out this kind of project for the antifoundationalism that is currently at the heart of left cultural theory, in both its poststructuralist and neopragmatist guises? Antifoundationalism typically insists on its novelty, but can we, in the face of this exaggerated claim, give a critical prehistory of *its* concepts, as Williams did for his? One wants, of course, to answer the question with an emphatic *yes*. This immediately gets tricky, however, because what is so distinctive about antifoundationalism is not so much the new concepts that it generates—though it has these, too—as the rather extraordinary place it assigns to conceptuality itself. There is no subject, in fact, on which antifoundationalism is more melodramatically eloquent than on “the violence of conceptuality.” It is the vocation of concepts to universalize, and antifoundationalism has made the urgent case that such universalism is more of a crime than a calling. The concept is an epistemological blunder and an ethical breach, teaching us as it does to look away from the unique qualities of singular objects. Better, then, to do without concepts wherever possible, or if one must have concepts, let them be self-defeating concepts, concepts that resist the very abstraction to which they are otherwise addicted: “contingencies” and “ruptures” and “difference” in all its plentitude. What antifoundationalism has instead of concepts, then, are suspicions, critical procedures, and argumentative forms—the techniques, in other words, by which it takes mere concepts to the mat. If we want to do for poststructuralism what Williams did for cultural materialism—to provide it with a critical prehistory—then it may be more rewarding to give the history of its argumentative forms than to give the history of the concepts or keywords about which it is so skittish. So the question becomes: Can we understand the *form* of poststructuralist skepticism as a historical problem or project of a special kind?

This may strike some as a strange formulation. What could it mean, after all, to study a set of theories for their form? Is it possible to say anything meaningful about a given philosophical system if you look away from its tissue of argumentation? Don't we want to insist, rather, that a philosophy is the propositions it makes or it is nothing? More to the point, even if

we can identify a philosophical form, would we be able to say that such a form inhabits history?⁴ We might, at this point, want to turn our attention away from Williams and take our cue instead from the Frankfurt School and its affiliates, who teach us that classical epistemology—the subject-object epistemology of German idealism—is the commodity in cognitive form. Now what does this mean? The most orthodox Marxism will tell us that there are two ways of looking at the commodity-object: you can view the object from the perspective of use, in which case it is resplendent with particularity, a particular object in the service of particular uses, about which no philosophical generalizations can be offered. Or you can view the object from the perspective of exchange, in which case you will need to repudiate its particularity, turn it into sheer quantity, a bearer of abstract value, an arbitrary mass with a price tag attached. What is intriguing is that even within the utterly familiar distinction between use-value and exchange-value, we can begin to see an account of epistemology beginning to emerge—an account, more to the point, of *conceptuality*, which is clearly of a piece with the exchange relationship: conceptuality, like exchange-value, renders objects abstract and thus fungible. The concept, in other words, gathers together the sundry objects it is said to subsume and forces them into a relation of equivalence. But such conceptual abstraction, then, is *not* simply a cognitive process, the spontaneous procedure of any thinking mind; it is of a piece with commodity exchange and thus grounded in social practices. Abstraction itself has something like material form. Classical epistemology invites us to divide up the world in much the way that capital does: into an isolated and atomized subject of knowledge, completely sundered from the realm of the social, and a world of alien and exchangeable objects. The important point for present purposes is that this is, throughout, a question of form. To say that classical epistemology replicates the commodity form is not to say anything about its content, the force of its propositions. Classical epistemology, in fact, has predictably little to say *about* commodities. The claim is rather that the commodity form helps constitute epistemology in its very structure.

Something interesting is happening at this point in the argument, which seems to be on the verge of a syllogism, or something very much like one. First, we know that antifoundationalism teaches us to critique concepts. And second, we can say, at least if we follow the Frankfurt School,

4. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977): “It is an innate peculiarity of philosophical writing to confront anew, with every radical turn in thought, the question of *Darstellung*” (27).

that concepts have their ground in the commodity form. It is surely tempting now to barrel straight on to some third proposition, to the effect that an antifoundationalist critique of the concept is therefore always also a critique of the commodity or of capitalism more generally. This is the type of claim, in fact, that a left antifoundationalism likes to make on its own behalf—that its critique of knowledge is simultaneously a critique of the state or of markets or of the cultural norms that would discipline us. But this is precisely the question that, in Williams’s spirit, we must keep open: If the philosophical tradition—the heavyweight Greco-German philosophical tradition—is inextricably entangled with the commodity form, does it follow that when we critique this tradition we are necessarily critiquing the commodity, as well? Let us hold questions of discipline and the state to one side for now and ask in some detail: Does antifoundationalism help us think against the commodity sphere? Or is it just another way of handing thought over to the commodity?

It is at this point that we need to understand something about the form of antifoundationalist argument, and for this I need to wander rather far afield, to that school of ancient skepticism known as Pyrrhonism, which serves as a kind of urtext for the many antifoundationalisms that will follow. Taking its cue from the classical rhetorical education, the characteristic feature of ancient skeptical discourse is the *argument ad utramque partem*, or “argument on both sides of the question.” This is the classic debating club exercise, in which a student is called upon to defeat the proposition he had just stood up to defend. Unlike the rhetoricians, however, who eventually tire of this game, the ancient skeptics insist that we must practice such antinomic argument systematically, against others and habitually against ourselves. A central skeptical text such as Sextus Empiricus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is, in this sense, basically just a rhetorical handbook of a special kind. It is not so much a reasoned, philosophical critique of epistemology as an anthology of counterarguments, an engine for generating contradiction. Skepticism is forever on the lookout for ways and reasons to disagree, and it attempts to instill in its disciples an obsessive facility with counterarguments.

To rehearse without end the clash of opposing viewpoints is to induce in one’s self and one’s listeners the condition of “*aporia*”—which Pyrrhonism glosses as “being at a loss,” or “stumped.” The rhetor that emerges from this description is the nightmare interlocutor who in his programmatic petulance will cripple every conversation. Governing the skeptic’s every utterance is the concomitant search for its obliteration. Pyrrhonism, in this sense, is less a philosophy than a balancing act, a concerted exercise in the equipollence of arguments and the suspension of judgment that is said

to attend it. Thus Pyrrhonism, strictly speaking, does not even claim that knowledge is impossible. It demonstrates, rather, that there are equally good reasons for thinking knowledge possible and impossible, such that we must suspend judgment on these (as on all) matters. The question of philosophical form emerges with special clarity here, because it is the cardinal aim of classical skepticism to dispense with propositions altogether, in which case we might say that skepticism simply *is a form*—the form of antinomy—that it aims to be *nothing but that form*, without any philosophical insides.

Understanding the form of Pyrrhonian arguments should allow us, in turn, to draw an important distinction. If we survey early modern philosophy, we see that there occurs something like a divergence between the form of skeptical arguments and what comes to be their content. Thus we might point to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which, in its opening epistemological chapters, imports many propositions that are more or less skeptical—human reason is impoverished, knowledge is impossible, and so on. But Hobbes introduces these propositions in changed form, merely by offering them *as propositions* and not as part of an argument on both sides of the question. Hobbes, in other words, offers up a reified Pyrrhonism that has abandoned skepticism's characteristic structure or rhetorical figure—antinomy—in favor of a program of assertion. And once we encounter Hobbes, we are forced to distinguish between those thinkers who preserve the fixed content of skepticism—Burke also comes to mind—and those who preserve its techniques: its conspicuous rhetorical agility, its strict avoidance of proposition, its penchant for contradiction. If we mean to give a critical prehistory of contemporary antifoundationalism, then, we would do well, I think, to look to those forms of thought that cultivate antinomies, that actually proceed by such contraries, that push all thought toward contradiction or aporia: skepticism, the dialectic, deconstruction and its cousins. This, in turn, should allow us to reformulate our questions with renewed precision: What is the relationship between the commodity sphere and antinomy? It may be useful here to sketch out a brief and speculative scheme, a selective genealogy of antinomic argumentation: Bernard Mandeville, Smiths Barbara Herrnstein and Adam, Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard. Such is the roll call I propose.

Mandeville is hard to describe. He is one of the eighteenth century's most distinctive theorists of market society, but he owes this distinction to his not following any of the century's established paradigms for describing commerce and its effects. Typically, discussions of commerce in the eighteenth century follow one of two strategies. There is the Country or Commonwealth

critique of commerce, which sees a market society as a deplorable lapse into superficial luxury and political corruption. And countering this, there is the humanist defense of commerce as an enrichment of human capacities. Mandeville is a defender of market practice, to be sure, but he is not an ideologue in this fashion, scripting a new legitimacy of the market in an attempt to deny all that is corrosive about it. When it comes to the market, Mandeville is as antagonistic to the Whig window dressers as he is to the Tory spoilers—as indifferent to ethical apologies for the market as he is to ethical attacks upon it—and his lesson in this sense is a stark one: the managers of the new regime should stop trying to meet the critics on their own terms by cobbling together some (patently ludicrous) theory of market virtue, because the new practices have no justification beyond their own continued existence. To insist otherwise, to try to provide some kind of external ethical framework for the market, is to hand over to the market's opponents a criterion of virtue against which commerce will inevitably be found wanting.

Now Mandeville is not obviously a skeptic in the way that the early modern Pyrrhonists such as Montaigne are skeptics. But he does in fact make use of the argument on both sides of a question in ways that are simultaneously systematic and indirect. This has something to do with the sense of relationality that pervades *The Fable of the Bees*—the sense, in other words, that a market society can only be understood as dispersed, diffuse, or differential, and that such dispersal creates unsolvable problems for an inherited, precapitalist ethical vocabulary. One of Mandeville's great insights is that under market conditions, ethical judgments themselves enter a kind of economy; essentialist notions of virtue, like absolute notions of value, are made untenable as they refract across the complex sequence of institutions and actions that make up the commodity sphere. Thus Mandeville: "It is in Morality as it is in Nature; there is nothing so perfectly Good in Creatures that it cannot be hurtful to any one of the Society, nor anything so entirely Evil, but it may prove beneficial to some part or other of the Creation."⁵ To phrase it more baldly: whatever harms one economic actor will necessarily benefit some second actor; the miller's loss is the brewer's gain, my bankruptcy is my competitor's windfall.⁶ The market, in this sense, is constituted by an endless series of small contradictions or indeterminacies—so that it is

5. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 369.

6. Anybody wishing to provide Mandeville with a concrete Pyrrhonist lineage need look no further than Montaigne, whose essay I.22 is entitled "One man's profit is another man's harm."

impossible to say whether any single action benefits or harms the market as a totality. The market inspires, as though naturally, what the classical skeptic must achieve through sustained rhetorical maneuvering—a well-turned equipollence of argument—and is in this sense a kind of running exercise in antinomy.⁷ Mandeville, then, allows us to draw a startling first conclusion: no less than German idealism, skepticism is—at least partially and potentially—an epistemology of the market, in which antinomy names the disintegrating logic of objects and actions as they are scattered across the capital circuit.

American neopragmatism finds its Mandeville in Barbara Herrnstein Smith, whose arguments are utterly fascinating, in an appalling kind of way. These arguments typically kick off with a well-rehearsed attack on positivism: beliefs are not caused by things in the world; objects do not carry meanings already attached to them such that they can determine the beliefs of those that perceive them; beliefs can be backed up by all sorts of contingent reasons, so that their only criterion is that they be “cognitively congenial and otherwise serviceable.”⁸ In *Contingencies of Value*, she begins, accordingly, by laying out a thoroughgoing nominalism, one in which she puts a complete ban on thinking universality. If all beliefs or judgments can be held for multiple and contingent reasons, then there is no general conclusion to be drawn about any of them. But then in a sly and disingenuous footnote, she takes it all back. This dedicated antifoundationalist thinker sneaks in a single foundation. There is, in fact, one language that holds universally, and that is the language of the market: “even if there are no marketplaces in Bongo-Bongo, a marketplace analogy could still illuminate how people communicate there.”⁹ Never mind the name Bongo-Bongo and the insult of its cartoon anthropology—the argument surrounding it is troubling enough: even where capitalism is not historically in place, markets are implicit in human thought

7. This is clearest in Remark G, which is structured entirely like an argument on both sides of the question: Drunkenness is a vice, corrosive of human virtue and the common weal. Equally, drunkenness is an economic good—it is merely a special kind of consumption and thus at the very heart of the miller’s, the brewer’s, the innkeeper’s trade (see Mandeville, *The Fable*, 89ff.).

8. See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Belief and Resistance: A Symmetrical Account,” in *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion Across the Discipline*, ed. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 148.

9. See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 206n35.

and human action, which can only mean that peasant and tribal societies have been just biding their time, ever at the wait for the markets that alone give full expression to the natural structure of human reasoning. The market alone is universal. It is the permanent location of thought. Such is the universalism that makes Smith's antiuniversalist pragmatism tick.

This is a strategy Smith repeats elsewhere. In "Belief and Resistance," she begins by emphasizing how innovative her pragmatist nominalism is. "[M]ore or less novel conceptions of what we might mean by 'beliefs' have been emerging," she writes, and the aim of her essay, we gather, is to pursue that novelty around another fresh corner.¹⁰ The "traditionalist epistemologies," by contrast, are "rationalist, realist, and so on."¹¹ It is worth noting how significant a rhetorical move this already is: to be an antifoundationalist, we are forced to conclude, is to be something other than a traditionalist. But then she wants to say that her "more or less novel," nontraditionalist insight is that *all thought is traditionalist*. All thought begs the question—begs *some* question, begs *its* question—in that it cannot help but fall back on an ensemble of active and enabling assumptions. We are possessed, she writes, by a "cognitive conservatism," and what is notable about her formulation is less her compounding an epistemological register with a political one than her taking recourse once again to the very type of universal that her nominalism had seemed to prohibit: taking our cues from "recent studies in the field of economic psychology and decision science," we can conclude that "cognitive conservatism" is "endemic, that is, species-wide. . . . We are, it seems, congenitally both docile and stubborn."¹² We are all, each of us, whether we own up to it or not, docile, stubborn, conservative thinkers in the eternal market. I am tempted to say, then, that Barbara Herrnstein Smith provides the key to, announces the secret meaning of, contemporary pragmatism. It is market thought, in which all cognition is revealed to be a meditation on the serviceable, a species of cost-benefit analysis.

What seems to me so crucial about Mandeville and Smith is that in their writing, antinomy is no longer just a (rather ill-tempered) philosophical form. It is a sociological observation, a feature of our institutions themselves. Mandeville in particular spells out a number of ways in which historical conditions—in this case, the expansion of the market economy—might make conventional forms of philosophical judgment seem impossible or undesir-

10. See Smith, "Belief and Resistance," 139.

11. Smith, "Belief and Resistance," 140.

12. Smith, "Belief and Resistance," 152.

able. It is this understanding—this use of antinomy to diagnose a condition that is at once epistemological and social—that Mandeville shares with a second Smith. Adam Smith is even less of a skeptic than Mandeville—he has almost nothing to say about knowledge as such—but it is clear all the same that Smith continues and extends Mandeville’s assault on philosophical notions of value. At one level, at least, *The Wealth of Nations* is a single sustained polemic against mercantilist essentialism—that is, against the empiricism or crude materialism of earlier economic theories. If we examine John Locke’s realist account of money, for instance, we will discover that it is empiricist to the point of tautology: silver is silver, Locke argues (if one can call that an argument); it can be nothing else—its value is intrinsic to it. *The Wealth of Nations*, in this light, is an attempt to establish decisively that silver is never just silver, and that wealth, more to the point, is not just wealth, just treasure. Wealth, rather, is the entire circuit of a nation’s trade and manufacture. Money, in this light, designates what Smith calls the object’s “nominal price.” It is merely a name or a sign, announcing the contingent value of objects circulating within networks. Smith demonstrates that in order to understand a market economy—in order to understand something as ordinary as its currency—one needs to be able to conceive of value as relative and mutable. *The Wealth of Nations* is a manifesto for market antifoundationalists.¹³ And so Georg Lukács’s gloss on Marx’s *Capital*, it comes as a small shock to realize, works perfectly well as a rough-and-ready description of *The Wealth of Nations* itself: Smith, like Marx, attempts what Lukács calls “the retranslation of economic objects from things back into processes, into the changing relations between men.”¹⁴

Perhaps it would be better to put the point the other way round. It would be inane to claim that Smith is a Marxist before the fact, but it is somewhat more plausible to claim that Marx is not merely a left-Hegelian—he is a left-Smithian, as well. This need come as no surprise, of course, since Hegel famously claims to have adopted the dialectic from Smith in the first place. The central error of vulgar political economy, according to Marx, is that it reifies capital much as mercantilism once reified wealth; it treats capital as

13. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: Modern Library, 1937). The really crucial sections, for my purposes, come in book 4, “Of Systems of Political Oeconomy,” and especially in chap. 1, “Of the Principle of the Commercial or Mercantile System” (398–419).

14. Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 183.

a naturally given thing. A dialectical account of capital, by contrast, would resist reification: it would provide an understanding of capital as a complex and changing historical structure governed at various levels by conflict and contradiction, fully a part of the history of human relationships. This, to be sure, provides a way of thinking against capital, but only in the sense that it allows Marxists to get a better bead on capital than a merely descriptive economics would provide. Marx is not so much trying to rebut Adam Smith on this score. He is trying to go Smith one better. So does the Marxist dialectic help us think capital or think against capital? For Marx, these are basically the same thing: antinomic thought is simultaneously an epistemology of the market and an epistemology of resistance.

The question regarding Marx is essentially the one posed by the capital logicians: Is the dialectic as Marx wields it a properly philosophical epistemology, that is, an ahistorical methodology that reports on the intricate and contradictory ways the world has always been and always will be? Or is the dialectic itself a historically bound form of thought, one that is specific to capital? The latter position—that the dialectic is specific to capital—itself comes in a soft line and a hard: the soft line maintains, à la Lukács, that the dialectic only comes into its own under capital, only becomes thinkable under capital, but is bound to persist to account for the new intricacies of some as yet unimaginable communist condition; the hard line insists that the dialectic is adequate only to capitalism and will wither with capitalism itself. Communism, presumably, will have no need of such philosophical extravagance. At this point, the question of epistemology gets referred into the political future.

Now there is yet a third position possible here—a voice from the utopian beyond—that would shift us onto rather different ground. This position would seek to disassociate dialectical thinking from capitalism nearly altogether and thus reverse the course we have been charting thus far. Rather than viewing antinomy as a species of capital-logic, it would discover in the filigree of dialectical thought a glimpse of the socialist condition yet to come, a condition in which the dialectical unity of identity and difference could not only be thought but also, in some as yet unimaginable fashion, actually lived. This is a position suggested by Fredric Jameson when he writes, “Dialectical reason, *which corresponds to a social organization that does not yet exist*, has not yet come into being in any hegemonic form.”¹⁵

15. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 47; my emphasis.

Jameson, for his part, has adapted this notion from Adorno, who, perhaps more than anyone, teaches us to think of skepticism and its antinomies as an intransigently political project. If Adorno is able to pull this off, however—if he is able to wrench the dialectic back from capital—this is in large part because he theorizes the changing place of knowledge under capitalism itself. For surely it is not enough to say, as Mandeville would have it, that the market is the great antifoundationalist. Even as capitalism is liquidating customary forms of knowledge and judgment, it is also assembling new epistemological apparatuses to place in the service of accumulation and its regimes. It is not as though the usual foundationalist epistemologies simply fell outside of the marketplace. Idealism, we have already noted, is an epistemology of the commodity and the lifeworld that it helps standardize, governed now by abstract time and abstract space and abstract subjectivity. Empiricism, similarly, is an epistemology of domination, in which concrete objects are made to yield knowledge of themselves the better to command them (though this last, empiricism, is equally an epistemology of servility, in which thought shows itself to be unthinking, content as it is to collapse back into a social system whose features it merely enumerates). And taken together, idealism and empiricism find their cutting edge in instrumental reason, a scientific and bureaucratic rationality that can master information but has abandoned any attempt to think ends.

This is a familiar notion, to be sure, but we need to think again about its consequences. If we make instrumental reason the hallmark of capital's epistemology, then antinomic argument clearly becomes a way of blasting open its simplicities. Consider, in this light, the form of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*: short, chiseled essays, each a thesis just waiting to be canceled by one of its fellows, their sentences a fun-house ride of whiplash reversals, if we could imagine a fun-house ride that was dense and deliberate and sad. *Minima Moralia* is an elaborate, startling exercise in aphoristic antinomy. Thus we read in #10, "Divided-United," that bourgeois marriage is just another form of economic contract—it is domination at its most intimate, hegemony by candlelight. And we read not half a page later, in #11, "With All My Worldly Goods," that marriage is the last best hope of noninstrumental relationships in a world otherwise given over to instrumentality.¹⁶ Nothing mediates this antithesis—no third essay follows to resolve the contraries.

16. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974). See #10: "Marriage as a community of interests unfailingly means the degradation of the interested parties"; and #11: "[M]arriage offers one of the last possibilities of forming human cells within universal inhumanity" (31). See also #2, "Grassy Seat."

Antinomic argument in *Minima Moralia* is a way of announcing the pervasive and agonizing contradictions around which capital organizes everyday life. It is a way of fixing the reader's gaze, without the sugar pill of consolation, on the suffering that attends such diremption. *Minima Moralia* attempts, by letting its every proposition collapse into paradox, to clear the ground for something that, from the perspective of instrumental reason, is bound to seem like ignorance: a splendid and immoderate Kantianism, in which one is not even to treat objects as objects.¹⁷

Now surely Adorno's project has received only added clarity in the thirty years since his death. Antifoundationalism—even an antifoundationalism rather more precipitate than Adorno's—makes brute and intuitive sense at a time when knowledge has become in some new way determinative of capitalism itself. It is easy, in this light, to think of the critique of “enlightenment” or of “disciplinary knowledge” or even of “epistemology” more generally as a just barely displaced attack on everything that is compressed into the term *information economy*: the capitalist organization of knowledge in the cybernetic revolution of the last half century, the corporate subsumption of science in the guise of research and development, the transformation of the First World's consumer sphere around new forms of commodified knowledge, the construction of a worldwide communications industry, which provides the structure for global production and generates new imperial projects in its wake.

This list—to which we might add, as a secondary or subsidiary phenomenon, the passing of the humanist university—points us now toward one of Lyotard's crucial points in *The Postmodern Condition*: that knowledge under late capitalism loses its traditional ideological functions. In an information economy, knowledge no longer serves to justify authority. On Lyotard's view, the forms of thinking that have come to the fore in the globalized economy are little more than refined forms of positivism, a technocratic knowledge that places itself directly in the service of capital and the state, which is to say that knowledge no longer takes the form of some ornate philosophical system whose business it is to provide capital or the state with conceptual legitimacy. But if one says this clearly, then I think one can also say that Lyotard's more famous argument—the argument concerning the death of metanarratives—has generally been misunderstood, or that the consequences of the argument have been poorly reckoned. The first sentence of *The Postmodern Condition* is already revealing: “Our working

17. See esp. #114, “Heliotrope.”

hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.”¹⁸ We need to pay careful attention to the phrasing here: Lyotard will be discussing the “*status* of knowledge,” its position relative to the economy and the culture. Note, too, the subtitle: *The Postmodern Condition* is a “report on knowledge”—which is to say that it is not a critique of knowledge. Lyotard does *not* demand that we launch an assault on epistemology. He seeks to consider the changing condition of knowledge under new social arrangements. And if we follow Lyotard’s account—if we accept the idea that the metanarratives have broken down—then it turns out that under late capitalism, philosophical knowledge is always already problematized—it has already ceded to the administered regime of science—in which case the antifoundationalist or the Adornian doesn’t have much to do.

This yields a difficult point. Antifoundationalism is typically thought to possess a coherent political profile. The Frankfurt School and its successors have tried to put the critique of knowledge in the service of an anti-capitalist and antibureaucratic politics. Poststructuralism aligns its version of that critique with what used to be called the new social movements. And even neopragmatism tends to call for a left-liberal political praxis on Deweyite lines. These are, no doubt, distinct projects, with different aims and different histories—each of them, indeed, further encompasses several distinct projects within it, and in a different context, everything would hinge on specifying those differences. But to so much as speak of “theory,” and not even to endorse it, but merely to take it seriously as a social fact, is to posit a realm in which critical Marxism, poststructuralism, and pragmatism form a common stock of arguments. And within the generalizing perspective of “theory,” within that politically resolute canon of counterphilosophy, these various projects are all premised on the notion that we must continue to uproot foundationalisms at every turn (because an unjust society speciously relies on them). But Lyotard’s argument is a humorless rejoinder to the epistemological determinism to which these projects, in their most distinctive formulations, tend. Chris Connery, for instance, has gone so far as to recommend, in the pages of *boundary 2*, that one treat antifoundationalism as an “entry requirement,” which means that anyone not properly *schooled*, anyone not sporting the poststructuralist beret, should be shunned as inau-

18. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Benington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3.

thetically or inadequately left.¹⁹ Yet if we follow Lyotard, antifoundationalist critique is simply redundant, because knowledge no longer plays the legitimizing role that antifoundationalists axiomatically take it to have. Capital and technology have already done the uprooting for us, so to critique epistemology is only to carry out the program that the market has laid down for us in advance—the program, that is, of obliterating the established canons of social, historical, and ethical knowledge.

And with that we seemed to have traced a circle. My argument seems to be foundering on a basic discrepancy or pulling away in two different directions at once. We began by asking whether antifoundationalism resists the commodity sphere or accommodates it, and what we are finding is that, in some queasy way, it does both. Here is the problem: We can follow Adorno (or deconstruction, or the Rethinking Marxism gang) and hold to our antinomies—our nominalisms, our skepticisms, our antifoundationalisms—insisting that they are our best shot at eluding reification and the constricted demands of instrumental reason. Or we can follow Jean Baudrillard or Lyotard or Barbara Herrnstein Smith and conclude that capital has beaten us to the punch, that the market will always outmatch our hostility to grand narratives and universal values and essential qualities.

In one sense, this is merely to say that if antifoundationalism is going to have any force, it will need to introduce a new degree of historical specificity to its claims. There may be some intrinsic interest in sticking it to logocentrism or foundational knowledge or science, but in order for such work to approach the political force that one typically hopes from it, it is necessary to enumerate with much greater precision than critics generally muster just which institutions we think are actually troubled by a critique of epistemology. What is it about the status of knowledge or science within our common lives that makes antifoundationalist critique compelling? I take that to be a question of unrelieved urgency.

But once we pose that question, it becomes hard all over again to know how to proceed. For if we are stuck between these skeptical options—between antifoundationalism as a species of market thought and antifoundationalism as a mode of critical ethics or political resistance—then this has something to do with the contradictory place occupied in advanced capitalism by knowledge itself. On the one hand, knowledge seems to be forever discredited in advance; the experience of complexity under global capi-

19. See Chris Connery, "Actually Existing Left Conservatism," *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 11.

tal seems to humiliate any conceptual scheme around which we might try to organize it and through which we might try to justify action against it. But at the same time, knowledge now seems to play a new and defining role in economic relations: global capitalism seems to give an unprecedented centrality to knowledge, or at least to information, around which it creates new technologies, new classes of workers, new institutions to produce, store, and distribute data. This, it seems to me, is the ground of our politico-epistemological hesitation. This helps explain why the antinomic argument that seems our surest means of withstanding the instrumentalization of thought is simultaneously the most supple of market logics. Arguments that appeal to contradiction embed us within global capitalism in a manner that is itself contradictory. That, I would like to suggest, is the antinomy of antinomies.