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Popular Occultism and Critical Social Theory: Exploring Some Themes in Adorno's Critique of Astrology and the Occult

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In recent years, the purveyors of the popular occult have flooded the marketplace with a plethora of books, magazines, movies, games and similar commodities, perhaps the most common of which is the astrology column syndicated in most daily newspapers. By resuscitating Theodor Adorno's brilliant but neglected critique of astrology and the occult, this paper examines some popular manifestations of occultism in terms of their deviation from occultism's original opposition to the status quo and their affirmation of commodity relations. The authors claim that popular occultism fosters "pseudo-individualization" and a "metaphysic of the dopes" which serves to stifle self-reflection. Hence, popular occultism achieves what traditional organized religion could not: the complete internalization of domination. As a distortion of consciousness which conceals material conditions, popular occultism legitimates the irrational contradictions of industrial society by guiding its followers to maintain the values of liberal-capitalism despite the inequalities of everyday life.

T.W. Adorno has acquired some notoriety among students of North American popular culture for his extensive cultural criticism, the bulk of which was produced from 1934 to 1954, when Adorno was exiled in the United States from his native Germany. The discussion of Adorno's critique of mass culture, however, usually centres on his studies of radio, jazz and television. Almost always neglected are Adorno's two works on popular occultism, "Theses Against Occultism" (1946-7) and "The Stars Down to Earth" (1953), possibly because neither has been widely available on this continent until quite recently. (Piccone et al, 1974, provides the full publication details.) Yet these two pieces, despite their markedly disparate methodological approaches, both represent significant advances in Adorno's attempt to implement a critical social theory which directs its attention to the cultural artifacts produced by contemporary society. The short "Theses Against Occultism," written in the abstract and almost literary style familiar to regular readers of Adorno, reflects his refined ability to draw together into a unified argument a wide variety of elements, including social theory, speculative metaphysics and popular cultural phenomena. "The Stars Down to Earth," on the other hand, is an eighty-page content analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* astrology column for a three month period in 1952-3. While

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each study reflects a side of Adorno's multifaceted perspective on cultural phenomena, the two works read together spell out several important conceptual categories for the general criticism of modern mass society.

In the present essay, we propose to offer a few notes on the relationship of popular occultism to contemporary society by thinking with and through some of Adorno's basic categories of social analysis. Occasionally, the resulting work is a recognizable restatement of Adorno; occasionally, it is discernably our own. Most of the time, however, the thoughts presented here represent a joint effort between Adorno and ourselves—although Adorno himself is no longer here to verify this, and we have no intention of resurrecting him via seance.

Adorno's critique of popular astrology and the occult does not begin where one might suppose an intellectual's criticism of such phenomena would begin. Adorno does not merely dismiss popular occultism on the grounds that it is demonstrably irrational. On the contrary, Adorno sees little that is mysterious in the supposedly mystical connection between the supernatural and the natural, between, for example, the constellations and human action. What Adorno recognizes, as a social philosopher, is the projection of the structural contradictions of industrial society onto the stars. What he sees, as a sociologist, is the reflection of these contradictions back into the practical "advice" offered by the astrological columns. In total, for Adorno, "irrationality [that is, the *apparent* irrationality of popular occultism] is not necessarily a force operating outside the range of rationality," (Adorno, 1974a:13) when "rationality" is understood as the social means for legitimating the contradictions of the contemporary social system (Habermas, 1975). Rather, on Adorno's view, the "irrationality" of astrology columns and similar supposedly mystical phenomena like tarot cards and tea leaves, and the commonplace "rationality" of modern society, coincide insofar as both serve the same social function, namely, the justification and legitimation of the status quo. It is how rationality and irrationality coincide—"the pattern of interacting rational and irrational forces in modern mass movements" (Adorno, 1974:13)—that is the object of investigation. The concepts which are drawn out of occult phenomena stand in close connection to the broader context of Western industrial society. Adorno's dissection of popular occultism is thus, ultimately, a critique of contemporary mass society.

It is important to emphasize that our immediate concern is not with the occult per se, but with its popular manifestations. Indeed it is not unlikely that Adorno might have found redeeming value in certain elements of traditional occultism—particularly, we might suppose, its emphasis on transcendence, that is, upon a "true" realm of reality which cannot be controlled or administered "rationally." But we must remember that popular or mass occultism differs from its original insofar as it is a commodity. Occult books, newspaper columns and radio programmes are all possible only insofar as they have a mass market. The mysteries of the "forbidden knowledge" are now available at such mundane establishments as K-Mart and Woolworth's. Precisely because of occultism's mass character, advanced industrial society imposes an order of technical feedback control on the constellations. If an item of occult material "doesn't sell," it is quickly removed from the marketplace and replaced with an item which is "more marketable."

It is not that the consumers of the occult adhere in prearranged fashion to its directives. Rather, the occult must adhere to the inflexible lifestyle of its consumers. Conformity per-

meates the form and the content of popular occultism. The occult reinforces the narrow world of its consumers in preaching the gospel of conformism. One would not expect to read in the morning paper's astrology column such imperatives as "If you are being treated badly by a boss, tell him off" or "Don't bother with going to work today; spend the day doing something you would enjoy." The "advice" of such columns is geared to the rigidly structured everyday life of the consumer.¹ The popular astrologer who dared to break with that rigidity would soon find himself out of a job. Every essential social and economic factor is left completely intact. Thus, the content of the columns (and of all popular occult phenomena) is, so to speak, "pre-digested" (Adorno, 1941:22). It advises to its consumers what they already know for themselves: in order successfully to preserve oneself and one's socio-economic status, one must adjust and adapt to the way things are, one must accept the given reality. The popular occult merely offers an "irrational" rationalization of the status quo.

The message which popular occultism conveys to its consumers is simple: 'Take things as they are, since you are fated for them anyway.' The importance of fate is not to be underestimated. The popular manifestations of the occult teach us that there are leaders and there are followers. Not everyone can be a leader. Those who are characteristically wily, quick tempered and ruthless become the leaders. Those who are gullible, patient and understanding become the followers. This privileged structure, which reflects the privileged access to knowledge and power on which industrial society is founded, develops into the recurring category around which the favourite subjects of the popular occult revolve: health, money and love. Not all of us can avoid sickness, debt and loneliness; those who do are among the privileged. It is our star-determined fate, rather than our socio-economic status, which sets the pattern of our lives. Of course, in order to cloud any possible connection between the "heavens" and the "earth," fate is interpreted as a cosmic throw of the dice. It is always the element of risk that determines one's fate. Health, for instance, is seen in terms of accidents or chance illness, rather than one's ability to access proper medical care or to afford a nutritious diet. Those who "get ahead," who are most successful at self-preservation, are those whose roll of the dice held luck. The underlying social and economic questions of privilege are left untouched. Not only does the popular occult convey complaisance with one's lot, it encourages anticipation of an effect that is causally pre-determined. If the worst is coming, one should brace oneself for the consequences rather than face the situation head on. The mentality of the behavioural scientist, expressed in the language of stimulus-response models, even invades the occult.

Yet, at the same time astrological columns and their popular occult cousins hold the individual accountable for each of his failures. If one's home life is not pleasant, it is up to the individual to correct the situation. If one's boss is particularly mean, one must make an ef-

¹Adorno provides a long catalogue of examples from astrology columns in "Stars Down to Earth," and even though these are nearly thirty years old, they are surprisingly similar to contemporary astrological forecasts. Additionally, the discussion of popular astrology by Maitre, 1966, which is constructed wholly from an empirical and psychological perspective, confirms a great many of Adorno's observations about the columns. This is despite the fact Maitre confined himself to France only, and was apparently unaware of Adorno's work on the subject. Because of the excellent empirical work of both Adorno, 1974b and Maitre, 1966, and also because a critical eye can locate in the astrology column of any local paper instances of the types we mention, we shall not provide further examples.

fort to be kinder to him. The message here is blatantly self-contradictory: a person is the victim of fateful chance at the same time as he is responsible for the difficulties in his environment. And we should not merely write this off as a manifestation of the "irrationality" of the occult. For it reflects the predicament of a society which clings to the liberal-capitalist ideology of the rugged individual even as that society has "seized" the "individual by innumerable channels of organization" (Adorno, 1974b:82). In theory, the values of the individual are forcefully upheld; in practice, the individual comes to be defined by the style of his apparel or the model of his automobile. It is the commodities which take on the characteristics of individuality. The consumer, stripped of his individuality per se by the anonymous social mechanism, grasps for objects, commodities, in order to bestow upon himself a self-definition. The individual is mere appearance, a shadow of the commodity.

Popular occultism, both in its form and in its content, participates completely in this process, which Adorno terms "pseudo-individualization." In an earlier essay on popular music, Adorno defined "pseudo-individualization" as the endowment of "cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself" (Adorno, 1941:25). The astrology columns, for instance, produce nothing more than a catalogue of mixed human emotions. To discriminate character structure along the lines of such common emotions as frustration or happiness is not really to discriminate at all. Moreover, though the columns propose to speak to each one of us specially, they in fact make each individual (at least each one born under a given "sign") completely interchangeable with every other individual. Indeed, many of us, while reading our daily horoscope, have glanced at the advice offered under some other sign, only to discover a strange similarity to what was forecast for us a day or two before. The pseudo-individualization implicit in popular occultism becomes most painfully clear in the course of daily conversation. The astrological sign comes to serve as a mediation of social relationships. The often-asked question "What sign are you?" and the just as common rejoinder "Of course, I could tell you are a Taurus" presents a means for pre-defining the individual's characteristics (and character) without resort to genuinely interpersonal contact. One's individuality is immediately lost in the vague characterizations of Star Chart. Just as our more general social experience is sometimes that of an interchangeable part in a great social mechanism, so popular occult phenomena reinforce that self-conception without ever owing up to it. Anyone can be anyone else. The individual is left emptied and impotent, except insofar as he is defined externally and by what is not intrinsically his, that is, by his commodities, whether they be his automobile or his astrological sign. Popular occultism sells good luck in the same way as television sells deodorant — by appealing to pseudo-individualized characteristics.

To sum up for a moment: rationality recycles its apparent opposite, irrationality. The advice given by astrology columns and tarot readings never deviates from its predigested format. It is the practical advice necessary to succeed in advanced industrial society. In order to be successful, one must adapt to one's environment, "integrate" oneself into the given reality, and submit to the ideology of privilege. But in adapting, one also relinquishes those individual characteristics which are presumed of the successful person. The popular occult reflects the contemporary Catch-22, or more properly, the contradiction of a society which asserts an outdated ideology the more broadly that ideology is eclipsed by actual practice. Occultism claims, for its part, that this is due to its own irrationality, to

the mystery of the stars or the cards or the tea leaves. But, in fact, occultist irrationality is only a microcosm of the irrational contradictions of the commodity society of which it is a product. The occult has only one advantage here: while popular occultism can attribute the contradiction to mystery, contemporary society (and its social theory) must actively forget its own inconsistencies. Popular occultism thus serves as an irrational rationalization of what advanced industrial society cannot itself rationalize. It is not clear which is more irrational: the occult “sciences” or the supposedly “rational” society of which they are the products. Whatever the case, occult irrationality has a very clear social function: it rationalizes and legitimizes certain contradictions which are imbedded in the structure of self-proclaimed “rational” modern society. Each moment of the relation between “rational” society and irrational occultism comes to take on various aspects of its opposite. The mystery of the stars outlines the mystification of contemporary society. Like all popular culture in the commodity system, popular occultism, by its very continued existence, affirms the “pseudo-rationality” (the unevaluated and unproven claim to rationality) of the given state of affairs. Its irrationality stems not from the mysteriousness of the cosmos but from the ideological mystification of actual social conditions.

In the nineteenth century, Marx observed that religion was the opium of the masses. Adorno, recognizing that organized religion has outlived its social usefulness, declared that “occultism is the metaphysic of the dopes” (Adorno, 1974a:9). Religion and the popular occult run parallel in at least one sense: both serve as forms of the domination of the spirit (inner life) in the name of the maintenance of the status quo. A purportedly mystical irrationality masks the non-rational contradictions of the believer’s everyday existence. But the parallel can be pushed no further. It is not that popular occultism is a new form of religion. Institutionalized religious faith constitutes a type of external domination which has been superseded in contemporary industrial society. Religion maintains itself within the context of a community (the congregation or mystical body), by way of rituals and practices designed to illuminate the social organization which enforces and reinforces the individual’s belief structure. The faith formed by traditional religions may involve “pre-digestion,” but definitions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy remain always within clear-cut and self-evident relations of authority and submission. Religion mirrors its social setting unambiguously.

Popular occultism, on the other hand, is simultaneously the culmination and the overcoming of the spiritual domination characteristic of organized religion. For the unfreedom of the occult is thoroughly internalized. Like similar forms of mass culture propagated by the “consciousness industry,” popular occultism involves “giving orders to oneself” (apparent autonomy) in a way which produces a self-commodification of the spirit. (These ideas are expanded on by Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972:120–67, and Adorno, 1941:45–6.) What centuries of the institutionalized coercion of individual values could never quite accomplish—namely, bringing the faithful into conformity with socially-affirmative standards of behaviour and thought—popular occultism achieves with ease. The individual seems to possess the freedom to interpret the astrology column, the tarot cards and so forth in a fashion immediately applicable to his own situation. But the standardization of life issuing from advanced industrial society renders such free interpretation a sham. The inflexibility of everyday existence makes the mystical quality of the occult self-validating.

As a result, popular occultism’s attempt to short-circuit self-reflection is infinitely more

efficient and successful than that of organized religion. Occultism substitutes a false transcendence for a true awareness of material contradictions. By eliminating the prospect of future salvation (the traditional promise of reward for faith), the message of the popular occult can be focussed exclusively on the here and now. This synchronic view provides the individual with the illusion of moving beyond the woes of everyday life without *going* anywhere. Occultism thus claims to represent the real and the true while in fact representing the mundane and meaningless circumstances of life in contemporary society. This conceptual treadmill, as an apology for the consumer society's irrationality, is best summarized by Adorno: "While chasing in the beyond after what is lost, all they [the occult followers] run into is their own nothingness" (Adorno, 1974a:10). Whereas organized religion's rituals, language and hierarchical structure point to the "other world" as one's true spiritual home, and suggest that this-worldly belief is the journey of the mind to God, occultism advocates adaptation to the true home of the given reality. The consumer of the occult is encouraged to carry on as before, despite the material inequalities of advanced industrialism, without holding out the hope of the eternal reward.

The occult consequently preaches what we may call "the banality of the beyond." This notion has as its direct analogy Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," that is, the point that the greatest evil-doers of our day, such as Eichmann, are not the homicidal tyrants as in other ages, but those who thoughtlessly carry out with technical specificity orders from their superiors. Individual responsibility, in the pre-20th century sense of that term, is impossible to determine, as we saw with Mai Lai a few years ago. The anonymous face of the technically organized social apparatus replaces the blood-thirsty tribal warrior. (Idi Amin is laughable to most of us because he is an anachronism.) The message conveyed from the beyond is nothing more essential than greetings from one's deceased grandmother, as though she had taken an extended excursion to Florida (Adorno, 1974a:9-10). The supernatural gives itself away in the dull everydayness of its content. The Ouija board and the crystal-ball gazer tell us who we will marry and what our occupation will be. The underlying structure of everyday life, of the social conditions under which we live, is left completely intact. Popular occultism merely reinforces the view that everything will continue to be as it has been. Even the afterlife promises no more than a leisurely permanent vacation once one has fulfilled his productive quota in the present life. Death holds no terror because it promises no change. The banality of the beyond reflects the banality of everyday existence in advanced industrial society, the individual reduced to pseudo-individualized characteristics through the social mediation of commodities.

If popular occultism is indeed grounded in the society which produces it as a commodity, it must thus represent a degeneration or perversion from its origin. We hinted at this much earlier. Astrology, for instance, originated in the following insight: if a man could predict the movements of the Gods in the heavens, then he certainly should be able to foresee the events on this puny earth. What we today call "astrology" and what we call "astronomy" were inseparable. It was not supposed that the stars guided men's actions but that the keys to predicting stellar motion and earthly events were the same. And this sense has been carried, albeit in altered form, into the present day. Exactly as astronomy claims for itself the status of "science," so astrology counts itself as an "occult science." But the alteration is not insignificant. What Valéry said is true enough: "Look at the disorder of the heavens . . . The courses of these little lights give rise to the idea of an order. Man has not

yet recovered from it" (Quoted by Maitre, 1966:82). But the general characteristics presented through such mass-produced forms as Star Charts contravene the magical origin that once gave irrationality its transcendent dimension. When astrology and other occult phenomena entered into the circulation of commodities, their potential for the illumination of the irrational within (the unreal, merely speculative and therefore transcendent) collapsed into a distorted reflection of the social structure without. The attempt of today's clairvoyant to draw back the curtain of illusion in effect reproduces a broader and more pervasive illusion in a more splendid and mystical way. Just as art, which is of a similar magical origin, has gone the route of mechanical reproduction, and has drawn itself into the values imposed on it by its commodity status, so occultism has absorbed itself into the rationalized reality which its original would have abhorred. (See Adorno, 1945:680–81, and Nederman, 1978:2–4.) This tension between occultism's original and its contemporary popular manifestation should indicate to us just how much the irrationality of the occult has been reprocessed and recycled into the given reality. By placing itself at the service of advanced industrial society, occultism denies to itself that magical moment which represented the negation of the real and the material. The more occultism complains about materialism in the endless stream of artifacts which occultists churn out, the more it affirms what it purports to deny. Nonaffirmation of the given reality turns (not so mystically) into its opposite—affirmation of the material conditions under which it is produced.

Popular occultism has forgotten the magical irrationality with which the occult was originally imbued. In this process of forgetting, the occult has lost its oppositional character, its capacity to negate the given material conditions of existence. But in recalling what is only implicit in popular occultism, we are given a clue to the shortcoming of *all* occult phenomena. Because the irrational transcendental element of occultism always remains in the realm of the super-natural, the occult necessarily presupposes that the real is the rational. Just in the way that it erects its opposition to reality, occultism affirms that the material and the existent are rational. But, as critical social theory shows, the reverse is true: reality is itself the bearer of irrationality, and it is only in the overcoming of irrational reality that the rational makes itself manifest. Critical social theory turns the formula of occultism upside down, thus cutting away the underpinnings of the occult. Since occultism operates on the principle of the revelation or illumination of the transcendent, rather than its realization, the occult dooms itself to an eternal repetition of simultaneous disclosure and concealment. Popular occultism, in the last analysis, is merely the final stage in an inevitable degeneration, concealing the irrationality of real conditions as it discloses its own irrationality. Occultism ultimately comes to the defense of what it intended to oppose: the given material reality. But this self-inversion is perhaps at the same time occultism's greatest revelation. It indicates the extent to which the "cult of reality," that insistence upon the absolute rationality of the given which is the guiding intellectual principle of advanced industrial society, exercises its authority over the popular forms of contemporary culture.

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