

Preface

If, as it has been suggested, terminology is the properly poetic moment of thought, then terminological choices can never be neutral.

~Giorgio Agamben,
State of Exception

This is a work of critical theory informed by the Frankfurt School tradition of social critique. It is based on the analytic model of Theodor W. Adorno in particular, and it proceeds on the premise that we are living in an age of organized domination – that the basic social problems of the early industrial age have not been resolved, and are in fact intensifying in their gravity and effect on human well-being. Thus, rather than being another commentary on the elaborate writings of Adorno, it takes him up seriously on a suggestion he makes for extensions/applications of the critical theory: In the dedication in *Minima Moralia* he says his thoughts intend “to furnish models for a future exertion of thought.” This book does that by continuing the critique of how culture operates as a form of domination and by examining a particular manifestation of culture – which is, the cultural rationality of the *agon*. It is both a study of a type of reification and a new conceptualization of power based on the action orientation of “agonism.” The study is premised on the idea that agonism – the cultural *ideology of conflict* – is materially related to the problem of domination; that the social, political and economic order that prevails in the world today is effectively maintained and normalized by a *dominant* rationality, an expression of *cultural* knowledge, one which is based on the philosophy of the *agon*. The *agon* is literally the arena of competition, the scene of contest, and the locus of adversarial conflict. The philosophy of *agonism* affirms the idea that transcendence, truth and growth are generated from the outcome of the contest. Thus the ideology

of conflict is rooted in what is conventionally seen as the positive value inherent in agonistic contest and struggle – where agonism versus antagonism furnishes the ideal model of action that is believed to produce positive/productive results in virtually all aspects of life.

The concept of agonism is most often understood in this affirmative sense as the generative principle of economy, society and even natural ecology and personal growth. Cultural expressions of agonism have numerous manifestations, including economic competition, competitive sport, the military rationality of the state, the adversarial system in legal practice and the view that historical progress emerges from the dialectical unfolding of agonistic contradictions. This study argues that such a conception forms part of the mythology of power that underpins the project of domination operating in the world today. It does not conform to the Nietzschean and now neo-liberal tradition of thought that valorizes agonism as a primary element of political democratic struggle. Rather, this study sees the values of agonism as a form of cultural rationality that legitimates the reproduction of conflict, violence and destruction. As such, agonism is fundamental to the social institutions that reproduce political domination and other forms of human rights violations that continue to predominate in the post 9/11 global market society.

The ambivalent character of agonism is that it is often seen as a mode of transcendence, while its instrumental relation to the mode of destruction is rarely acknowledged. The ideology of agonism has been so prominent a cultural force in the *project of domination* that it has shaped power at the micro-social and macro social levels. Agonistic forms of conflict underwrite global politics and the perpetual war economies of a globalizing capitalism, and agonism shapes the psychic structure of individual consciousness in the formation of the reified *agonal subject*. Reification is the process through which domination is exercised at the level of subject formation. Reification is discussed in this study as a form of self-incurred psychic defeat – a competition with oneself unto the point of self-defeat. Agonistic thinking, which believes that truth emerges from victory in the contest and from championship in battle, is itself a form of reified thinking, which conflates progress with destruction culminating in the cultural celebration of conflict and violence as instrumental forms of power.

The critique of agonism is thus a critique of competition and championship as an unquestioned value system that supports the order of domination in the current geo-political context. An agon culture is a winner-loser culture – it is both structurally and ideologically reproduced in the incessant celebration and institutional support of competition, sport and violence: a political order that engages in perpetual warfare as its forceful mode of hegemony is one that requires regularized consent in the support for war; and the economic order that is based on the corporate monopolization of resources and that results in scarcity, unemployment and poverty must be made to appear as natural aspects of society. These political and economic forms of domination are justified by an elaborate ideology of agonism – of an ideological order that pits all against all. Thus we see agonistic forms of thinking and practice expressed profusely throughout the spectrum of human culture and society.

The agon, which is the hyper-competitive society that produces domination, conflict and war, is celebrated in the media frenzy of competition programs from sports to “survivor” shows, to shows in which contestants compete for “love” to the odiousness of extreme fighting. Throughout our entire lives we have been infused with a discourse which claims the righteousness, the goodness, the benefit, the correctness of competition. From the competitive exercises inherent in childhood socialization to the ideological proliferation of agonistic clichés in language, to the practice of politics and education and consumption as competitive pursuits – we are constantly encouraged to compete for our own good. In the agon culture, those who question competition are looked upon with suspicion. This reactionary response is certainly a measure of the effectiveness of monumental indoctrination, and a historical blindness to the fact of co-operation has been the saviour of human anthropological ascent.

Agonism is the *primary organizing principle* of the global capitalist order – its most enduring force and most strongly defended cultural mythology – one that gives primacy to the ruling order of competition. Already I can hear the defenders of competition crying that most dangerous of defences, “*But competition and war is all very natural!*” And when pressed further, evidence of this “belief guarded against reflection” is quickly produced: “*In the animal kingdom...*” it starts. And just like that

an entire century of sociology goes down the drain, and the naturalization of destruction finds yet another “champion” – all this despite the abundant social scientific evidence to the contrary.

Agonism is a form of power that is promoted by a particular type of dominant rationality arising out of the exaltation of instrumental force. It is the classic means-ends rationality writ large as a cultural mythology. When all reason fails, it is the strongest application of violent force that prevails – this is clear in the observation by von Clausewitz that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” At present, this agonal force, which includes the network of military, technological, ideological, cultural, libidinal, political and economic convergences, is unprecedented in human history. It underpins the continuing *dialectic of production and destruction* that threatens to wipe out the better part of life forms on earth.

The critique of agon culture contained in this analysis stretches from a consideration of the modern origins of agonism in the Western Enlightenment project of the domination of nature to contemporary modalities of agonistic power in popular media and political economy. In typical Adornian fashion, this analysis adheres to the analytic principle of social totality where the Universal is dialectical with the Particular, and thus the agonistic reification of individual consciousness is inseparable from the agonal order of power that drives the project of global domination and war.

This study began as a doctoral thesis in the late 1990s before the events of September 11, 2001 provoked a politico-military response that would consolidate agonistic tensions on an unprecedented global scale. A decade afterwards and we are still firmly facing the difficulties of a post 9/11 world. I chose to revive my interest in the issue of “agon culture” because its continuing relevance is proven daily in the intensifications of conflict that appear in the political, economic and cultural realms of society – and also because of the virtual absence of any substantial critique of competition as it relates to power and order in both the scholarly and political literature. What is offered here is a theory of power, one based on the modality of agonism – that is, on the

connection between competition-conflict-combat and how this value couplet serves to perpetuate dominating power from the top and also work to interpellate human subjects into conscious conformity with the order of domination.

The need for an agonal critique of society is further warranted in the *extremification* of competitive/conflictual modes of action within numerous aspects of social life. The post 9/11 world order is characterized by intensifications of various forms of *agonistic* power: A reactionary neo-liberalism has intensified what Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) call “the economic mechanism of selection” that increases dispossession, immiseration, class polarization, open forms of corporate criminality and military “exceptionalism” that functions outside the established boundaries of legal conduct; new waves of human rights violations are emerging in the frenzy of fundamentalisms of thought and action; civil backlashes, global resource pillage, and a growth in the scope and power of the not-yet-redundant military-industrial-complex all combine to form a new ontology of horror that can be named an “agonal order.”

This study proposes an agonal model of analysis that can be used to identify agonism at both an ideological level (ideas, culture, entertainment, leisure and play, philosophies, operating rationalities and logics, motivational justifications) as well as the material level (war, state action, law, the labour process, sport, interpersonal difficulties and the litany of competitive activities that exist throughout society):

- An agonal analysis can be used to extend the critique of domination by examining the sociology of the practices of power where competition, conflict, and battle remain prominent features.
- Agonal critique can explain the ubiquity of violence. The use of violent force as a way of resolving difficulties – the so-called instrumentality of violence, the means justifying the ends way of thinking – is a direct rationalization that finds its philosophic basis in the logic of the agon.
- Agonal critique is based on the sociological axiom that we live in a socially constructed reality. It is the system of cultural ideas that shapes our institutions and our life-

worlds. The antagonistic nature of present-day human society is not the product of innate animal drives outwardly expressed. This is a growing and powerful discourse that has overshadowed sociological conceptions of the human condition with biological deterministic categories of analysis, in particular, evolutionary psychological and evolutionary biological ones. This is a dangerous and monumental Spencerian regression of social thought. It is the most classic example of the naturalization of human destruction that threatens to replace critical theory with a vulgar pseudo-Darwinistic Discovery Channel view of the world.

- An agonal analysis can be applied to numerous social antagonisms in gender, class and racialized relations where the competitive/conflictual mode of interaction prevails in the formation of social hierarchies based on competition and exclusion.
- An agonal analysis can be applied to the sociology of institutions in terms of studying how certain persons are able to achieve top positions of power within hierarchical institutions. This process is seen as the “competitive mechanism of selection,” with the ideology being that if someone won the competition and made it to the top then they are deserving – regardless of tactics. The competitive nature of power processes within many hierarchical institutions has resulted in the election not of the most able and just to top positions of power, but often of the most power hungry and pathological.
- Agonal analysis can be applied to the reification of individual consciousness to develop a revived social psychology of subject formation in the context of a winner-loser culture where numerous forms of psychic defeat – from suicide to depression to aggressive displays of the self-as-warrior, bullying and narcissism – are subjective pathologies understandable through an agonistic cultural model of analysis.
- Agonal analysis can be used to inform an understanding of various institutional practices including some of the failings of the adversarial legal system where truth is

based on the evidentiary contest between legal combatants rather than inquisitorial scientific cooperation in the search for justice as truth rather than justice as conviction. In such a system winning a conviction becomes the goal of the court contestants rather than finding out the truth.

- Agonism is rampant in the political and economic institutions of neo-liberal capitalism. It is the sublime ideology of global capitalist expansion. Critiques of the current imperialist expansion do not question the agonal order of war, sport and championship that helps to authorize the same order of economic domination.
- An agonal analysis of media content and other forms of cultural expression can reveal how the dominant ethic of championship and victory simultaneously perpetuate an order of domination and subjugation, where victimization in such an order can be more easily rationalized as the outcome of the contest as a fair form of social selection because of its presumed naturalness.

This text cannot possibly cover all of these fields of inquiry. It can only touch upon some of them. The main purpose is to introduce the critical concept of the agon into social scientific analysis. It is my hope that this study encourages others to employ an agonal critique of power in their own fields of study so that the resistance to domination can find new sociological grounding. What I also endeavour to accomplish here is the provision of a reconstructed conception of the *agon* that moves beyond its former deployment in studies of democracy and other conventional liberal contexts where the term has been depleted of its critical meaning. As my conception of agonism is informed by Adorno's critical theory, this analysis is a contemporary application of an Adornian critique of domination to the present geopolitical order of power. As such, *Agon Culture: Competition, Conflict and the Problem of Domination* offers a critical analysis of the culture of domination by examining how critiques of power that do not question the agonal order of competition and conflict fall short of being radical critiques of the social totality in their omission of the cultural realm of meaning that is necessary to support social violation, conflict and war.

This study is unlike most of the scholarship offered from “critical theory” practitioners (and by that term I mean Frankfurt School critical theory and not the entire gamut of scholarly analysis that claims the title of critical theory). It differs in so far as it does not perform its analysis entirely through the epistemological categories established in the canon of European philosophy. As is implied consistently throughout Adorno’s work, social critique is also a critique of knowledge, and that certainly makes philosophical discourse ripe as a text to be analysed for its immanent shortcomings and its potential relation to domination; however, this critique also works through the forms of culture we find in contemporary capitalist consumer society, especially as they are informed by *agonistic rationality*, which is indeed a distinctive form of cultural knowledge. The agonistic cultural form certainly has Western cultural origins but is no longer only Western, since it has been exported almost world wide in the globalization of capitalism – and this takes many forms, including the global corporatization of sport to the liberalization of the corporate marketplace. This expansiveness is indicative of the totalizing thrust of the *project of domination* that so ignited Adorno’s sociology of power and the critique of totalization.

Although I am relying on Adorno’s critical model insofar as it operates through a critique of reification, and how the ideal of sacrifice gets mobilized subjectively within the project of domination, the writing style is not quite so dialectical as Adorno’s (as if anyone could replicate that deliciously epiphantic prose!). Rather, the style is more like that of Herbert Marcuse, who as one French critic remarked, performs an analysis that is “sculpted like bricks,” meaning it was too straightforward and blunt, perhaps even too vulgar. I would offer a different reading of such a blunt Marcusean style, however. When it comes to matters of life and death it is best to “speak concretely” (as Deleuze suggested) – critical prose sculpted like bricks will do just fine for me.

This analysis is not a fetishization of Adorno’s thought or another short-sighted critique of his presumed pessimism or elitism, or of his impenetrable style, or of how Adorno is too Marxist/not Marxist enough, and so on. This analysis is an application of his conceptual model to one of the ways power manifests in

the world today. Not *all* of Adorno's concepts and not *all* of power, of course, but a significant aspect of it, namely: *agonistic power as a type of reification*. It comes as no surprise, to those who understand Adorno's analysis of power and society, that it is entirely prescient to the order of domination operating in the world today. So why repeat it? The critique of agon culture is not a repetition of Adorno. As Adorno (and Horkheimer) mentioned: "the core of truth is historical" so the critical theory should be adapted to changing socio-historical conditions. Nevertheless, one should not misread such a caveat as saying that social theory has a definite expiry date, as many scholars presume. Although historical conditions have certainly changed since the World War II era, the mode of power that was identified in classical Critical Theory around that time is still very much in operation today, albeit the new authoritarianisms have changing forms, intensities and localities. This study represents a new way of tying critical analytic categories up with current social realities and calling the "substance" of the present power-order "by name." As Adorno and others have remarked, analytic concepts name social realities that otherwise proceed undetected. So he too, like Marcuse, thought it was best to not mince words.

Gilles Deleuze reminded his readers that it is the business of philosophers to invent (and reconstruct) concepts to capture that essence of a social reality that evades mention and thus thwarts collective efforts at amending its problematicity. And as Orwell too reminded: The richness and detail of social reality is captured in the words we assign to name it, and thus social control depends in part on obfuscating perception of that reality. So, the critique of agonism is a type of *conceptual intervention into the problem of domination* – it seeks to name this reality of domination by entering a new term into the critical discourse. Yes, the term "agon" is not new – this reconstruction and application of it, however, seems to be. There is much merit in developing a conceptual analysis that challenges the positively blinding connotations associated with "competition," "contest," "championship," "winner-loser," "triumph," "heroism," "warriorism," "struggle for survival" and the many other celebrated virtues of agon culture. As you can imagine, the list of concepts within the agonal discourse is quite extensive, and many are familiar to us. How and why has such a unified discourse of power (a grand

hegemonic narrative in the purest sense) evaded critical scrutiny? It must surely have something to do with the ideological effectiveness that the conceptual thematic of competition-contest-conflict that agon culture has on the individual consciousness of the social theorist – that is, how effectively so many have been seduced into thinking that agonistic competition is dialectically profound and associated with transcendence or play, or democratic struggle, or just a simple fact of human nature, or even essential to all social orders and life itself. Interrogating these deeply rooted ideological justifications and “beliefs guarded against reflection” will form the hermeneutic basis of this critique.

The concept of the agon is thus the single most exacting way of uniting the expressions of power that contribute to the problem of domination in the world today. All social formations are justified and upheld by particular forms of knowledge, which are thus *ideological*. The principal ideology that upholds the order of domination is the one based on the positive meanings associated with conflict and its many variations: rivalry, contest, competition, championship, warriorism, conquest, and so on. All of these ideals work to justify and maintain the existing order of domination. From the violation of human rights to the perpetuation of war, misery, injustice, including the domination of nature and the destruction of the ecology, we are confronted with an operating rationality that is accompanied by a cultural logic that supports the order of domination. Both of these conflicted tendencies were identified in the seminal critique of domination, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, wherein Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) made the connection between the rational impulse towards human emancipation that became coterminous with the rational domination of nature. Their conception of domination includes considerations of human motivation such as the subjective identification with power and those individuals who hold power, and also the problems associated with the otherwise unproblematized cultural values such as “sacrifice” – which really means death, but in popular, religious and most other senses is somehow read as a positive thing, as a gift one gives, rather than an act of reified self-destruction. And that is precisely what agonism is all about – the valorization of the mode of destruction. This valorization takes place through the exaltation of the ideology of *competition*, which is arguably the dominant cultural value system in our society.

Competition is the primary ideology of neo-liberal capitalism. As an ideology it is a form of “false knowledge,” meaning it is deceptive and does not produce the promised result of emancipation, economic, personal or otherwise. Competition for resources is no more natural than the equitable distribution of resources – both scenarios are social constructions – it is up to humans to choose which type of world to build. As an operating principle agonistic competition as an equitable selective mechanism is a mythic order. Free competition does not exist in corporate monopoly capitalism in which concentrations of economic power dominate the entire globalization project. “Freedom through competition” and “exaltation of the self through the manipulation/destruction of the other” – these imperatives inform the grand mythology of agon culture. And as Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) indicated, no society can resist being processed by its own mythology.

I want to emphasize a point made in this project, lest it be criticized for being too negative, not hopeful enough, for having a model of power that leaves no room for agency, and other such puerile reactions to the observations of critical theory: The point is that although violence is a formidable element in the strategy of domination it does not always triumph, and that life lives on and life prevails over death. Humans do indeed struggle against the totality of power and against their domination – this is proved every day in so many places around the world and is the real essence of *culture as preservation*. This does not mean that all is well in the end. The problem of domination still remains the central focus of social critique, and there are far too many sites of suffering and human rights violations that need to be brought into focus and ameliorated, and so critical analysis must continue.

The quality and experience of human life is necessarily transformed by the presence of domination and death, and by the manner in which people come to terms with these. Death, which is feared, is precisely that which gets exalted in the reified consciousness of agon culture. In agon culture there are multiple

forms of reification. These arise from the primordial fear of death, which the reified consciousness reacts to by honouring it and exalting it in cultural forms from the cult of the warrior hero to vampire eroticism. The cultural condition of mass reification represents the celebration and hence the victory of death in life. This has consequences in the ways we live our lives and are able to make sense of things. Life against death is the ruling binarism that underpins all discourses of power – how this gets formulated culturally is the problem at hand. What at first seems an ontological problem must in the end be reformulated as a phenomenological one concerning the nature of human consciousness formulated in the midst of social domination. And if we are to uphold the preservative essence of culture against domination, then it makes no sense to honour conflict and death while trying to preserve life.

~Claudio Colaguori
Toronto
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