

# 9

## Is sociology a science of man? A dispute

THEODOR W. ADORNO & ARNOLD GEHLEN

Towards the end of the following conversation, Theodor Adorno presses Arnold Gehlen to discuss the important role of institutions in his sociology, indicating that it was one of the reasons Adorno wanted to enter into discussion with him. That Adorno felt compelled to engage with Gehlen's concept of the institution, on public radio, highlights how seriously he took the implications of Gehlen's thought, which he wanted both to distance himself from and to criticize. This was particularly pressing for Adorno given many of the premisses and diagnoses shared between himself and Gehlen that become apparent earlier on in the conversation. Yet these similarities – of which some are fundamental, others more superficial – betray the deep fault lines that separate Adorno's and Gehlen's positions both internally to sociological method and outside of it. It is here that the question of an anthropological concept of 'man', which gives the debate its overall frame, becomes central.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. The conversation was recorded by Südwestfunk and broadcast by SFB (Sender Freies Berlin) on 3 February 1965. It was broadcast a second time by Norddeutschen Rundfunk (NDR) on its regional channel on 21 March 1965. The transcription translated here was published in Friedemann Grenz, *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen: Auflösung einiger Deutungsprobleme*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1974.

**GEHLEN** Is sociology a science of man?<sup>2</sup> Well, of course we both know that there is also a sociology of animals with which neither of us is concerned.

**ADORNO** I even less than you.

**GEHLEN** So we must have had a certain idea in choosing this exact formulation. Now, let's start our conversation and I can ask you to comment.

**ADORNO** Yes, that sociology deals with 'man' – that is, with socialized man – goes without saying. I had something far more specific in mind when I suggested this formulation. Namely, whether the essential moments of society and, above all, the critical moments in society that you, as well as I, have been noticing for a long time now can be traced back to the essence of man [*Wesen des Menschens*] or whether they are rooted essentially in relations, which – although somehow originally made by human beings – have developed an independence of their own. Now, I know that we also have largely similar views with respect to the process of their becoming independent [*Verselbständigung*], but I believe one can only fruitfully work out differences if one also has a certain stock of common ground, and perhaps it would not be a bad thing if we first of all wanted to emphasize precisely those commonalities, so that the differences and the reasons for them can be drawn out.

---

2. *Translator's note.* The word *Mensch(en)* in German can mean both 'man' and 'human'/'human being', a difference that is both subtle and rarely clearly delineated in the course of this discussion. Given one of the key aspects of Adorno and Gehlen's conversation is nonetheless the ambiguity of the expression *Mensch*, I have at the outset retained the conventional 'man', since it is less tied to the notion of the 'human species' and thus open to more speculative possibilities and determinations – despite its gender-exclusive ideological connotations. On occasion, I have marked this usage by inverted commas; on others I have reverted to the expression 'human being' or 'human' where its specific use is more obvious; sometimes, I have opted for 'men and women' where the single term 'men' might previously have been used; at other times, especially in the context of the final section, I have preferred the gender-neutral 'people'.

**GEHLEN** Yes, Mr Adorno, that is a large undertaking. And I would like to approach it step by step. First of all with the question: so you would not, as Max Weber did at the time, regard sociology as an essentially cultural science or science of culture [*kulturelle Wissenschaft oder Kulturwissenschaft*], but rather as an anthropological science?

**ADORNO** No, not at all.

**GEHLEN** Not at all.

**ADORNO** Not at all, on the contrary. I would say that sociology is essentially a science that refers to or involves cultural moments and is not something that can be reduced to the 'essence of man', to anthropology. According to the tenor of your books, with which I am very familiar, one would have expected that you stand for anthropology in an extended sense, and I do not. But I would like to say straight away – so that we do not argue about things that we do not need to argue about – that we agree from the outset with one another regarding one essential point: namely, that there exists – and I may quote you on this – 'no pre-cultural human nature [*menschliche Natur*]'. I would say, though, that it lies in this: that there cannot be sociology as a pure anthropology – that is, as a science of human beings – nor as a science of relations that have become independent of men and women.

**GEHLEN** Okay, fine. I would think that the expression 'man' is also not unambiguous.

**ADORNO** God no.

**GEHLEN** So we have to give listeners who want to follow our conversation an idea of the way in which we work sociologically. And here, first of all, I believe there is indeed this difficulty: that many of our basic concepts have, in the course of time, become

vague. Now, as far as it concerns man, it just came to me that a colleague of ours said in his book on technology that there is today a 'myth of man' [*Mythos Mensch*], and this myth is a natural secretion of technological progress.

**ADORNO** Yes. I have said something quite similar, only formulated more viciously, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*; far more viciously, for I said that, today, man is the ideology for inhumanity. That's not so different in substance, only far more vicious.

**GEHLEN** Exactly. We want to distance ourselves from that.

**ADORNO** So, from the 'myth of man', from the reverent ogling or eye-batting that arises when one simply says 'everything depends on man', we want to distance ourselves from that at the outset.

**GEHLEN** Exactly. It would therefore be a matter of science, so to speak, bringing reason – knowledge [*Kenntnis*] and reason, perhaps also experience – into our responsibility for man, in so far as we have a responsibility.

**ADORNO** Yes, but I believe we should attempt here to make the concept of man a little more precise compared to the naive outlook. I completely share your view that one must be constantly cautious about using this concept of man in an irresponsible and vague manner. And I would thus say: first of all, 'man' is a historical being [*Wesen*], namely a being that is formed by historical conditions and historical relations to an infinitely greater extent than the naive idea accepts, which is satisfied, so to speak, with human beings having not changed all that much in their physiological constitution over very long periods of time.

**GEHLEN** I agree, Mr Adorno. When you look at human beings, one has the feeling that history never passes.

**ADORNO** Yes. But in actuality the human being, right down to the innermost core of their psyche, is formed by history, and that means essentially by society.

**GEHLEN** Precisely. And it never goes away, so to speak.

**ADORNO** And I believe this to be the basis, this presupposition, therefore, of the actual historical nature of 'man', right down to the innermost categories, which is the presupposition of what we, in general, want to discuss.

**GEHLEN** Now we are getting closer. Would you now concede that culture as well as history – and therefore also 'man' – is open, so to speak, to the future?

**ADORNO** Yes. I mean, to say what man is is absolutely impossible. If biologists are right – that it is precisely characteristic of the human to be itself open and not defined by a determined field [*Umkreis*] of objects of action, then it also lies in this openness that we cannot at all foresee what will become of the human. And that applies to both sides, including the negative. I recall Valéry's statement that inhumanity still has a great future.

**GEHLEN** Yes, that also lies within the problem. Now that we have agreed on this, would you also recognize a thesis that I am quite happy to represent, namely that with industrial culture – which is of course a broad concept of facts – a new unfolding of human possibilities, let us say, has entered into appearance, the likes of which has not been seen before?

### **Technology, exchange relations and progress**

**ADORNO** Well, I would agree with you that something has occurred in culture, which you now call industrial culture, that had previously not existed in this way and that you essentially determine – and, incidentally, very similarly to the way I would too – through the concept of the domination of nature and through the connection of technology to science. But perhaps I may note something here that sounds pedantic but that is perhaps not without merit for our discussion: I would not, for my part, use the expression ‘industrial society’, which is very popular today.

**GEHLEN** What would you say then?

**ADORNO** Well, let’s see. I would first of all like to say: in this concept two moments are interlocked which, although they have a lot to do with each another, cannot simply be equated. First: the development of technology; that is, the unfolding of the human productive forces that have been objectified in technology. Technology is, as has been said, an extended arm of ‘man’. But likewise present in industrial society is the moment of the relations of social production: that is, in the whole Western world it is a matter of exchange relations, and in the Eastern world in this case...

**GEHLEN** Yes, but Mr Adorno that is what one means when one says industrial society.

**ADORNO** Yes, but if one does not separate these moments – and perhaps I may say this by way of explanation – if one does not separate these moments – productive forces and relations of production – there easily exists the danger to which Max Weber, of whom you spoke earlier, already succumbed: namely, that one predicates things of something relatively abstract like ‘technical

rationality' – burdens it with things that, in actuality, do not lie as much in the rationality [*Ratio*] itself as in the peculiar constellation that rules between this rationality and a so-called exchange society.

**GEHLEN** Mr Adorno, you are now proposing a closer determination of the concept of industrial society and we do not want to lose sight of the new kinds of human phenomena that have emerged in the process.

**ADORNO** We are in complete agreement on that.

**GEHLEN** I would like to explore the space where we agree and where we do not. We can then argue about the other things. I would for now only say the following: with the means of modern society, means of transportation, with the means of information, with the technological means of every kind, it is the case today that, for the first time, humanity meets itself head on, gets to know itself through getting to know each other, and in its full scope. And so there are no more isolatable events.

**ADORNO** Sure. However, as an irrepressible sociologist, I do have some doubts as to whether humanity really meets itself to its full extent. I must say that it always amazes me, when I go to the opera, that there is not the slightest restriction on the exchange between countesses and Gypsies, for example. I do not want to say that the world resembles the opera. If one knows American society somewhat – and this is as familiar to you as it is to me, of course – selection mechanisms already exist that make it impossible for people, at least in the upper classes of society, to interact at all with those who do not roughly belong to their income group. So, I don't know, you are talking about the phenomenon of the public [*Öffentlichkeit*]...

**GEHLEN** No, not that either.

**ADORNO** Good, then please explain.

**GEHLEN** I did not want to talk about the phenomenon of the public, about the fact – isn't it the case? – that today one can read about everyone, about Koreans and Russians and so on. I am not speaking about class distinctions either. I am speaking rather about the fact that – take an entity like the UN – that all concrete societies – European, Asian, African – not only enter into commodity contact, not only into political contact; they also enter into intellectual [*geistige*] and physical contact. That is dramatic enough in America, with respect to the 'Negro question'. I think that the dismantling of borders is happening on a broad front.

**ADORNO** So you mean the phenomenon of 'one world' [*English in original*].

**GEHLEN** Exactly. And this will allow for certain experiences about human beings to be had.

**ADORNO** Yes, sure.

**GEHLEN** It's also not that simple with the 'one world'. There are also trap doors.

**ADORNO** You could say that.

**GEHLEN** Yes, that's what I wanted to hear. This brings me, by the way, to a second thought: progress [*Fortschritt*]. I think we can agree that the 'one world' is – compared to closed-off, earlier cultures that did not know, or ignored, one another – for the first-time [*Erstmaligkeit*],<sup>3</sup> and in a certain sense, also a step

---

3. *Translator's note.* *Erstmaligkeit* is translated here with the somewhat clumsy 'for the first time' (and, later, 'first-timeness'), rather than the more obvious 'novelty', because Gehlen seems to be placing emphasis on the idea of something as 'first', rather than something being 'new', which would imply some relation to the 'old'.



forward [*Fortschritt*]. ‘Man’s’ ability to live at least seems more favourable now...

**ADORNO** You are speaking of the concept of technological progress [*technischen Fortschrittsbegriff*]. According to the state of the technical productive forces, especially if one were to include the agriculture sector in earnest, there would be no hunger.

**GEHLEN** And I recently said: ‘Today, progress accomplishes itself by itself.’ I caused some offence with this. There were people who did not want to admit that. What do you think of this proposition?

**ADORNO** Well, the interests of self-preservation of particular groups always compel them thereby to introduce innovations in production, or otherwise practise certain ways of behaving [*Verhaltensweise*] which, in some way, benefit the whole, even if they do not at all want it. Incidentally, this was always the case in the history of bourgeois society.

**GEHLEN** That was the meaning of the statement. But it also has another meaning that aims somewhat further. What do I mean when I say ‘progress accomplishes itself by itself’? Progress, what does it mean? It means that the material provisions of life and intellectual life-stimuli [*geistigen Lebensreize*] are becoming ever more accessible to more and more people. And I believe that this process runs almost automatically. You can’t work in a profession today without being pushed to the front where either [the material provisions or intellectual life-stimuli] are produced, with the tendency: always more, and for more and more.

**ADORNO** You spoke earlier of the trap doors in ‘one world’; progress certainly also has trap doors. So, if I may give an example...

**GEHLEN** Yes, please.

**ADORNO** You say that the possibility of stimuli – and that would necessarily mean also, of differentiation – is becoming accessible to more and more people.

**GEHLEN** Intellectual.

**ADORNO** Well, one would name them so-called educational opportunities.

**GEHLEN** Quite so.

**ADORNO** But when one looks at social reality, however, the countless mechanisms which preform [*präformieren*] men and women – that is, the entire culture industry in its broadest scope – the innumerable, more or less (how to say?) levelling ideologies that are bandied about, no longer make it at all possible for men and women to experience the countless things that approach them.

**GEHLEN** Yes, exactly.

**ADORNO** One can listen to radical modern music on the radio, but in the face of the overwhelming ideology, let's say, which stands behind the pop music industry and insists that it is an important event when the singer Iselpiesel sings 'Roses in Hawaii' – who then, amongst the barrage [*Trommelfeuer*] of these things, is at all capable of taking in truly progressive music, with its extraordinarily differentiated and individualized and, at the same time, spiritualized [*vergeistigten*] stimuli?

**GEHLEN** Yes, Mr Adorno, I cannot contribute when it comes to music...

**ADORNO** Then let's stay with painting.

**GEHLEN** When it comes to music, I'm missing a gyrus [*Hirnwinding*]. But in literature, for example, avant-garde circles are also pretty good at banging the drum [*Trommel*].

**ADORNO** Yes, they hit sometimes, perhaps ...

**GEHLEN** Well, they do bang around.

**ADORNO** ... but this 'around' is then not so awful. I don't think we should talk about it too much because it takes us a little bit away from our subject. But I would say that compared to the illustrated novel and the way of shaping consciousness, Beckett's plays do not get 'around' in the same way. This I would say in all modesty.

**GEHLEN** That's for sure.

**ADORNO** I mean, one needs to limit this.

**GEHLEN** Yes. But, generally, would you also say that the direction of progress or the trend of progress has an automatic character. I mean, they are also all...

**ADORNO** But perhaps it is therefore not real progress at all, precisely because it has an automatic character. There is a wonderful sentence of Kafka's: 'Believing in progress does not mean believing that any progress has yet been made.'<sup>4</sup> I believe that we could even agree on this, that progress – and Benjamin was probably the first to formulate this in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – in so far as one can speak of such a progress up to

---

4. *Translator's note.* It is unclear precisely which passage in Kafka Adorno is referring to. He could, however, be paraphrasing Aphorism 48 from Kafka's *Züran Aphorisms*, which reads in full: 'An Fortschritt glauben heißt nicht glauben, daß ein Fortschritt schon geschehen ist. Das wäre kein Glauben.' (To believe in progress doesn't mean to believe that progress has already occurred. That would not be belief.)

today, is essentially a progress in the techniques of the domination of nature and in the knowledges of mastering nature. This would mean that progress is a particular progress, if you will, which in no way means, however, that humanity has thereby come to empower itself [*mächtig*], that humanity has come of age [*mündig*]. And progress would only begin at the point where this maturity [*Mündigkeit*], where humanity, one could say, constitutes itself as a complete subject [*Gesamtsubjekt*], instead of remaining, despite the growth of these arts and accomplishments, in a state of blindness; handed over, that is, to blind, anonymous processes of which humanity itself is not conscious. And that is precisely the reason why I said earlier, somewhat paradoxically, that progress accomplishes itself automatically; that is, men are blindly seized by progress as technological-scientific progress, without at all constituting themselves properly as subjects and thereby becoming empowered. That is probably the reason why 'progress' is not at all an actual one; that is, it is coupled in every second with the possibility of total catastrophe.

**GEHLEN** Okay, wait a minute. We do not want to dramatize things. One thing struck me...

**ADORNO** I remind you of the days we were in Münster together, where we really did not know what would happen in the next moment.

**GEHLEN** Yes, yes. One thing struck me: all nations and continents seem to be in agreement on the desirability of progress. That is to say, there are today certain currencies valid from New York to Beijing: equality, development, progress. I believe, Mr Adorno, that this is also the first time that such formulas of faith have no opposition to each other – that there are no enemies. The Greeks distinguished themselves from the barbarians, the Christians from the pagans, the enlighteners from the

feudals. But all are for equality, all are for progress, all are for development.

**ADORNO** Yes, and even if one attempts a critique of any categories connected to them, one has thereby already gone too far on the ground of these omnipresent categories.

**GEHLEN** Yes, but that's a strange thing, isn't it?

**ADORNO** It's an extremely odd thing.

**GEHLEN** So, above the table everyone is eating from the same bowl, and below the table everyone is kicking each other.

**ADORNO** You could say that, yes. May I come back to one point, Mr Gehlen, that I already touched on earlier and from which we have completely strayed again – in connection with this whole complex of industrial society, productive forces, relations of production. In your books you have repeatedly pointed to the phenomenon of deforming [*Entformung*]; that is, to the phenomenon that the qualitative moments within society – that is, simply the qualitative differences; I am not talking of value judgement – the qualitative moments are being ground down in the face of progressive quantification. That has been repeatedly observed.

**GEHLEN** I learned that from Max Scheler. Scheler's work is titled *Man in the Age of Equalization* (*Der Mensch im Zeitalter des Ausgleichs*).

**ADORNO** *Man in the Age of Equalization*, that's what it was called, yes. Now, I would say that this tendency does not lie in technology as such or in science as such, but rather lies essentially in a specifically social principle, a principle connected to the order of the relations of society: namely, the principle of exchange

[*Tauschprinzip*]. The universal principle of exchange: this is what dominates the world, at least our world, the Western world, today to an unprecedented extent. This principle of exchange cuts off the qualities, the specific characteristics of the goods to be exchanged, and thus also the specific forms of labour of the producers and the specific needs of those who receive them. This moment of levelling lies therein. What I mean, if I may, as a thought experiment: if one imagines a society in which nothing was exchanged – that is, humans no longer received goods through the market, but they are rather produced according to the needs of humans – then this moment of absolute equalization [*Vergleichlichkeit*], and with it the levelling moment, would also fall away and one could imagine that the ‘qualitative’ – and with it all the moments of form – that appears to be washed away by present society would reproduce and reconstitute themselves on a higher level. I would therefore say: ‘deforming’ is much more – if I may put it quite bluntly – a phenomenon of bourgeois society than a phenomenon that is, in itself, necessarily to be equated with industry qua advancing technology. That is the reason why I insist, in a slightly petty way, on this difference. For it has to do with something serious here.

**GEHLEN** That’s a bold claim you are making. For me – you know that I consider myself an empiricist – what you are saying is, first of all, metaphysics. I will ask you a counter-question: don’t you believe, then, that this pipe is so timeworn that it will burst under the fermentation of what is now coming our way?

**ADORNO** No, I do not believe so. I do not know if the possibilities are not being buried today by the violence of what is coming our way. I would certainly assume that possibility. I do not believe that here I am being more optimistic than you. But I would nevertheless say: exactly this image of a world no longer levelled through

exchange, this image seems to me to be quite accomplishable, if one first of all makes theoretically clear (and we are theorists and cannot avoid thinking, no matter how close we are to the empirical) such distinctions as, for example, those phenomena that are only *relatively* related to technology like industrialism and the principle of exchange. After all, an endless amount of things are pinned on either mere forms, such as the form of administration, or on what I call the technological veil – that is, the covering over of social relations by technology, which in actuality are still grounded, now as ever, in social relations – and I am old-fashioned enough to believe that much more can be made of a critique of society than a critique of technology as technics [*Kritik der Technik als Technik*]. Technology as a ‘technics’ is neither good nor evil; it is probably good. And the things to which one protests in technics loads on it – imposes [*aufnutzt*] on it, one might say if that’s German at all – the moments that are actually due to the one-sided way they are practised in our society.

**GEHLEN** In the East we have, however, societies in which purchase and exchange do not play the role they do here. Do you believe that in China or Russia one is already noticeably further towards the individualization and greater qualification [*Hochqualifizierung*] of the individual than here?

**ADORNO** To pose this question is, of course, pure mockery. Of course that is not the case.

**GEHLEN** I did not mean to mock.

**ADORNO** No, and by God I do not want to defend the dreadful horror that is obviously spreading there. But I would say that the levelling that continues there is proof that the society they are operating there is a pure mockery of the idea [*Idee*] of a society truly liberated according to its substance.

**GEHLEN** Look, I do not want to put myself in the position (as, let's say, a convinced empiricist) of making difficulties for you, of hurling facts at you from below, so to speak – you being in the fortunate position of having a great utopian impulse. I say that without any intention to disparage or even to only doubt; I even envy it, in a certain sense. But at this point I remain hopelessly behind in our conversation.

**ADORNO** I do not know if I am not further behind, because the things I'm registering here are extraordinarily against the spirit of the times. So one can roll the dice.

**GEHLEN** Yes, we can play dice with that. So whoever points to facts today, to naked facts, shocks: just as nudity shocks. That's also risky. Maybe today it's already risky to say how it is; it immediately sounds provocative or cynical. That is a burden I always have to struggle with. But the thesis that if we abolish money, or if we change the relations of production in the direction of complete equality...

**ADORNO** We would have abolished what it is essential to abolish. Complete equality is an indifferent matter. Instead, production should be according to the needs of human beings. Then, indeed in a changed social organization, it would cease that needs are produced by the apparatus in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

**GEHLEN** I see.

**ADORNO** And it is precisely that needs have been produced by this apparatus that results in all these horrendous symptoms of the administered world, the phenomenology of which you and I together have written quite a bit about in our long lives.

---

5. Wenn wir das abschaffen, so wird damit das Wesentliche abgeschafft. Völlige Gleichheit ist gleichgültig. Sondern daß nach den Bedürfnissen der Menschen produziert wird. Dann, allerdings in einer veränderten gesellschaftlichen Organisation, würde es aufhören, daß die Bedürfnisse von der Apparatur überhaupt erst produziert werden.



**GEHLEN** That's precisely what I call this great utopian impulse, which I certainly want to respect, Mr Adorno. But look: when you argue like this, is the 'first-timeness' of our time really being honoured? Or are you not complaining about an old hat?

**ADORNO** Okay, as to the novelty of our time, I would say that (if you don't begrudge me speaking metaphysically again, very metaphysically) the quantity of these phenomena – that is, of bourgeois-industrial rationalization – is beginning to change into a new quality. I would concede that to you. On the other hand, however, I have to say that it is also – if I may express it very flippantly – an old hat. Since there has been something like bourgeois society, whether you read Bacon or even Descartes, this has actually always been contained in it and has only unfolded today to an extraordinarily extreme degree, in that the threat of this principle – namely, the sequestering [*Einziehung*] of the subject by an unleashed technical rationality and all that is connected to it – looms as an immediate possibility. This was always part of the entire structure of this exchange society. In this respect, I would be a little more sceptical than you are, especially with regard to the thesis of the absolute newness [*Neuen*] of what we are experiencing today, and indeed would say, well, when I read an author like [Auguste] Comte, for example, all the elements of this are already there.

**GEHLEN** Exactly. Mr Adorno, that's nice – here we agree again. I would certainly admit that. I would moreover say: industrial culture – you listed some categories at the beginning to define it – is new. It is also, however, already two hundred years old. It is a first [*Erstmalig*] and if it is so, that humanity has stepped up to this podium in the course of the last two hundred years for the first time, then there must be a lot that hangs on it. It is a favourite pastime of mine to search for what is then a

first-time-of-consequence. So, for example, the cold war. I don't think that really existed before. It's an expression that begins as 'dry war' before the First World War in the intermediate state of permanent mutual mobilization.

**ADORNO** Yes.

**GEHLEN** And so something has been conceived there, no?

**ADORNO** Yes.

**GEHLEN** So today there no longer exists a clean divorce of war and peace, which even the Scythians knew.

**ADORNO** ... they no longer exist.

**GEHLEN** So that is a first-time-of-consequence [*Konsequenzerstmaligkeit*]. Or when people ask harmlessly and nicely, 'Is that still art?'...

**ADORNO** Yes.

**GEHLEN** I find the same thing in it: the honouring of a 'first time'. It's never looked like that before, has it? Or the Pope flies to India...

**ADORNO** India.

**GEHLEN** ...because, at least *in cerebro*, one has an idea of inter-connecting religions. These are all first times. And I think the appeal of sociology consists largely in seeing and describing these things, if only because words are lacking, for our words are from the past. We never have the right words for them. We struggle with language and with concepts handed down long ago to describe what ultimately now appears here and was never there before. Would you also accept that?

## Institutions

**ADORNO** I would also accept that. But may I now again come back to what largely motivated me, in any case, for us to meet. That is the position of your sociology – if I may say so; I almost said your philosophy, and I think I could also justify that – on the concept of institutions, which has an extraordinarily central position in your work. Since time is getting on, I believe that we really owe it to our listeners – if only to ensure that they get their money’s worth – to finally get down to the meat. That is to say, now we will spar. We agree that men and women [*Menschen*] today – and I would say to an unprecedented degree – are dependent on institutions, which means here, first and foremost, on the economy, which has been monstrously agglomerated; and secondly on administrations in a comprehensive sense, which themselves partly fuse with the economy and are partly modelled on it. Now I believe – and this is what prompted my specific formulation of the question, and please correct me if I misinterpret you – that you are inclined to principally affirm these institutions as a necessity on the basis of the deficient situation of ‘man’ [*Mangelsituation des Menschen*] and to say: it would not be viable without this superiority of the institutions that have become independent [*verselbständigten*] from men and women – or, as I would say, reified and alienated [*verdinglichten und entfremdeten*]. They relieve men and women, who otherwise would collapse under the weight of all kinds of things they can no longer manage. They give them all sorts of directives and more. Well, in contrast to that, I would say: on the one hand, precisely this power of institutions over men and women is what, in the old language of philosophy, was called heteronomous...

**GEHLEN** Exactly.

**ADORNO** They thus confront human beings as an alien and threatening power, as a kind of fatality they can hardly resist. You are now inclined, if I understand you correctly – there are individual formulations of yours, I can read you some – to accept precisely this kind of fatality as something destinal [*Schicksalhaftes*] and, ultimately, as something which refers back to the nature of the human. And I would say that this fatality itself is due to the fact that human relations and relationships between human beings have become opaque to themselves, and because they are no longer known – namely as relations between human beings – they have taken on this overpowering character as opposed to them. And precisely what you accept here as a necessity – partly pessimistically but also partly *con amore* – would have to be first of all countered by the analysis, the critical analysis of these institutions, and then finally by the question: if these institutions really stand against us as a blind force in the sense of the principle about which you also spoke earlier – that humanity is becoming independent and mature – whether they are not to be changed and replaced by institutions that are perhaps, to take up your terminology, less relieving for men than the institutions today? Institutions which are also not such a terribly oppressive burden that they threaten to bury every individual under them, and ultimately no longer permit anything like the formation [*Bildung*] of a free subject. I believe that this is actually our problem. So, when I ask ‘Is sociology an anthropology?’ I mean to question succinctly whether institutions really are a necessity of human nature, or whether they are the fruit of a historical development, the reasons for which are transparent and which, under certain circumstances, can be changed. This is the very simple question about which I would have liked to tarry with you.

**GEHLEN** Yes, Mr Adorno. I can, however, only answer with a somewhat longer explanation. First of all, I have the impression

that law, marriage, family are what endures [*Bestände sind*] – those institutions essentially connected to man, as well as the economy. These institutions look hugely different in space and time. But it is possible to comprehend them under notions such as ‘family’ and ‘law’, for there are similarities between them. And I would say that they are the essential features of man. But that’s not really the point of your question.

**ADORNO** I wouldn’t agree with that either, by the way. I would say that the differences that these institutions have undergone are so immensely important and central...

**GEHLEN** Well, yes.

**ADORNO** ... that to insist on their invariance is already a bit dangerous.

**GEHLEN** Property would also have to be factored in too, Mr Adorno; it doesn’t help...

**ADORNO** It has certainly always existed. There would also be something similar in a society of abundance, otherwise men would be inevitably poorer. But property would no longer have this independent power [*verselbständigte Gewalt*]...

**GEHLEN** Alright.

**ADORNO** ... that people, in order to be able to have property, in order to be able to live, are made into agents of property.

**GEHLEN** Mr Adorno, I completely agree with you that these fundamental anthropological institutions [*Einrichtungen*] such as family, law, marriage, property and so on, economics, co-economies [*Zusammenwirtschaften*], offer a tremendously

diverse picture in history, and I also cannot foresee that these substances themselves will one day dissolve. They will continue to transform themselves. But, as I say, that's not the question you actually asked...

**ADORNO** No.

**GEHLEN** ... but you ask more: why do I then insist so much on institutions? And that's where I have...

**ADORNO** So that there is no misunderstanding: in a certain way I also insist on them, because I also believe that the supreme power [*Obergewalt*] of institutions over people, at least for the situation today, is the key. It's just that we probably draw different consequences.

**GEHLEN** Yes, yes. Let's see. We have to finally find the point of contention. Perhaps it lies in the fact that I am inclined – like Aristotle, from whom I learned this – to grant a significant role to the aspect of security. I believe that institutions are restraints on humanity's readiness to decay [*Verfallbereitschaft*]. I also believe that institutions protect people from themselves. They certainly also limit freedom. But one sees time and time again that there are revolutionaries.

**ADORNO** You yourself once said of it: 'Institutions are preserving and consuming.'

**GEHLEN** Yes. Preserving and consuming. Exactly. When one thinks not only of people like us, who take their stability into their own hands, so to speak, but of the many people who think 'Oh God, you know, I'm actually searching for an honourable thing to serve', I still consider that as ethics.

**ADORNO** Yes. But that keeps us from knowing how this actuality itself is constituted, such that one can serve it. I think that this formulation is as seductive as it is problematic. Certainly, ethics is nothing other than the attempt to make good on the obligations that the experience of this entangled world places on us. But this obligation can also take the form of adaptation and subordination, which you seem to emphasize more strongly here than what I would emphasize more strongly, namely that in the attempt to take this obligation seriously one attempts to change that which hinders all humans living their own possibility within these given relations and thus realizing the potential [*Potential*] that lies in them.

**GEHLEN** I did not understand that exactly. How do you know what lies undirected [*ungelenkt*],<sup>6</sup> as potential, in humans?

**ADORNO** Well, I do not know positively what this potential is, but I do know from all kinds of partial insights – including scientific ones – that the processes of adaptation to which people are currently subjected amounts to the crippling of people to an indescribable extent; and I think you would also admit this. Let us take, for example, a complex that you have thought about a lot, namely technical aptitude. You tend to say – and Veblen already had the same thesis – that there is something like an ‘instinct of workmanship’ [*in English*], a kind of technological-anthropological instinct. Whether that is the case or not is very difficult for me to decide. But I do know that there are countless people today whose relationship to technology is, if I may express it clinically, neurotic; who are concretely bound to technology,

---

6. *Translator's note.* A *Gelenk* in German refers to a joint or hinge. The use of *ungelenkt* here could thus imply not being ‘connected’ to something, but, in doing so, also not being directed, or governed, by it. Gehlen seems to be asking what (or where) such a potential would lie that wouldn’t always already be adapted or subordinated to institutional arrangements.

to all possible means of controlling life, since purposes – namely the fulfilment of their own lives and their own living needs – are largely denied to them. And I would say that the psychological observation of all the countless defective people with whom one deals (and the defect has become, I would almost say, the norm today) alone justifies saying that the human potentialities are being stunted and suppressed by institutions to an unprecedented extent.

**GEHLEN** I don't believe that. It's not true, we are both about the same age and we have all now experienced four forms of government, three revolutions and two world wars.

**ADORNO** Yes.

**GEHLEN** During this time a tremendous number of institutions have been shredded apart and dismantled. The result is a general inner insecurity and what I take to be 'subjectivisms with a minus sign' [*Subjektivismen mit einem Minuszeichen*]. I mean the inner surge. That is now becoming loud, that is the public. And opposed to that I have a therapeutic point of view. I am in favour – and now I'll use the word – of conserving what is still left of institutions. And within them everyone can indeed see from their own position that things improve here and there, but one cannot begin with that. If we wanted to try to reform the universities, for example, we would first have to serve there for a few decades in order to know where the sick positions are.

**ADORNO** We've been doing it long enough...

**GEHLEN** But one cannot say that the moment one receives their *venia legendi* one can initiate university reform programmes. And that's how it is in all areas: one first has to go in and swallow



quite a lot. In every institution there is much of what you call unfreedom and bondage [*Verknechtung*]. And then, after a while, one can see that one just has to keep pushing. You see, what is sought is an honourable cause that can be served. The difficulty is that we cannot say bluntly that it's this or that.

**ADORNO** I would concede that too. I just mean that the uncertainty is not so terribly far off. One says that often. They are so against clichés and against bland *convenus*. I would therefore say: the world in which there is nothing which one can hold on to, as Brecht says, is that also then not largely a myth? Actually, I observe in general that people move far too exactly along the predetermined paths, that they offer far too little resistance at all, and that, as a result, they are not so terribly unsure of reality. They have a certain real fear, which I could describe to you precisely: first, it is connected with the latent catastrophe which people all unconsciously know about; and then it is connected to the fact that within present economic conditions people are fundamentally superfluous to the preservation of their own society, and that we all know, deep down, we are potentially unemployed and being drip-fed – that is to say: it all runs without us. I think these are the greatest real reasons for this fear. But with the insecurity in an allegedly deformed [*entformten*] world...

**GEHLEN** Does the concept of fear, then, touch on the issue?

**ADORNO** Not 'fear' in the sense of a metaphysical state of mind, as with Heidegger, but rather fear in the sense that is not articulated consciously, but that refers to these tangible things, such as, first, the catastrophe, and second, each individual's replaceability [*Ersetzbarkeit*] and ability to be abolished [*Abschaffbarkeit*]. For in a functional society, in which people are reduced to their functions, everyone is also dispensable: what has a function can also

be replaced, and only the functionless could at all be irreplaceable. People know that very well.

**GEHLEN** That's a horrible thought that you are raising here, Mr Adorno. I first saw it in Hannah Arendt, this formula of the 'superfluity of man'. It is a ground that one hardly dares to tread...

**ADORNO** It is, however, also an illusion, which consists in the fact that people today are essentially appendages of machinery and not subjects of their own power. I want nothing other than that the world should be arranged in such a way that people are not its superfluous appendages, but – in God's name – that things are there for the wants of human beings and not human beings for the wants of the things that they themselves have made. And the fact that they have made it themselves, that the institutions ultimately point back to human beings themselves – that is, for me in any case, a very small consolation.

**GEHLEN** Yes, the child hiding behind the mother's apron is at the same time afraid and has the minimal or optimal security that the situation offers. Mr Adorno, you see here the problem of maturity once again, of course. Do you really believe that we should impose on everyone the burden of these fundamental problems – the effort of reflection, as such a towering and deeply affecting mass of existential mistakes [*Lebensirrtürmen*], which we would have to go through only because we tried to swim free? I should be very interested to know your views on this.

**ADORNO** I can give you a simple answer: yes! I have an image of objective happiness and objective despair, and I would say that for as long as people are unencumbered [*entlasten*] as they are now, and are not expected to take on full responsibility and full

self-determination, then for just as long their welfare and happiness in this world will be an illusion. And it will be an illusion that will one day burst. And when it bursts it will have dreadful consequences.

**GEHLEN** We have reached the exact point where you say 'yes' and I say 'no', or the other way around; where I would say that everything one that knows about human beings, since the beginning up until today, would indicate that your standpoint is an anthropological-utopian one, if also a lavish, indeed magnificent standpoint...

**ADORNO** It's not so frightfully utopian at all, but I would first of all say to that: the difficulties because of which, according to your theory, people are pushed towards seeking out relief [*Entlastungen*] – which I do not deny... – you know that I have completely independent of you and in a very different context come across the concept of relief myself, in aesthetic contexts. Interestingly, I am a critic of relief while you are a proponent of relief: the distress that drives people to seek out such forms of relief is precisely the distress that is put on them by the institutions – that is, from the arrangement [*Einrichtungen*] of the world that is alien to them and omnipotent over them. So, in a sense, it is like this: first they are chased away by the mother, sent away, out into the cold, and are under horrific pressure, and then, as a result, they flee behind the skirts of the very same mother, namely the society that chased them away. And that seems to me to be an ur-phenomenon of anthropology today, that people flee precisely to the power that is causing them the harm [*Unheil*] they are suffering from. Depth psychology even has an expression for this: it is called 'identification with the aggressor'. What seems to me – if you will allow me to put it this way – what appears to me to be the danger in your position, in which, God knows, I

cannot ignore the undercurrent of a deep despair, is this: I fear that you sometimes surrender yourself to this identification with the aggressor out of a kind of – yes, forgive me – metaphysical despair. That is to say, you theoretically identify yourself with the very power that you yourself, like all of us, fear; but in doing so you also side with a whole series of things, which I think – and which you would probably also think – are nevertheless tied to the disaster [*Unheil*] in a profound way.

**GEHLEN** Mr Adorno, we are now running out of time and have reached the end of our discussion. We cannot continue it any further.

**ADORNO** No, we can't...

**GEHLEN** But I would like to make a counter-accusation. Although I have the feeling that we are in agreement on certain profound premisses, I have the impression that it is dangerous, and that you have the inclination, to make men dissatisfied with the little that still remains in their hands within this whole state of catastrophe.

**ADORNO** Well, then I would really like to quote Grabbe's sentence in response: 'For nothing but despair can save us.'

TRANSLATED BY DANIEL GOTTLIEB