

CHRISTINE LEMKE & JAN TIMME

Fish in Water

Since the all-embracing distributive machinery of highly-concentrated industry has superseded the sphere of circulation, the latter has begun a strange post-existence. As the professions of the middle-man lose their economic basis, the private lives of countless people are becoming those of agents and go-betweens; indeed the entire private domain is being engulfed by a mysterious activity that bears all the features of commercial life without there being actually any business to transact. All these nervous people, from the unemployed to the celebrity liable at any moment to incur the wrath of those whose investment he represents, believe that only by empathy, assiduity, serviceability, arts and dodges, by tradesmen's qualities, can they ingratiate themselves with the executive they imagine omnipresent, and soon there is no relationship that is not seen as a 'connection', no impulse not first censored as to whether it deviates from the acceptable. The concept of connections, a category of mediation and circulation, never flourished best in the sphere of circulation proper, the market, but in closed and monopolistic hierarchies. Now that the whole of society is becoming hierarchical, these murky connections are spreading wherever there used still to be an appearance of freedom. The irrationality of the system is expressed scarcely less clearly in the parasitic psychology of the individual than in his economic fate. Earlier, when something like the maligned bourgeois division between professional and private life still existed – a division whose passing one almost now regrets – anyone who pursued practical aims in the private sphere was eyed mistrustfully as a mannerless intruder. Today it is seen as arrogant, alien and improper to engage in private activity without pursuing any purpose. Not to be 'after' something is almost suspect: no help



to others in the rat-race is acknowledged unless legitimized by counter-claims. Countless people are making, from the aftermath of the liquidation of professions, their profession. They are the nice folk, the good mixers liked by all, the just, humanely excusing all meanness and scrupulously proscribing any non-standardized impulses as sentimental. Indispensable for their knowledge of all the channels and plug-holes of power, they anticipate its most secret judgements and live by adroitly propagating them. They are found in all political camps, even where the rejection of the system is taken for granted, and has thereby produced a slack and cunning conformism of its own. Often they win sympathy by a certain good-naturedness, a kindly interest in other people's lives: selflessness as speculation. They are clever, witty, full of sensitive reactions: they have refurbished the old tradesman's mentality with the day before yesterday's psychological discoveries. They are capable of everything, even love, yet always faithlessly. They deceive, not by instinct, but on principle, valuing even themselves as a profit begrudged to anyone else. To intellect they are bound both by affinity and hatred: they are a temptation for the thoughtful, but also their worst enemies. For it is they who subtly take over and ruin the last retreats of resistance, the hours still exempt from the demands of machinery. Their belated individualism poisons what little is left of the individual.

"Fish in Water", *Minima Moralia – Reflections on a Damaged Life*, Th. W. Adorno, 1944/1951