In the previous chapter I engaged with the tradition of dialectics by considering the speculative nature of a range of different philosophies. What I tried to show is that dialectics is not, as is sometimes claimed, a method aiming to produce a universal, even totalitarian, synthesis. Instead, dialectics is, for me, a movement between negativity and positivity that describes the impossibility of social organization. Hence, dialectics can be connected to the question of politics. That is, as dialectics cannot produce a final synthesis, the question of social organization remains open. It is precisely this openness that describes the political event. In the next two chapters I will problematize this insight by discussing a range of philosophies in much more detail. While this chapter, Chapter 3, will consider philosophies that can be associated with a German pre-Second-World-War tradition of thought, Chapter 4 will engage with some French post-war philosophies.

There is one concept that features in the writings of all three German writers that I am concerned with in this chapter, Benjamin, Adorno and Heidegger. All of them were interested in the concept of destruction, which is probably not a coincidence as all three had their main writing periods in a time of war and destruction in the first half of the 20th century. As hopefully becomes apparent, there are similarities, but also important differences, in the way these writers understand the movement between negativity and positivity that characterizes destruction. What I aim to show in this chapter is that for all three philosophers destruction is not simply a negativity that eradicates history and tradition; instead, it is a negative movement that seeks an affirmation – a new experience and a new life. As I will show, it is precisely this movement between negativity and positivity that describes the political event.

Adorno’s response to Heidegger

For Adorno, philosophy should not simply be something positive and affirmative. For him, in order for philosophy to be philosophy, it has to
envisage its own liquidation, or destruction: ‘each philosophy, which today is not concerned with securing the existing mental and social conditions but with truth, is faced with the problem of a liquidation of philosophy itself’ (AGS 1, p. 331). What Adorno poses to us is the notion that philosophy can only exist by liquidating itself: the being of philosophy comes through its non-being. For Adorno, the positivity of philosophy describes itself in contemporary modes of disciplinary knowledge production, which have turned philosophy into an apparatus based on a logic of positioning thought within formal categories.

Let us think, for example, of analytical philosophy, which, according to Adorno, is ‘learnable and reproducible by robots’ (AGS 6, p. 40), and which, in his view, has attained a monopoly position in Anglo-American countries (AGS 10/2, p. 462). Such a philosophy assumes reality to be a historical order that can be positively measured and analyzed. In his view, positivism, as the name suggests, confirms the positive; it positions social relations and contemporary modes of being inside a grid of predefined knowledge, which itself is never questioned. According to Adorno, positivism’s brother is pragmatism, which tries to eternalize the here and now by basing all its analytical power on existing relations to make them consumable and practicable. For Adorno, pragmatism, which aims at the production of a ‘reasonable and responsible mankind, remains in the spell of the disaster without a theory being capable of thinking the whole in its untruth’ (AGS 10/2, p. 470).

Adorno, then, is deeply troubled by the fact that contemporary philosophy seems merely another scientific discipline, whose knowledge production is institutionalized and made practicable for the mundane purposes of existing social reality. For Adorno, philosophy, as a formal logic of positioning, a philosophy that is only practiced to reproduce an institutional positivity, is bankrupt and corrupt, because it exists only for itself. If, in Adorno’s view, philosophy wants to be relevant in relation to social reality, its task has to be one of a destruction of its own positivity; for him, philosophy needs to be understood and practiced as ‘negative dialectics.’ Philosophy as ‘negative dialectics’ would continuously negate or destruct itself in order to expose its own antagonisms. For him, only this movement of destructive discontinuity can prevent philosophy from celebrating the positive, continuous order of history.

At first sight Adorno’s philosophy look similar to what Heidegger poses to us in Being and Time, which he describes as the destruction of Western metaphysics. Here, too, destruction must not be understood simply as the negativity of doing away with a philosophical tradition. ‘On the contrary, it should stake out the positive possibilities of the tradition, and that always means to fix its boundaries…. The destructuring is not related negatively to the past: its criticism concerns “today” and the dominant way we treat the history of ontology…. However, the destructuring does not wish