It is less recognized than it should be that Theodor Adorno's key noncategory of the Bilderverbot, or ban on images, owes as much to overturning Sigmund Freud's argument concerning idolatry as it does to the biblical ban on images. Of course, both bounce their thoughts off the second commandment of Exod 20 (and Deut 5). Yet Freud's interpretation runs the risk of replicating precisely what the ban seeks to overcome, for the abstraction he espies in the ban is precisely the move that reinstalls idolatry. For this reason, Adorno seeks to deploy the ban on images in a way that blocks the possibility of any form of idolatry. Not only am I interested in the way the arguments of Freud and Adorno unfold, but also I am vitally concerned with the political implications of Adorno's development of what may be called political iconoclasm. What does it mean to engage in a process that cuts down any possibility of reification in a system—capitalism—for which reification is its very lifeblood?

The following argument has two stages, beginning with Freud's arresting argument concerning the ban on images in *Moses and Monotheism*. This enables me to step back and ask what is going on with the ban on images in the biblical text itself, and so I argue that it constitutes a defense mechanism to block the critique of idolatry. Second, I pick up a line that has been taken less commonly, namely, from Freud to Adorno. The latter famously sought common ground between Marxism, Nietzsche, and psychoanalysis, although his psychoanalytic forays have not stood well the test of time—except for one item, the ban on images, the Bilderverbot that became a leitmotif of his philosophy. However, these are not merely arcane concerns of philosophy, for they have significant ramifications for any viable politics in our day and age. So I focus on what may be called the "political iconoclasm" of Adorno's deployment of the ban on images.
On (Not) Cutting the Idol Link

I begin with Freud's argument in *Moses and Monotheism* concerning the ban on images and idolatry. Freud (2001, 112) writes that the religion of Moses brought a "far grander conception of God, or, as we might put it more modestly, the conception of a grander God." Moses achieved this breakthrough by banning any images of God. The ban on seeing, hearing, or touching this God is crucial for Freud, for "it meant that a sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea—a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation, with all its necessary psychological consequences" (113). In other words, the ban on images is a mark of intellectual superiority, abstraction, and renunciation. In the first part of this lopsided work, Freud contrasts this imagined Hebrew religion with the Egyptian: while the one was monotheistic, the other was confusedly polytheistic; one simply refused to contemplate an afterlife, the other obsessed about it, and one was intellectually superior, the other inferior. The religion of the ancient Hebrews had, in short, soared to the "heights of sublime abstraction" (22).

Rather than dwell on the obvious problems with such an argument—the mythical status of Freud's narrative, the dangerous territory of Hebrew exceptionalism, the assumption that the origins of Western thought may be found in the Hebrew Bible—I would like to step back and ask a prior question that goes to the heart of Freud's concerns: what does the ban on images seek to forestall? An initial answer would be idolatry, one that Freud accepts. On that level, the ban belongs to the genre of the critique of idolatry: we should not worship animals, stars, found objects, or things made with our hands in the sweat of our brows. Or as the biblical text of Isaiah puts it, in one of the best polemics against idolatry still to be found:

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame. Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good? Look, all its devotees shall be put to shame; the artisans too are merely human. Let them all assemble, let them stand up; they shall be terrified, they shall all be put to shame.

The ironmonger fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!" The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Save me, for you are my god!"

They do not know, nor do they comprehend: for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes, a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?" (Isa 44:9–20 NRSV)

This biblical critique gives the initial impression that idol worshipers are intellectually inferior, as Freud might put it, for they worship an oddly shaped block of wood, a chiseled piece of stone or perhaps a polished metal idol that can never be more than the material out of which it is made. The passage from Isaiah plays up the sheer ordinaryness of the idol with a good dose of satire, seeking to puncture the exorbitant claims made for it. But this text also points to the need for an analysis of the material object in question and not the vapid claims made on its behalf.

A deeper analysis needs to go behind the text a little in order to uncover its workings. In begin with, I would like to shift perspective from the polemicist to the so-called worshiper of the idol. Now the idol becomes a mere symbol or pointer to the deity, a tangible, earthly marker of the god's connection to this world. The idol worshiper does not think of the god itself, instead, it is a finger pointing to the deity. Here it is worth considering the first and second of the Ten Commandments together, for they reveal this precondition of the critique of idolatry (Exod

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1. See also the explicitly political polemics in Isa 40:19; 41:6–7; 43:17; 45:16–17; and 46:1–2, 5–7. Not to be outdone, Paul in the New Testament makes the same point in his own way. Thus Paul argues that due to darkened minds (Rom 1:21) the dead, created thing comes to life and gains the power to rule and dominate human lives instead of God (Rom 1:23, 25).
happens to all the interstellar detritus, the symbols and signs that they have left behind in their hasty departure? They become idols.

But the monotheist and atheist do differ on one point for the monotheist argues that all gods apart from one's own are unreal delusions, while the atheist points out that the monotheist's claim falls under the same logic. So the atheist observes that the monotheist must be consistent: if you are going to break the signifying link of all others, then you must carry that logic through to your own religion. Those images in your church, the crucifix on the altar, the Bible you read, or indeed Jesus Christ himself, are all forms of idolatry. You set up a signifying line between them and your God, whether Bible or Christ as revelation, icon or crucifix as symbols of your God, or even the word “God” or “Yahweh” itself. But your God does not exist, cannot be experienced or verified, heard or encountered in any real sense, so you too are an idolater, worshipping a text, human being, or liquefied object. You are, the atheist concludes, no better than the teenager who lovingly polishes his first car, or the fetishist who drools over spiked heels, or those who hope for a messiah to lead them to the promised land.

The fallback position for the monotheist, especially in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, is iconoclasm—or rather, since iconoclasm assumes an existing image to be smashed, a ban on images in the first place: aniconism. For this reason, the second commandment is so powerful: one is not permitted to make any image whatsoever, not of anything on the earth, in the seas, or in the heavens. Now I would like to part with Freud's argument, especially his point that the ban on images manifests greater intellect since it is the first moment of abstraction. Instead, at its heart, the ban on images is the manifestation of a fear that the process of idol criticism will continue inexorably. Once you have denied the existence of all the other gods bar one, then it is but one step further to deny the existence of the last one standing. So one seeks to close down the mechanism by which this might happen: without such a representation, there is no fixing point for the signifying chain, no possibility to set up a connection between earthly object and superhuman being. Instead, one must direct one's attention to God alone. Without a signifying link, it becomes impossible to break such a link. One can hardly pull out the chain-cutters to sever a chain that does

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2. It is quite possible for a polytheist to make this argument as well, selecting one or two gods out of a larger collection for the argument that follows. Indeed, the polytheist could also take up the ban on images for all the gods. But it is a more difficult position to hold for the polytheist by definition recognizes a multiplicity of gods.

3. There is more than enough evidence to suggest that an earlier polytheism was gradually overlaid in the texts of the Hebrew Bible by monotheism. Thus the various references to the veneration and worship of multiple gods become, in light of this late overlay, myriad examples of waywardness and apostasy. See, for example, D'Av 2002.

4. Hence the perpetual assertion, such as: “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last: besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it, let him declare and set it forth before me” (Isa 44:6–7a NRSV).
not exist. So, responds the monotheist, your argument has no bite; I am not an idolater.

Of course, the monotheist would have to admit that there have been more than a few slip-ups in the ban of images. Witness the synagogue with its symbols—menorah or star of David—or the church with its crucifixes, stained-glass windows, and iconography. Moreover, one cannot escape the reliance on "Holy Scriptures" that is felt to varying degrees to be the revelation of God or—at a minimal level—the written experiences of those human beings who have experienced God. The histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are overflowing with moments when people became enamored of an earthly representation of God. Yet the monotheist might respond in a way that is consistent with the critique of idolatry: These are examples of disobeying the command against graven images, which is an exceedingly difficult command to follow consistently.

Adorno, or, Toward Political Iconoclasm

It is the fact that the prohibition on graven images (das Bilderverbot) that occupies a position of central importance in the religions that believe in salvation, that this prohibition extends into the ideas and the most sublime ramifications of thought. (Adorno 2008, 26; see also Adorno 2003b, 46)

I have, of course, wound my argument in the direction of Adorno's critique, which is suspicious of any effort to allow space for the signifying link of idolatry. Not even the monotheist's last stand is to be tolerated, for it allows a small window through which the dynamic of idolatry may once again invade the scene. Adorno develops a political iconoclasm, a resolute resistance to any form of commodification, reification, and thereby idolatry. Why? These are constitutive of capitalism and its attendant ideologies, so he seeks to find a way to deny them any space whatsoever. Adorno's strategy is to return to the biblical text and develop in his own way the ban on images, or Bilderverbot. This philosophical motif appears throughout his work in the effort to produce a nonconceptual philosophy or rather to unlock the nonconceptual through the conceptual: in his central category of the nonidentical; in his refusal to speculate or represent utopia; in his (appropriately) incomplete attempt at an aesthetic theory; in his thoughts on the personality cult and secularized theology. In brief, his achievement was to extend the blockage of the signifying connection between idol and god, which was embodied in the ban on images, to the relations between human beings and the various elements of capitalism.

However, Adorno's return to the biblical texts is done in a way that undermines the very heart of Freud's argument for the abstraction implicit in the ban—recall that the ban on sensory representations of the deity is the foundation of abstract thought, at least for Freud. In order to see how that happens, let me introduce a crucial distinction between what may be called the idol link and the reifying relation. If we use a spatial metaphor, the former is vertical, designating the relation between the object produced here on earth and the god to whom that object is supposed to point; the reifying relation, by contrast, is horizontal, dealing with the relations between human beings and things here in earth. In fact, all of the preceding section was an elaboration of the vertical relation, or what I am calling the idol link. The critiques of idolatry sought to break that link, arguing that no god exists and that the worshiper—stupidity—serves a mere object of wood, stone, metal, or perhaps animal or human. In order to block the same logic being applied to one's own god, we find the ban on images in the Hebrew Bible.

If the previous section's concern was the idol link, then this section has as its focus the reifying relation. Briefly put, Adorno's innovation was to take this idol link and apply it to the relations between human beings; that is, to transfer the idol link to the reifying relation. How so? The command to block all possible connections between the deity and representations here on earth is now applied to the reifications that take place between human beings and the products of our labor. In the same way that second commandment seeks to sever the signifying chain between deity and worshiper, so also does Adorno wish to snap the link between human being and object made.

Let me say a little more about the reifying relation that Adorno seeks to block. This relation takes place between human beings and the prod-

5. Surprisingly, relatively few critics recognize the importance and pervasiveness of the Bilderverbot in Adorno's thought. Christopher Brittain at least does so, and one may usefully read his observations by way of introduction, although he neglects the rich heritage of this motif in Freudian and Marxist thought (especially by way of the fetish); see Brittain 2010, 88-98. Other works worthy of note include Pritchard 2002 and Buchholz 1991.
acts of their labor. It is an argument drawn originally from Marx but profoundly transformed: Marx sought to understand why there seems to be a transfer of powers between a range of elements within capitalism—commodity, money, value, capitalist, profit, wealth, and so on—and the human beings who produced those elements. For Marx, the theory of fetishism (see my essay on imperial fetish in this volume) provided him with an answer—a mutual transfer of powers between human beings (who lost out) and products of their labor—that later gained philosophical rigor with Georg Lukács (1988, 83–110) elaboration of the theory of reification (cf. Jameson 1991, 95–96): the process by which living beings, thoughts, activities, relations, and so on become abstracted and thing-like, especially when the "thing" in question is the commodity; conversely, that "thing" acquires the properties that have so quickly been divested from those beings, thoughts, activities, and relations.

So let us see how Adorno goes about his task of applying the ban on images to the transfer of powers characteristic of commodities and workers within capitalism. Adorno's move is to pick up the biblical injunction against images from Exod 20:4 and boldy slide it from the initial signifying link of the idol to the transferring connection between human beings and objects produced. In a way analogous to the barring of the passage from image to god, so also one blows up the bridge that connects the object produced and the human being who has produced it. In the same way that the ban on images removes any anchor for the signifying line between god and idol, so also does its application to the transferal of powers between product and human being chop off any foothold that such a transferal might gain. In Adorno's skillful hands, the ban on images becomes a way of preventing the reifying transfer from taking place in the first place. One difference between the targets of the two strategies does remain. The ban on images in the Bible is twofold, while its application to capitalist reification is singular: the former is designed to negate the possibility that the signifying link may be broken by preventing that link transfer of powers is more direct, for it simply seeks to prevent the transferring connection from taking place at all. Yet even here the two strategies are analogous: one seeks to quarantine God from idolatry, while the other desperately wishes to protect human beings from the baleful effects of capitalist reification.

Adorno seeks a way to resist the pervasiveness of capitalism in the capillaries of everyday life. Its irrepressible ability to commodify every aspect of tangible and—increasingly—intangible reality and the seemingly inescapable reification that attends every act, thought, and product means that any resistance has to be trenchant and radical. Adorno resolves not to allow even the smallest foothold for the reifying processes of capitalism. For as soon as one produces a concept, offers an image of a better world, or puts one's trust in a leader, it (or he or she) becomes reified and even commercialized. Witness the way in our day how "Ideology" or "Politics" have become clothing labels, or the way Bob Dylan ended up doing car advertisements, or how Che Guevara's image made its way onto ice cream labels and T-shirts for bourgeois teens (in the 1980s). In other words, the ban on images becomes in Adorno's hands a grimly defended barricade against the persistent and permeating waves of capitalist commodification.

In order to understand this wielding of the buan on images as a mode of resistance, we need to be aware of the context in which Adorno (and Horkheimer) worked. They voiced their opposition in terms of a profound dismay at the technological leaps of capitalism (if only they could have seen the cyber-technologies of today), the repressive state apparatuses of the police and the military, and the lock-down of the Cold War, all of which produced a sense that capitalism had dug itself in and would not be dislodged. But at a deeper level they were caught in a double-bind. The first was the melancholic ambivalence over what Germany meant: Adorno hated the United States and his exile there during the Second World War, longing to return to Germany and to be able to express himself in German. Yet that return brought on a melancholy that came from the awareness of what had been perpetrated there in the very recent past. It would have been like the children of migrants, who inherit from their parents a profound ambivalence about home: the old country is far better than this primitive place to which we have emigrated, but then the old country is dreadful, since otherwise we would not have left in the first place. The second double-bind was the cost of defeating fascism: it brought with it an unprecedented penetration (and I use the word deliberately) of American money and commercial practices into a now bankrupt and war-torn Europe. Was the cost worth it? Adorno was not so sure, since he esipled the techniques of fascism within United States-style commerce and propaganda. It did not help matters that Adorno saw Stalin's ascendency in the East as a dissipation of hope for an alternative. In the face of these onslaughts, Adorno resolved not to give the pattern of commodification and reification any purchase within his philosophy.
I have sought to fill out the logic and background to Adorno’s appropriation of the ban on images, but now let me review briefly a few of the instances when Adorno deploys the ban. One of the most controversial is his effort to produce a nonconceptual philosophy, the most significant manifestation of his effort to refuse philosophical systematizing. 6 Over against the central role of concepts—ontology, immanence, transcendence, univocality, analogy, Dasent, truth, event, and on and on—Adorno attempts in his search for a negative dialectic to block the production of such concepts in the first place. He does not simply refuse to use concepts as such but seeks to show how those concepts undermine themselves, turning them through an immanent method into a nonconceptual framework in which one never pins one’s colors to any concept at all. An almost impossible process that produced a formidable mode of philosophizing (in which each sentence is a discrete argument in itself so that one does not succumb to the pattern of logical argumentation), its underlying drive is to prevent the possibility of any concept becoming reified and hijacking philosophy as it does so.

Another is its application to utopia. One must not, argues Adorno, spend months and years perfecting a blueprint of utopia, since that becomes an image, an idol at the feet of which one lays one’s hopes and expectations. It comes to replace utopia itself, standing in as an idol for what cannot yet be achieved. Or in the case of the personality cult, Adorno (with Horkheimer) argues that as soon as we recognize someone with charisma, who convinces us with stunning oratory or perhaps simple sayings of deep wisdom, who promises much if only we will trust him or her, we are lost. They do not merely mean that such leaders will disappoint, leading us to a mosquito-infested march or treacherous jungle to eke out a slave-like existence, or that they end up seducing the young boys and girls while owning a fleet of Rolls-Royces, or that the Swiss bank account will swell while we become penniless. Rather, they mean that the process of deification has already taken place, that the human being has become like God, an idol in whom we have invested our own powers and resources. That process, they suggest, has been enabled in a way not seen before by Christology: as Christ has become man and then returns to the heavens, human beings may now join him on the return journey, becoming deified in the process—or at least they become so in the eyes of their adorers. Being a God-human (according to traditional Christology) opens the door for others to reverse the equation and become a human-God (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987, 206–9; 2002, 145–47; see also Boer 2007, 433–35).

Finally, and to his posthumous shame, Adorno also applied this logic to the waves of student revolts that began to wash over German campuses in the 1960s (Adorno 1998, 259–78; 2003b, 73–84; 2008, 47–54). Apart from questioning action for the sake of action, organizing for the sake of organizing, and apart from pointing to the futility of protests in light of the all-pervasive nature of capitalism and the strength of the forces of repression, Adorno also applied the ban on images. He did so in relation to the separation between theory and practice. The students argued that radical philosophical theory was fine, but what about practice, especially if you keep Marx’s eleventh thesis of Feuerbach in mind? In response, Adorno pointed out that the separation of theory and practice was itself a result of the reification of life under capitalism. Instead of separating them and succumbing to the reifying effects of capitalism, Adorno argued for a resistance in which thought and practice could be kept together. “Thinking itself is a kind of behaviour; it is, whether one likes it or not, a kind of practice, even in its purest logical operations” (Adorno 2008, 53; see also 2003b, 83). It would be more radical, according to Adorno, to see theory and practice as one whole rather than follow the dictates of a reified separation. In other words, do not make an idol of political action, especially if it is done in the name of something better, of a utopian possibility that you can espay in the near future. That would be to slip from one idol (practice) to another (utopia), both of which will disappoint you. We might want to disagree with Adorno and take Antonio Negri’s line that resistance emerges from the midst of capitalism rather than through an effort to block its path, but even here Adorno shows an extraordinarily

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6. Apart from the extraordinary effort at working through such a nonconceptual approach in Adorno 1973 and Adorno 2003a, see also his much more accessible comments in the lectures given at the time he was working through this approach: Adorno 2008, 57, 62, 68–75, 94–95, 185–86; 2003b, 87, 95, 102–13, 139–40, 229–31. For reflection on philosophical systems, see Adorno 2008, 22–43; 2003b, 40–54.

7. Adorno’s preference for microanalysis (he notes his debts to Benjamin here) also plays a role in such sentences.

8. Adorno also writes, “Thinking is a doing, theory a form of praxis already the ideology of the purity of thinking deceives about this. Thinking has a double character: it is immanently determined and rigorous, and yet an inalienable real mode of behaviour in the midst of reality” (1998, 261).
rigorous adherence to the ban on images, to keeping the barricade in place to thwart the reifying transfer.

Conclusion

A little earlier, I suggested that Adorno’s analysis turns the tables on Freud’s argument that the ban on images marks the moment of abstraction, of the break from sensual representations of the deity. The trap for Freud is that his argument falls into the very logic he seeks to overcome, but I can make that argument only after having passed through Adorno. Simply put, a central feature of the process of reification is precisely abstraction: in drawing powers from human beings and granting them to objects produced, one abstracts them, creating entities that take on a life of their own. For example, commodities are abstracts in this sense, as is the dollar or yuan and its slide up and down the league table of currencies, as is the “economy,” and so on. That argument relies on the connection made by Adorno between the ban on images and the reifying relation, but once the connection is made, we cannot avoid the conclusion that Freud is producing yet another version of idolatry—of abstraction and abstract thought.

As for the political implications, they are as stark as Adorno suggests. His prescriptions are far from any “lifestyle” choice, where one refuses certain types of obvious commercialism. Wearing only secondhand clothes, growing one’s own food or perhaps visiting the farmer’s market occasionally, avoiding television and the Internet, even dispensing with smartphones and the like will hardly make a significant impact on the structures of commodification and their attendant cultural forms. Adorno has in mind a political project so resolutely far-sighted that it becomes almost impossible to imagine. This can lead to a counsel of despair (an affliction of Western Marxists), leaving any alternative for a barely discernible future. In light of this situation, I would like to close with a slight twist. Let me begin by asking whether reification is restricted to capitalism and its workings, or whether one also finds processes of reification under socialism. We have plenty of experience with socialism by now, almost a century since the Russian Revolution. What we find there is that reification, the process of iconography, even of idolatry, took a very different path (think of the veneration of revolutionary leaders, for instance). Is it possible, then, that the future Adorno imagines is one not necessarily free from any form of image production, but rather a very different form for which the language all too easily falls into known modes of expression?

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