ADORNO, Theodor Wiesengrund (1903-1969)

Born Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund to an Italian Catholic mother and an assimilated Jewish father, Adorno would take his mother’s vaguely aristocratic last name. Philosopher, aesthetician, social theorist, and musician, Adorno throughout his life remained committed to a decidedly secular and socialist European consciousness, even when dissecting German anti-Semitism in the 1940s. Yet his notion of utopian political transformation owed much to his early reading of Ernst Bloch’s insistence on a hunger for the transcendent that Bloch added to Marxian materialism. Adorno’s understanding of the work of art—a crucial element of his thinking, culminating in his *Aesthetic Theory*—was equally in tension over the historical necessity of its progressive secularization and rationalization. On the one hand, any “contamination of art with revelation” would uncritically embrace the mystical, fetish character of art. On the other hand, “the eradication of every trace of revelation from art” would reduce the artwork to a mere repetition of the status quo—that is, the lifeless routines of an administered society, including film and jazz, both of which Adorno denigrated.

Adorno himself was trained as a pianist and composer, and music (especially that of modernists such as Arnold Schoenberg) became the focus of some his most important reflections on art as *mimesis*, a category borrowed from Walter Benjamin. Art is not mere representation of reality, but is the imitation of “objective expression,” which could be called expression as end-in-itself (the writings of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett were much admired examples). All the work of expression in art is consummated for Adorno by its utter refusal to become the expression of something. The ruthless concentration on its own internal organization becomes an implicit condemnation of the bad totality around it, which is to say, of the administered society and its culture industry that threatened to make any attempt to represent the social world, to express its true nature (for example, in novelistic realism), into an apology for that world. The only choice for the writer, Adorno argued, was a sort of turning inward that nevertheless indicted what was left behind. By the same token, Adorno championed the rigorously atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg (with whom he had studied)—and criticized the far more user-friendly and programmatic (or picturesque) scores of Igor Stravinsky—on precisely these grounds. For Adorno, Schoenberg’s mathematically defined twelve-tone row went as far as possible in severing the relationship between music and the world (including the composer) that it supposedly expressed, while it at the same time expressed a lament over the world’s domination of nature by means of its own formal, even inhuman, control. Not accidentally, Adorno served as Thomas Mann’s musical advisor in the writing of the latter’s *Doktor Faustus* (1947), in which, via a pact with the Devil, a composer using dodecaphonic technique becomes a commentary on Nazi Germany.

The topos of the domination of nature runs through all of Adorno’s philosophical work, and was a central element of the group loosely organized as the Frankfurt School and Institute of Social Research after 1923. Derived in equal parts from Hegel, Marx, and Max Weber, Adorno’s political theory (as in the book co-authored with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) was aimed not simply at the eradication of exploitative labor practices but at a transformation of the human domination of nature as a whole, a theme the later Heidegger also explored. For Adorno, Soviet-style Marxism, Nazi or Fascist statism, and modern state-administered capitalism all exhibited the same unreflective will to the domination of nature, for which only what could be put to use instrumentally had value. In this way, Hegel’s dictum that “the whole is the true” had been reversed. Within the administered society, of whatever stripe, “the whole is the untrue,” in Adorno’s phrase, a condition that hobbled social theory in an age when the consumerist culture industry managed all thought outside the increasingly hermetic and resistant artwork. Deprived of the Archimedean reference point formerly given by the perspective of totality, or rational human ends, social theory for Adorno required a “negative dialectic” as strategy. This is a style of argument in which the lure of even a temporary resolution of social contradiction should be constantly refused, since all such resolutions would be inherently false. Adorno’s style of writing became for many the prime exhibit of such argumentation, in which the endless embedding of qualifying clauses in each sentence seemed to be the rhetorical requirement of non-dominative thought.

Adorno’s famous quip, expressed in *Minima* Moralia (1952), that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric is of a piece with his later, darker attitude toward anything resembling practical reform. If every attempt to alter a bad social system can be re-interpreted by the system as a sign of its health—an idea extended by Herbert Marcuse with his thesis of “repressive tolerance”—then even the idea of a “reconstruction” of Germany after the war was somehow contradictory, for it implied that normal life could go on, could be resurrected, despite the catastrophe that had occurred. Combined with the incessant reproduction of paradox and contradiction in the negative dialectic of his style of argument, Adorno’s bleak pessimism about the idiocy of any return to normalcy after the war led the later Frankfurt School theorist Jürgen Habermas to criticize the self-consuming futility of his perspective as no more than “performative contradiction.” That is, Adorno no longer wished to find a solution to the problems he had diagnosed.

Adorno’s last years, after his return to Germany from exile in Los Angeles during the war, found him at stark odds with the new student movements of the 1960s, which seemed to him to embrace a kind of irrationalism. He had little sympathy for a return to a more pastoral, communal life, a choice that perhaps appeared somehow reminiscent of *Blut and Boden* ideals before the rise of Hitler. And he had little understanding of the new militancy rising among feminists and minorities. For much of the new student left in Germany, Adorno himself had become the face of an authoritarian intellectual and cultural elite that was fatally attached to the pre-1945 world of Hegelian-Marxian philosophy, the high culture of pre-war Europe, and the overwhelming conviction that popular culture, even the popular culture of new music, film, and the arts, was nothing more than the manipulated product of an American-dominated culture industry. And quite unlike Marcuse, who managed to become for a time a hero to the American New Left because of his sense that a liberated Eros—free love—could be an effective antidote to capitalist culture, Adorno remained convinced that sensuality itself had become nothing more than a socially administered project for pseudo-individual self-expression, one to be pursued with all the mindless conformity of the independent hobbyist at his ham radio.

Further Reading:

Martin Jay. *Adorno.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984

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