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, which Adorno greatly disliked. 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 writing of Samuel Beckett was a much admired example). All the work of “expression” in art is consummated for Adorno by its utter refusal to become the expression of “something.” By dominating its own elements so ruthlessly for its immanent purposes, art became a spiritualized corrective of the domination of nature.

The topos of the domination of nature runs through all of Adorno’s philosophical work, and became 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 on 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. The later Frankfurt School theorist Jürgen Habermas criticized the apparent futility of this sort of argument as no more than “performative contradiction.” 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 an irrationalism that no longer had any patience for his exegetical imperatives.

Bibliography:

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