

Gretel Adorno

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Life

This section provides general bibliographic information about Gretel Adorno.

Childhood

Born:

Margarete Karplus

10th June 1902, Berlin

Gretel Adorno was born in Berlin in June 1902. Her childhood home was near the Tiergarten, where she grew up with her sister, Liselotte.

Education

Doctorate:

Obtained a PhD in chemistry from Friedrich Wilhelm University, Berlin

Gretel studied at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, obtaining a PhD in chemistry with her dissertation "On the Influence of Calcium-hydrate on Cetane". She also completed doctoral coursework in two minors, Physics and Philosophy.

Early career

Early career:

Business woman 1925-1936

After completing her doctorate, Gretel became a businesswoman, living in Berlin in financial independence, until she fled to the USA in 1937.

She invested in Karplus & Herzberger, a leather factory. After her investment was liquidated in 1933, she became a junior partner in the firm Georg Tengler. When the owner died in 1934, she became responsible for the factory and more than 200 employees, until liquidating the company in 1936.

Marriage

Marriage:

Married Theodor Adorno 1937

Gretel married Theodor Adorno in 1937, after 14 years of courtship, much of it long distance. It seems the lengthy separation caused long-term emotional strain on her, according to her letters with the Adornos' close friend, Walter Benjamin.

Theodor Adorno had several affairs, which Gretel was presumably aware of: Theodor wrote about them in his diary and letters, which Gretel was involved in typing up.

Gretel was widowed in 1969.

Death

Died:

16 July 1993, Frankfurt

Gretel suffered from chronic undiagnosed health issues throughout her life, which sometimes left her immobilised for days or weeks at a time. She died in Frankfurt in 1993.

Frankfurt School

This section describes Gretel Adorno's involvement in the Frankfurt School of philosophy, focusing on her contributions to three key texts.

Much of Gretel's documented contribution was through stenography and secretarial work, though it should be noted she was also involved in substantial editorial work, especially on "[Aesthetic Theory](#)" on page 13.

Extent of Gretel's role

It is hard to evaluate Gretel Adorno's overall contribution to the Frankfurt School, and her husband's work. She was certainly more than 'just' a typist: she was present at during the discussions between Adorno and Horkheimer, taking the notes that produced **"The Dialectic of Enlightenment" on the next page**. Was she a silent note-taker, or an active participant? Is it credible that a woman who engaged in extensive intellectual correspondence with Walter Benjamin had nothing to say during these discussions? Her editorial role completing **"Aesthetic Theory" on page 13** after Adorno's death suggests active contribution and engagement with the ideas of the Frankfurt School.

Further reading:

"Gretel's role in the Frankfurt School" on page 15

"Women in the Frankfurt School" on page 15

The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Gretel helped Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer create the manuscript for *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and is acknowledged in the foreword. She took notes during discussions between Adorno and Horkheimer, which then developed into the book.

Published in 1947, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a core text of critical theory. It examines the failure of Enlightenment, and the rise of fascism and totalitarianism.

Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis

As with "[The Dialectic of Enlightenment](#)" on the previous page, Gretel acted as stenographer, recording conversations between her husband and Max Horkheimer.

Originally created in 1956, and reissued in 2011 as [Towards a New Manifesto](#), *Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis* was intended to be contemporary version of Mark and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*.

Aesthetic Theory

Unlike "The Dialectic of Enlightenment" on page 11 and "Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis" on the previous page, Gretel had a much clearer editorial role in the creation of *Aesthetic Theory*. Working with Rolf Tiedemann, using Adorno's drafts, Gretel assembled and completed the book.

Aesthetic Theory is Theodor Adorno's last work, published posthumously in 1970. It examines the evolution of art and the causes of its current status within capitalism and modernity.

Reference

This section contains a bibliography and suggestions for further reading.

Further reading

Where links are provided to books, they are to the current (in 2020) widely available editions of texts.

Primary texts

The Dialectic of Enlightenment (multiple editions available)

[Towards a New Manifesto](#) (reissue of "Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis" on page 12)

[Aesthetic Theory](#)

Secondary reading

Gretel's role in the Frankfurt School

Article: [Gretel Adorno, the Typewriter: Sacrificial Lambs and Critical Theory's 'Risk of Formulation'](#)

Women in the Frankfurt School

Article: [The Effect of the Whip: The Frankfurt School and the Oppression of Women](#)

Sources

Bibliographic references use the MHRA style.

Wikipedia, "Gretel Adorno", *en.wikipedia.org* [online] [cited 12 April 2020]. Available from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gretel_Adorno>

Glossary

F

Frankfurt School

A school of social theory and critical philosophy at Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany. Founded 1918.

T

Tiergarten

Famous park in Berlin.