

Displacements of negativity: social antagonism in Theodor W. Adorno

Yasmin Afshar

Thesenpapier, Kolloquium Sozialphilosophie - 12.01.2023

My thesis investigates the concept of antagonism in the sociological writings of Theodor W. Adorno, taking as an interpretative thread the article *Anmerkungen zum sozialen Konflikt heute* (1968), coauthored with the sociologist Ursula Jaerisch. This text, rarely discussed in the specialized literature, articulates the false integration of postwar society (and thus its persistent antagonistic structure) and the persistent tendency toward social disintegration (which can take the form of fascism, among others). I intend, thus, both to fill this gap in the Adorno Studies, inserting his critical position in the philosophical and sociological debate on antagonism, as well as to contribute to the understanding of the contemporary configurations of the social conflicts – either in their emancipatory potentiality or their fascist metamorphosis.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I deal with how the antagonistic dynamics of society appear in the philosophical (Hobbes, Smith, Kant, Hegel) and sociological (Durkheim, Simmel, Weber) modern thought, examining how integration is traditionally associated with the structural disintegrating tendency of society. In chapter two, I present the modern conflict theories of Dahrendorf and Coser, which Adorno and Jaerisch debate more directly. In the third chapter, I deal with Adorno's interpretation of Marx, particularly with regard to class conflict and the nature of the capitalist crisis. In the fourth chapter I aim to detail how Adorno relates integration, disintegration and antagonism, both from a sociological (in its relation to fascism and class struggle) and philosophical point of view (understanding social non-conciliation/contradiction as the negativity that persists).

Table of contents

1. Dialectics of Integration
 - 1.1 The problem of order [Hobbes, Smith]
 - 1.2 Scarcity, self-interest and competition [Smith, Freud, Simmel]
 - 1.3 Antagonistic socialization in Kant
 - 1.4. Order as consent or as coercion? [Hobbes, Smith, Durkheim]
 - 1.5 Permanence of the disintegrating fact in order [Durkheim, Freud]
 - 1.6. Apotheosis of conflict: evolution and progress [Kant, Hegel, Spencer]
2. The modern sociology of conflict: Dahrendorf and Coser
 - 2.1 A new sociological discipline
 - 2.2. Against the Parsonian conception of conflict
 - 2.3 Neutralization of conflict
 - 2.4 Evolution and progress in liberal democracies
3. Some aspects of the Adornian reading of Marx
 - 3.1. Capitalist antagonistic integration
 - 3.2. Objective antagonism: crises
 - 3.3. Subjective antagonism: struggle
 - 3.4 Antagonism and progress in Marx
 - 3.5. The debate over the stabilization of capitalism after Marx
4. Social antagonism in Adorno
 - 4.1. Fundamental contradiction?
 - 4.2. Adorno's take on the Neumann-Pollock debate
 - 4.3. Capitalist integration, fascist disintegration
 - 4.4. Ursula Jaerisch and the NPD-research
 - 4.5. Antagonism as the non-identical
 - 4.6. Displacements of negativity

Some questions to be answered

- How has the tendency to disintegration been incorporated by traditional social theory as an element of social cohesion? [1; 2]

- How can competitive antagonism and class struggle be distinguished? [3]
- What is the difference between antagonism and conflict? [3]
- How does the debate about the stabilization of capitalism inflect on the question about antagonism and fascism? [3.5; 4.2]
- For Adorno, the fundamental contradiction seems to be either the one between capital and labor (*Anmerkungen*) or that between nature and society (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Are these perspectives compatible? [4.1.]
- What is the energy of class struggle and what is the mechanism of its displacement? [4.5]
- To what extent can disintegration be emancipatory? [4.6]

Excerpts

- Mangel und Not sind in der gepriesenen *affluent society* nicht mehr das Schicksal der beschäftigten Arbeiter, sondern das von Kleinrentnern und gewissen schwer fassbaren, nicht organisierten Zwischengruppen. Bei jenen Gruppen werden Neid, Gezänk, verdrückte und fehlgeleitete Aggression, alte Erbschaft des Kleinbürgertums, am zähesten sich behaupten. Nicht sowohl für die Ordnung als für missliebige Minderheiten oder politisch nicht Konformierende bilden sie ein gefährliches Potential: gegen sie mag im Krisenfall die ihrem primären Ziel entfremdete Klassenkampfenergie nutzbar gemacht werden. Dies Potential ist eines von Desintegration. Der Zerfall in zentrifugale Partikeln ist die Kehrseite sozialer Integration. Je rücksichtsloser sie das Verschiedene unter sich begräbt, desto mehr zersetzt unterirdisch sich das soziale Gefüge. An den Cliquenkämpfen der Nationalsozialisten war das zu beobachten. (*Anmerkungen zum sozialen Konflikt heute*, GS 8, S. 188,)
- In Krisensituationen mag der soziale Konflikt als einer von Klassen sich aktualisieren; ob abermals in den Formen der verwalteten Welt, bleibt abzuwarten. (*Anmerkungen...*, GS8, 186)
- Freuds 'Unbehagen in der Kultur' hat einen Gehalt, der ihm schwerlich gegenwärtig war; nicht allein in der Psyche der Vergesellschafteten akkumuliert sich der Aggressionstrieb bis zum offen destruktiven Drang, sondern die totale Vergesellschaftung brütet objektiv ihr Widerspiel aus, ohne dass bis heute zu sagen wäre, ob es die Katastrophe ist oder die Befreiung. (*Negative Dialektik*, GS 6, 340)