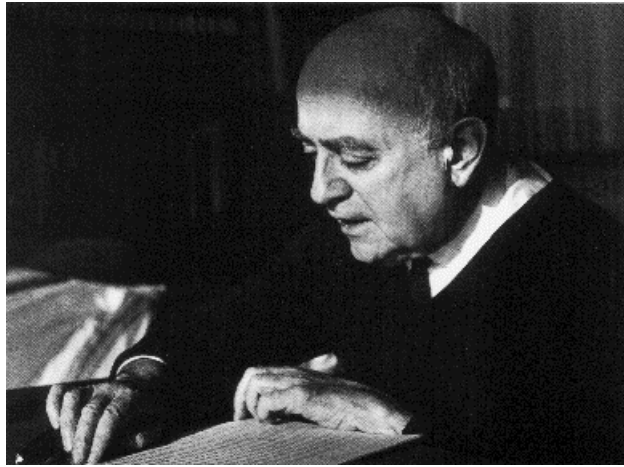


Global Storm

Theodor Adorno's Negative Dialectics



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Introduction

Any American excursus on the work of the Frankfurt School's most brilliant theoretician, Theodor W. Adorno, must acknowledge the unique difficulty and compensating virtue of bringing Adorno's most realized work, Negative Dialectics (published in 1966), to the forefront of today's critical agenda. The difficulty is the lack of effective translations, something typically ascribed to the dire impossibility of translating Adorno or indeed any Central European thinker of note into adequate English, but which is better understood as an interdisciplinary problem: asking a non-theoretician to translate a work of theory is like expecting a novelist to write high-level computer software programs, just because both use linguistic codes. Readers of Adorno's German with some training in literary and aesthetic theory cannot help but be struck by the immense power, nuanced crafting, and poetic grace of texts so many academics have reproached (mostly on the basis of the afore-mentioned translations) as an incomprehensible mass of jargon. On the other hand, a reasonably dextrous set of translations exists for the major post-structuralist thinkers, who were not exactly enamored of rhetorical simplicity. This suggests, to the paranoid among us (and paranoia in late capitalism consists merely of the healthy intuition that someone, somewhere, is gunning for our slice of market share) that the contemporary marketplace of theory has its own devious priorities, which need to be carefully sorted out, analyzed and critiqued in their own right, in careful conjunction with the theories actually being discussed. Why was the oeuvre of the French post-structuralists so easily valorized on this marketplace, but not the late works of Sartre? Why was not merely the Frankfurt School ignored, but indeed the whole corpus of Central European industrial sociology? Why the fascination with Jacques Derrida but not Pierre Bourdieu? The great East German playwright Heiner Mueller already had the goods on the Nineties theory-market twenty years before the thing existed: "Das ist eine philosophische Frage," rejoins the nominal King of Prussia to an uncomfortably cognizant question by his not-quite-ready-for-prime-time underling in the 1973 play Germania Death in Berlin. "Dafuer habe ich keine Zeit." ["That is a philosophical question, for which I have no time."] When the global bourgeoisie is not preaching the virtues of anorexia to the starving, they indulge in the privatized socialism of an infinite credit expansion, in the realm of theory as much as in the stupendous 1990s bailouts of Eastern Europe and the Pacific Rim.

All this is closely connected with the afore-mentioned virtue of the whole enterprise: namely, the fact that America has some of the most highly-developed theory-industries (among its other business services, like software and consulting) on the planet, and thus offers the surest practical test of Adorno's critical categories, in the form of one of the world's most diverse and innovative mass-cultures. Theory in its broadest sense is by no means an elite activity, but is something even the humblest sports journalist and the late night talk show take the greatest pleasure in producing, and is deeply rooted in the mundane necessity of manufacturing, stocking, shipping, selling, choosing and consuming an ever more variegated and complex palette of products on the marketplace. All of this has created a plebianized zone of consumer literacy no less powerful and far-reaching than that more obvious set of cultural tastes endemic to the televisual and cinematic industries, let alone that still narrower set of distinctions (in Bourdieu's sense

of the term) retailed by the various disciplines of the university, and it is precisely the social ubiquity of consumerism, its occasionally liberating (but also dreadfully oppressive) materiality – something caricatured rather than explained by the notion of a regnant Anglo-Saxon pragmatism – which Adorno insists that we not simply condemn, but carefully think through.

The usual knock against Adorno, of course, is that he failed to take his own advice when it came to the leading works of American jazz and film modernism – which is only half of the proverbial story.¹ Adorno also wrote some of the most wondrous and compelling musicologies on European musical modernism ever written, e.g. In Search of Wagner and The Philosophy of Modern Music, works whose aesthetic categories are eminently applicable to the dialectics of jazz modernism (in particular, the increasing antagonism between the innovations of the great jazz composers and the commercialism of the music-industry). That Adorno's aesthetic horizons were largely delimited to the Central European modernisms, from Kafka and Webern to Klee and Brecht, was due neither to theoretical cupidity nor reactionary anti-Americanism, but to the objective underdevelopment of German capitalism and its corresponding consumer culture in relation to the British and later American metropolises. Germany was (much like Japan, and Italy, and Singapore, and indeed all the industrial overachievers of the present era) really a partly-industrialized semi-periphery in the world economy, at least until the post-WW II boom. German culture in the Fifties and Sixties was, just like its postwar Japanese counterpart, geared toward the necessity of building up the manufacturing base rather than producing luxuries such as films, and indeed the history of West Germany reflects, on the whole, a mutually self-reinforcing dynamic of economic exports to world (at first US, and later EC) markets and cultural imports of (mostly American) films and mass media. In the Central European context, Adorno was an amazing and intransigent cultural radical, whose unyielding refusal to countenance the barbarities of the Eastern bloc or to swallow the no less destructive commercialism of the West offers a powerful and still-relevant model of global solidarity for our own day.

American culture is at issue in a second and no less important way. For nowhere else on the planet do markets have such unbridled and ferocious sway, and are countervailing forces such as trade unions, Left political parties, and civic infrastructures so weak, as in the post-Cold War United States (unless one had the tactlessness to mention that other former superpower, namely Russia; but as an old joke goes, the new Russian bourgeoisie were bent on imitating America and, unfortunately, succeeded); nowhere else on the planet do such crass extremes of private opulence and public squalor exist; no other First World country, with the partial exception of Great Britain, has managed to plow under its industrial base and mismanage its economy so badly, to the point that in fifty years, what was once the richest, most productive economy on the planet has become the dependent ward of East Asia and the EU; and no other economic region has developed such a radical media-culture, such a sophisticated micropolitics, or such a thriving theory-scene. In short, America in the era of the Wall Street Bubble provides the social theorist with that most valuable of all tropes, an index of positively neo-Victorian decadence by which to measure the transformations of the world-system. “Decadence was the Fata Morgana,” wrote Adorno concerning the latter, “of that progress which had not yet begun”²; the American decadence is thus something like the

Fata Videoana of the ascension of East Asia and the European Union to co-hegemons of the world-economy. As we shall see, Negative Dialectics offers the citizens of the 21st century an indispensable toolbox of techniques, concepts and strategies by which multinational capital can not only be analyzed as a conceptual form, but concretely resisted in practice.

Footnotes

1. In addition to his journalistic and sociological interventions, Adorno took great care to fine-tune his radio broadcasts to his audience. See Henry Pickford, "Critical Models: Adorno's Theory and Practice of Cultural Criticism", Yale School of Journalism (247-270).
2. "Die Dekadenz war die Fata Morgana jenes Fortschritts, der noch nicht begonnen hat... Dekadenz ist der Nervenpunkt, wo die Dialektik des Fortschritts vom Bewusstsein leibhaft gleichsam zugeeignet wird..." [Decadence was the Fata Morgana of that progress which had not yet begun... Decadence is the nerve-ending where the dialectic of progress lays claim, as it were, to its corporeal consciousness...] Theodor Adorno. Fortschritt, Gesammelten Schriften:10. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977 (626-627).