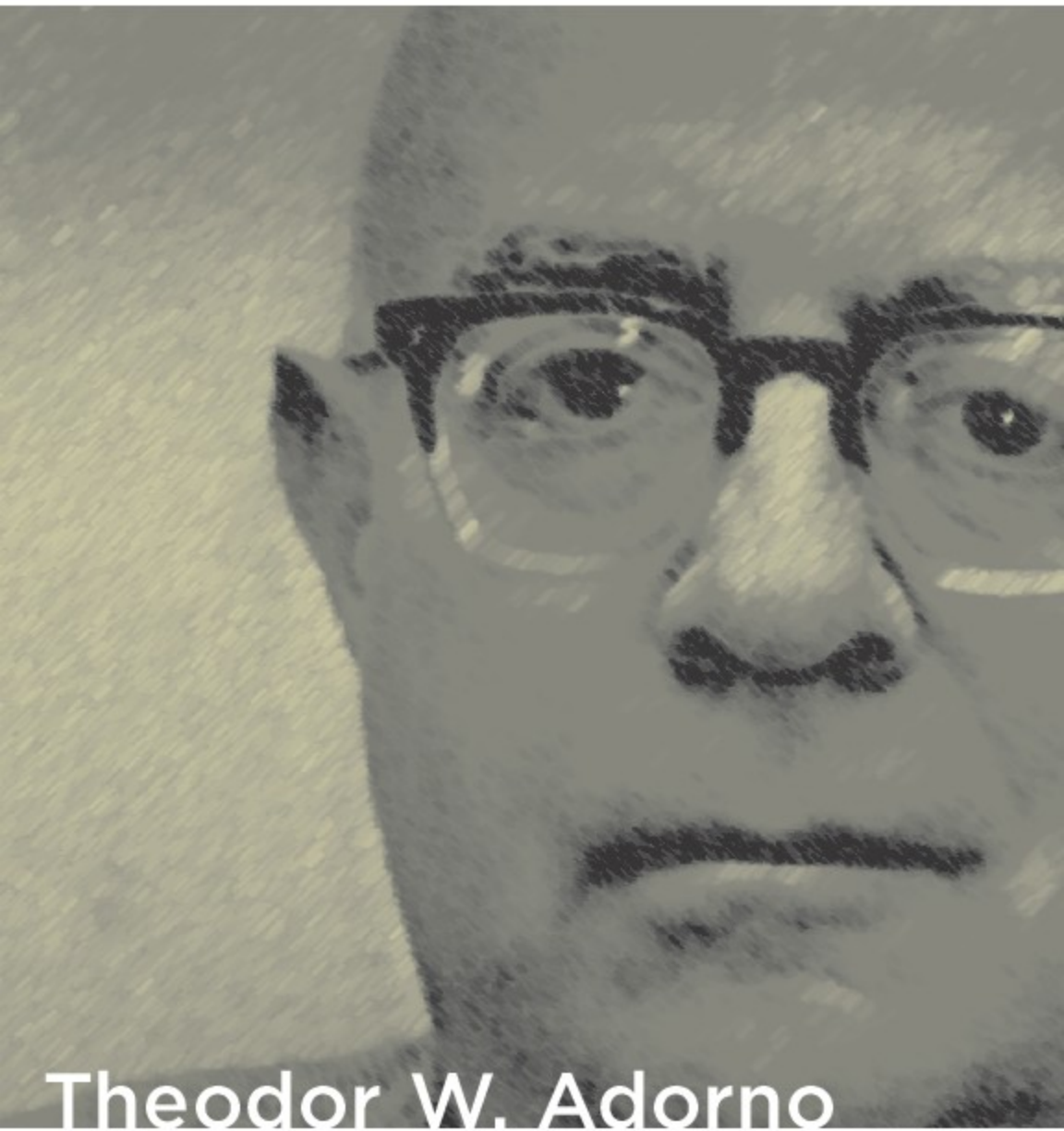


Gerhard Schweppenhäuser TRANSLATED BY JAMES ROLLESTON



Theodor W. Adorno

an introduction

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Post-Contemporary Interventions



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Gerhard Schweppenhäuser

Translated by James Rolleston

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Preface to the English Edition

THIS BOOK AIMS TO PRESENT some of the main motifs of Adorno's critical theory in a concise and clear manner. The presentation starts from the core concepts of his philosophy and shows how they are developed in the framework of sociology as well as that of aesthetic and cultural theory. I refer constantly to Adorno's *Minima Moralia* and his *Negative Dialectics*: together with his contribution to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, these constitute, when we think of his work systemically, his most important achievements. From this perspective I have outlined the thought patterns I see as essential, as sustaining and shaping the complex and highly differentiated structure of Adorno's philosophy. Inevitably I have neglected elements which would surely be essential to a comprehensive portrayal of Adorno's multilayered thinking. And I have not been able to do full justice to the multifaceted dimensions of the history of thought, in which Adorno's intellectual odyssey is embedded.

This odyssey begins with neo-Kantian positions, moving through a preoccupation with Husserl's phenomenology—decisively influenced

by the philosophical avant-garde of Lukács, Bloch, and Benjamin—to an engagement with Freud and Kierkegaard. Adorno's intellectual journey leads him to Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, and later culminates in his critique of Heidegger, but always ultimately permits him to return to Kant. Not all of this is reconstructed here; where necessary, it can be read back into the intellectual outcomes. Moreover, experts in music theory will hardly be satisfied with the brevity with which I have discussed Adorno's philosophy of music, while for lay people too many questions in this field will remain open.

My decision to weight matters in this way reflects the fact that this book is intended as a philosophical introduction to Adorno's thought, not as a comprehensive portrayal of the theoretical cosmos of a thinker who today is often called the last universal genius. Recent monographs in German are available that portray him in his entirety; particularly noteworthy is Detlev Claussen's study, published in 2003, the year of Adorno's centenary. I hope that my more selective portrayal will help render accessible Adorno's thinking, which is consistently critical of systems but in no way unsystematic. My study concentrates on a series of core philosophical concepts, using these as a base from which to trace Adorno's perspective when he deploys these concepts in fields such as the aesthetics of music and literature. The web of philosophical history into which Adorno's thinking opens—he gave life and power to the history of ideas in a way matched by few twentieth-century thinkers—is here brought to life only indirectly. But it is present as a subtext. This allusive method has found resonance among German-speaking readers, thereby seeming to justify my methodological decision.

For the present English-language edition I have expanded the text in several places. I have incorporated thinking from three essays that I first published in 2003 and 2005, in the *Zeitschrift für kritische Theorie* and in the collection *Modelle kritischer Gesellschaftstheorie*.

At this point I would like to thank my father, Hermann Schwepenhäuser, for his multifaceted introduction, over many years, to critical theory. I wish to acknowledge with gratitude how important reading *Negative Dialectics* with Sven Kramer in the late 1980s has been for my interpretation of Adorno. And I thank Herbert Schnädel-

bach, with whom I studied philosophy in Hamburg in the 1980s, for inviting me in 1995 to write this book for the series of “introductory” volumes he directed at Hamburg’s Junius-Verlag. Another contributor to this constellation was the philosopher Detlef Horster from Hanover, also a member of the advisory board for the Hamburg series, who has been my friend since my participation in the philosophy seminar at the University of Hanover. To Fredric Jameson, with whom I have had many conversations during and since my time as visiting professor in Duke University’s literature program, I owe insights into new ways of reading and contextualizing Adorno’s aesthetics and cultural theory. And I am especially glad that James Rolleston has taken on the task of translating the book; with him I know my text is in good hands.

GERHARD SCHWEPPENHÄUSER

Weimar, July 2006

Translator's Preface

DOES THEODOR ADORNO STILL NEED to be introduced? Arguably, he always will, not because he is an obscure figure, but for almost the opposite reason: he may be the last great intellectual whose aim was to synthesize the essential insights of Western philosophy in the interest of a critical social and political perspective. His predecessors in this modern German tradition—Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin—give an idea of what to expect in Adorno's work. His goal was to revisit their ethical and sociological arguments in light of two enormous twentieth-century experiences: the rise of fascism, culminating in the Holocaust, and the standardizing of "popular" culture as a commodity indispensable to contemporary capitalism. Adorno's early training in musicology gave him unique, often controversial insights into the latter phenomenon.

So wide-ranging were the critical tasks he set himself that Adorno's prose could become necessarily complex. Gerhard Schweppenhäuser has done a magisterial job of elucidating the core elements of

Adorno's thinking. My decision as translator has been to provide my own versions of the direct citations from Adorno. I sought thereby to generate a linguistic continuum that does justice to both Schwepenhäuser and Adorno himself. With the help of my multitalented assistant, Dell Williams, I have provided, at the end, a list of the works cited, as well as an updated list of scholarly books on Adorno in English.

JAMES ROLLESTON

Durham, July 2008

Theodor W. Adorno

an introduction

1

The Project of Renewing Childhood by Transforming One's Life

IN 1943, WHILE EXILED IN CALIFORNIA, Adorno became personally acquainted with the German author Thomas Mann, whom he greatly admired. As neighbors in Hollywood they became close both socially and professionally. The world-famous, Nobel Prize-winning novelist, who was nearing seventy, initiated the unknown music theorist, who had just turned forty, into his project of writing *the* novel about the dialectic of German culture. In Mann's *Doktor Faustus* the debate focuses on a culture that metamorphoses into an archaic brutality implemented with the most modern technology and methods of violence; this happens not by chance, but on the basis of the structural ambivalence inherent in that culture. In Hollywood, Adorno, through his understanding of music theory, became "coauthor" of Thomas Mann's novel.¹

In his account of the creation of *Doktor Faustus*, Thomas Mann

writes the following about Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund-Adorno, born in Frankfurt on September 11, 1903:

“His father was a German Jew,” namely, Oskar Wiesengrund, a Frankfurt wine wholesaler who had converted to Protestantism; “his mother, herself a singer, is the daughter of a French officer of Corsican—originally Genoan—descent, who married a German singer”: Maria, born Maria Cavelli-Adorno della Piana. “Adorno, as he calls himself, using his mother’s maiden name, is a person of the same kind of aloof, tragically astute, and exclusive intellectual temperament [as] Walter Benjamin, who, hounded to death by the Nazis, left as a legacy the book on ‘German tragic drama’—in reality a philosophy and history of allegory.”

Mann continues: “Growing up in an atmosphere totally dominated by theoretical (including political) and aesthetic, above all musical, interests,” Adorno achieved, even as a young man, an impressive intellectual impact in liberal Frankfurt. His happy childhood and youth were clouded, if at all, only by the antipathy that narrow-minded fellow students may have shown toward him, a privileged and highly gifted boy. Later, in *Minima Moralia*, he described these “malicious schoolmates” as “messengers” of fascism. Such experiences became the basis of his aversion to “conformist identity,” which he had been investigating since the 1940s using innovative methods in the social sciences.

Adorno was trained in philosophy by his older friend Siegfried Kracauer, an important literary journalist at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*: “For several years, every Saturday afternoon, he would read with me the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I don’t exaggerate in the slightest when I say that I owe more to these study sessions than I do to my academic instructors.”

As a student, Adorno was already an influential music critic in the spirit of radical modernism. He stood up for Schoenberg early on. Some of his own compositions were performed in Frankfurt. At twenty-one he concluded his study of philosophy, musicology, psychology, and sociology by gaining a doctorate in philosophy with Hans Cornelius. Cornelius was also the teacher and patron of Max Horkheimer, later the director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social

Research and founder of critical theory as a standpoint for social analysis. In 1925 Adorno went to Vienna for a year. We read in Mann's account:

This strange intellect persisted in a lifelong refusal to choose professionally between philosophy and music. It was all too clear to him that he was really pursuing the same goals in the two divergent fields. His dialectical way of thinking and his immersion in the philosophy of society and history—these traits are inseparable from his musical passion. Adorno pursued this passion in his studies of piano and composition with Alban Berg and Eduard Steuermann in Vienna. From 1928 to 1931, as editor of the Viennese journal *Anbruch* [Dawn], he worked on behalf of radical modernist music.

Back in Frankfurt, Adorno intensified his contact with the Institute for Social Research, linked as he was to Max Horkheimer, its director, by theoretical interests they had shared since their time at university. Adorno described their first meeting later in an "Open letter to Max Horkheimer" on the latter's seventieth birthday:

When I first saw you, in Adhemar Gelb's psychology seminar, since you are eight years older you hardly looked like a student to me; rather, I saw you as a young gentleman from a prosperous family, evincing a certain distanced interest in science. You were untouched by the academic's vocational deformation that leads him all too easily to confuse an involvement in learned matters with reality itself. Yet what you said was so clever, so astute, and above all so independent-minded, that I quickly began seeing you as superior to that sphere from which you held yourself imperceptibly aloof.

A main theme of the institute's work was research into the causes of the unfolding self-dissolution of bourgeois society that was to lead, in Germany, to the authoritarian state. In order to comprehend why human subjects submitted to domination against their own interests, and indeed identified with their rulers, Horkheimer's critical theory linked insights from Marx to a form of psychoanalysis progressively developed into a social psychology, and began to integrate into its investigations the methodology of empirical social research, barely

known in Germany at that point. In Horkheimer's institute, philosophy had the task of systematically fusing the interdisciplinary, largely empirical studies focused on this core theme into a materialist theory of the social revolution that had not occurred; the goal was to be able to contribute to such a revolution, to the extent it remained feasible.

Together with Herbert Marcuse, Leo Löwenthal, Erich Fromm, and others, Adorno as a music theorist worked in this context on an interdisciplinary theory of the overall social process, grounded in a critique of ideology. He investigated the social content of music in order to gain information about the dual character of artworks, understood by him as both autonomous constructs and socially determined products. He revealed the social content of music not from the outside, as something sociologically given, but through analysis of the formal aesthetic structuring of the works themselves. Adorno combined musicological analyses with sociological investigations of both the ways society shapes music and the public impacts of its production, reception, and distribution. Thus from his special field, music, he could gain insights into the social totality. At the same time, stimulated by Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács, and in a productive exchange with his teacher and friend Walter Benjamin, Adorno worked to articulate, in his dissertation on Kierkegaard, the social and potentially critical content of philosophy.

Adorno had met Benjamin in 1923, when Kracauer introduced them. "I saw Benjamin quite frequently, I'd say at least once a week, probably more often, during the whole time he lived in France," Adorno later wrote. "Later I also saw him regularly, not only on his visits here but above all in Berlin. I was very young then and he was eleven years older; I very much felt myself to be the apprentice. I know that I listened to him with total fascination, sometimes then asking him for more details. Very soon he began showing me some of his writings before they were published."

As Thomas Mann continues the story, in 1931 Adorno "qualified as a lecturer at Frankfurt University, where he taught philosophy until expelled by the Nazis." After that he tried first to "survive the winter" in Germany. At the same time, he sought to gain an academic foothold as an instructor in Oxford. Until 1937 Adorno regularly

returned from Oxford to Frankfurt for extended visits. After initial misunderstandings and annoyances he was able, in 1938, to gain clear status as collaborator in the Institute for Social Research and to emigrate to the United States with his wife, the newly graduated doctor of chemistry Margarete Karpplus. In Thomas Mann's words: "Since 1941 he has been living in Los Angeles almost as a neighbor." It was there that he changed his name to Theodor W. Adorno.

His ongoing work as a member of the institute's inner circle, which began after his emigration, first to New York and then to Los Angeles, defined not only Adorno's professional life but also his specific experiences of American life. While he never could reconcile himself to American culture, he also knew that he was in a sense indebted to it:

In America I was liberated from a naïve belief in culture as such; I became able to view culture from outside. To clarify: despite all critiques of society and awareness of the primacy of the economic, I had always assumed as obvious the absolute relevance of the spiritual. In America I learned that this obvious relevance was simply not so: there, there is no silent respect for everything spiritual, such as prevails in Central and Western Europe far beyond the so-called educated classes; the absence of this respect provokes the mind to critical self-reflection.

Just as important for Adorno was "the experience of democratic forms as having substance; . . . they are wired into American life, whereas in Germany they were never more than formal rules of the game—and I'm afraid they're still no more than that." He applied this social experience to a concept, rooted in Marx and Engels, that was already central to him before his emigration: genuine humanism.

Over there I came to recognize a potential for genuine humanness such as can hardly be found in old Europe. The political forms of democracy are just infinitely closer to people. Notwithstanding the much deplored haste, there is in American daily life an element of peace, benevolence, and generosity that is totally remote from the pent-up malice and resentment that erupted in Germany between 1933 and 1945. . . . In German sociological studies one constantly encounters statements by subjects that go: "We're not yet mature