

Theodor W.
Adorno

The Stars Down to Earth

and other essays on the irrational in culture

Edited and with an introduction by
Stephen Crook



London and New York

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The Stars Down to Earth

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The Modern Review

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*Bryan S. Turner, co-editor, The Penguin
Dictionary of Sociology*

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INTRODUCTION: ADORNO AND AUTHORITARIAN IRRATIONALISM

THE CHALLENGE OF ADORNO

This volume brings together four texts written by Theodor Adorno between the late 1930s and the mid-1950s. The longest, “The Stars Down to Earth” is for the most part a content analysis of an astrology column in the *Los Angeles Times* which Adorno wrote in 1952–3 during a return visit to the United States from Germany. The shortest, “Theses Against Occultism,” is on a related but more general theme and was written in 1947 as part of *Minima Moralia*. “Research Project on Anti-Semitism,” a review of the dimensions and sources of modern anti-Semitism co-authored by Adorno, appeared in the journal of the Institute of Social Research in 1941.¹ The title of the final piece, “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda,” explains its topic clearly enough. Published in 1946, the paper draws extensively on a

much longer study which Adorno had written in 1943, but which was not published in his lifetime.²

These four diverse pieces by Adorno are underpinned by a (more-or-less) consistent and coherent account of the powerful tendencies towards authoritarianism and irrationalism operative in mid-twentieth century Western culture. That account is of much more than historical interest: Adorno's mid-century diagnosis is still, or even especially, relevant in the *fin de siècle*, postmodernizing, 1990s. Most obviously, there is no shortage of evidence that authoritarian politics, aggressive ethnic prejudice and extreme nationalism are still with us. The genocidal war in the former Yugoslavia and the resurgence of fascism in Italy and Germany are only the most prominent examples that euro-centric media place at the top of our agenda.

Coincidentally or otherwise, the period in which such irrational phenomena seem to have proliferated is also marked by a broader cultural anti-rationalism. It is a truism of debates about postmodernization that the rationalistic "grand narratives" of enlightenment, progress and emancipation have lost their binding power in the advanced societies. Such societies evince a curious intertwining of dependence upon and hostility to science and technology. The anti-rationalisms of "New Age" cults, religious fundamentalism and deep ecology develop alongside and make use of the latest communications technologies and the latest findings in science. Adorno's diagnoses of the authoritarian complicities of astrology and occultism are directly relevant to these developments.

The remarks which follow do not urge a blanket endorsement of every element in Adorno's theoretical framework, each step in his methodological procedures, or every one of his substantive claims. There is much that is debatable, and a little that is frankly silly, in Adorno's work. But with all their infelicities, these essays throw down a challenge to students of contemporary culture to come to grips with the crucial, if unfashionable, problem

of authoritarian irrationalism.³ The main dimensions of that challenge can be mapped by three dogmatic propositions.

- Authoritarian irrationalism is an integral part of enlightened modernity, not to be thought away as historical relic, unintended consequence or marginal other.
- The affinity between modernity and authoritarian irrationalism must be sought in the psychodynamics of modernity, in the characterological bases and outcomes of processes of cultural, economic, political and social modernization.
- In their common manipulation of the dependency needs of typically late-modern personalities there is a direct continuity between authoritarian irrationalist propaganda and the everyday products of the “culture industry.”

The three sections which follow explore each of these propositions in turn: while the four texts collected here are not (by Adorno’s standards) difficult, their themes and contexts may not be familiar to contemporary readers. A fourth section offers a summary assessment of the contemporary relevance of Adorno’s work.

AUTHORITARIAN IRRATIONALISM AS ANTI-SEMITISM: THE DARK SIDE OF ENLIGHTENED MODERNITY

Adorno’s unsettling account of the modernity of anti-Semitism provides a useful point of entry into the more general analysis of authoritarian irrationalism.

For too many people anti-Semitism is nothing more than a pitiable aberration, a relapse into the Dark Ages; and while its presence is understandable in those nations of middle and Eastern Europe whose post-war status made the

permanent achievement of democracy impossible, it is on the whole viewed as an element foreign to the spirit of modern society.⁴

This view, set out at the beginning of the “Research Project,” is as prevalent in 1994 as it was in 1939–41. Indeed, there would be an added point: even for those who acknowledge the contemporary importance of ethnically-inflected prejudices and communal conflicts, anti-Semitism might seem a marginal issue. Afro-Americans, Australian and British Asians, French North Africans and the Turkish communities in Germany can be argued to be far more significant targets for racist politics than Jews. But, although twentieth-century anti-Semitism can appear definitionally linked to the time and place of the Nazi persecutions and eventual Holocaust, it does not go away.

Two German skinheads had, together with a Polish-born pub landlord, attacked and killed Karl-Hans Rohn . . . after beating him they poured alcohol over him and set him alight, declaring “Open Auschwitz up again, Jews must burn.”⁵

It is not only in Germany that European anti-Semitism has re-emerged, of course. It is a potent force in the post-soviet societies of Russia and the East, while the far West is not immune.

Trevor Phillips, the [Runnymede] Trust’s chairman said: “this report shows that anti-Semitism is still alive and – literally – kicking in Britain today”. Attacks include the desecration of a cemetery in Southampton last year with Neo-Nazi and anti-Semitism slogans, and the circulation of a letter accusing the Jews of the ritual murder of children. Rabbi Neuberger was one of many to receive a hoax greetings card for the Jewish festival of Chanukah last autumn showing a robin at a concentration

camp, with the words “away in a chamber” and “God rest ye merry gentlemen.”⁶

The ambiguous and persistent negative stereotype of the Jew, the “conceptual Jew” in Bauman’s phrase,⁷ portrays Jews not only as alien and inferior but sinister and powerful. It is strikingly easy for the criticism of established economic and political power to slip into complaints against the Jews: during the period of the Nazi rise to power the German Communist Party itself occasionally flirted with anti-Semitism, for example.⁸ In our own time there are examples of members of disadvantaged minorities giving an anti-Semitic gloss to their grievances. The tension between African-American and Jewish-American communities in New York has hit the headlines more than once, while in Britain as elsewhere, radical Islamic groups flirt with anti-Semitism.⁹

at night he is teaching young Muslims about their “enemies.” The Jews, he says, are the most powerful force in Britain. “Who signed the GATT agreement for Britain? Leon Brittan, a Jew. Who signed for the Americans? Another Jew.”¹⁰

The arguments of the “Research Project” considerably illuminate, even if they do not resolve, these difficult issues. Anti-Semitism is not an historical relic but “one of the dangers inherent in all more recent culture.”¹¹ In a striking and provocative claim it is held that modern movements for emancipation and the modernizing process are both fundamentally implicated in anti-Semitism.

Emancipatory mass-movements from the first Crusade to the Wars of German Independence are analyzed and shown to display either a frankly anti-Semitic strain or some formal equivalence to anti-Semitism. For example, German universities in the post-Napoleonic period “combined anti-Semitism with the German ideology of freedom.”¹² During the French Revolution

itself, the aristocracy was marked as a "race" to be exterminated. Further, "there are a number of accusations against the aristocrats which correspond to the usual charges against the Jews – shirking work, parasitic character, viciousness, international connections, their claim to be chosen, etc."¹³ The argument connects with Horkheimer's thesis¹⁴ that bourgeois revolutions have always repressed egoistic and hedonistic demands, thereby producing aggression, terror and the perversion of hopes for "liberty, equality and fraternity." Modern anti-Semitism is the typical expression of that perversion.

On the question of "Enlightenment," the "Research Project" shows that anti-Semitic themes can be found in the work of the most ostensibly enlightened of modern writers, from Voltaire to Kant and Goethe. However, this line of inquiry does not bear much fruit in the "Research Project" itself where it is simply stated that despite their devotion to "humanity," enlightenment thinkers were "rooted . . . in the reality of their environment; their impulses, their intimate sympathies, and aversions derived therefrom."¹⁵ No clear link is established between anti-Semitism and the logic of enlightenment.

This lacuna is largely made good in the later "Elements of Anti-Semitism" which Adorno wrote with Max Horkheimer. In addition to reflecting on the psychodynamics of Christian resentment of Judaism¹⁶ and on what Jay¹⁷ terms the "archaic roots" of anti-Semitism, Adorno and Horkheimer establish a series of links between enlightenment, conceptual thought, paranoid projection and anti-Semitism. The philosophical starting point is the observation that for epistemology after Kant "the subject creates the outside world himself from the traces which it leaves in his senses." It follows from the active role of the subject in projecting a conceptual framework onto sensory data to generate empirical knowledge that "reflection, the life of reason, takes place as conscious projection."¹⁸ Anti-Semitism is not the antithesis of Enlightenment reason but a morbid version of it

in which reflection does not set limits to projection. In such paranoid projections "the world becomes the weak or all-powerful total concept of all that is projected onto it."¹⁹ Paranoia is a pathological possibility built-in to all conceptual thinking, the "dark side of cognition" and the typical symptom of the "half-educated."²⁰ Anti-Semitism is a form of paranoid projection which has long been at the heart of Western culture, and it can be expected to flourish as social conditions swell the ranks of the disgruntled "half-educated." This argument is central to the link which Adorno establishes between the "irrationalism" of fascist anti-Semitism and superficially harmless phenomena such as Astrology.

A more conventionally sociological theme developed in the "Research Project" which bears on the modernity of anti-Semitism is that of "The Jews in Society." In their historical identification with the role of "middle-man," with so-called "non-productive capital" and with "rational law" Jews embody those visible features of capitalist modernity which are found most objectionable in petty-bourgeois and utopian anti-capitalism.²¹ Anti-Semitism is a nuance away from the "progressive" critique of capitalism, in a development of the well-known diagnosis of anti-Semitism as the "socialism of fools."

The account of Nazi anti-Semitism offered in the "Research Project" is curiously thin, superficial and unconvincing. It is argued, first, that "the replacement of the market by a planned economy of the state bureaucracy and the decline of the power of money capital makes possible the policy against the Jews in the Third Reich."²² Second, it is asserted that Nazi anti-Semitism is aimed at foreign, rather than domestic, audiences. "While frank disgust for the anti-Semitism of the government is revealed among the German masses, the promises of anti-Semitism are swallowed where fascist governments have never been attempted."²³ These formulae are an echo of the tensions which surrounded the gradual and reluctant acknowledgement by the

members of the Institute of Social Research that Nazism was more than just another political shell for capitalism, and that anti-Semitism was more than just a diversionary tactic for Nazism.²⁴ Paradoxical as it may seem, Adorno's most important insights into fascism and anti-Semitism arise out of the study of non-fascist societies.

The arguments of the "Research Project" and related texts on anti-Semitism can be read in at least two ways which preserve their contemporary salience. One way is to accept that, for European culture, anti-Semitism is not just one ethnic prejudice among others but the very archetype of authoritarian irrationalism. The "conceptual Jew" is the defining and threatening other of, first, Christian Europe and, later, the Europe of national states and cultures. When other groups are singled out as the "enemy within" – aristocrats or Asians, communists or Catholics – they are endowed with a kind of honorary Jewishness. Alternatively, "anti-Semitism" can be read as a metonym for more general mechanisms of prejudice and collective scapegoating, for an authoritarian irrationalism which may take on different surface characteristics in different environments. Either way, Adorno's account of the modern prevalence of anti-Semitism/prejudice and its link with authoritarianism needs to be understood in relation to his model of the psychodynamics of modern culture.

FASCISM, ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF MODERNITY

During the 1940s the Institute of Social Research sponsored a series of investigations into anti-Semitism and authoritarianism in the United States. The best-known of these "Studies in Prejudice," *The Authoritarian Personality*²⁵ set the agenda for post-war social psychology with its claim that the characterological basis of anti-Semitism and fascism could be specified and be shown to be widely distributed. In the words of a contemporary reviewer

anti-Semitism, far from being an isolated though unrespectable psychological phenomenon, is an integral component of a general “ethnocentric ideology” [which] . . . is revealed as the expression of a distinctive “authoritarian personality structure” whose unadmitted needs and defenses it serves.²⁶

The concerns and themes of *The Authoritarian Personality* were not entirely new to Institute members. Earlier studies in Germany had developed a claim that the collapse of traditional family-based authority would produce personality types susceptible to political-authoritarian manipulation.²⁷

The account of authoritarianism and anti-Semitism developed by Adorno and other members of the Institute in the 1940s is heavily dependent upon Freudian theory. Freudianism was the vehicle through which the Institute moved away from the rigidities and superficialities of their earlier reductionist accounts of the phenomena. The dynamics of fascist regimes, fascist movements and fascist propaganda are conceptualized almost exclusively in psychoanalytic terms in Adorno’s work. While this dependence presents a number of problems for a contemporary re-working of the analysis (considered below), it does not amount to a direct reduction of fascism to facts about individual psychology, as was charged by some critics of *The Authoritarian Personality*. Adorno’s Freudianism is a dynamic theory in which the “self” is shaped and re-shaped in the interplay between what Freud termed the “psychic apparatus” and historically developing social and cultural conditions.

A useful point of entry into what can only be an oversimplification of a complex argument is provided by one of the best-known ideas from *The Authoritarian Personality*. High-scorers on the “F” scale (a measure of potential fascism) are marked by a bi-phasic ambivalence in relation to authority: they are submissive to those above them in a perceived hierarchy and bullying to those below. Elsewhere, Adorno identifies this pattern in a slogan

of Hitler's, "responsibility towards above, authority towards below," and notes its sado-masochistic character.²⁸ The relationship which the fascist follower bears to the leader, a relationship which Adorno sees as definitive of fascism, is fundamentally masochistic. However, the leader permits, and sometimes requires, the follower to give vent to sadistic impulses.²⁹ A review of three issues associated with this relationship can structure this account of Adorno's theory of the psychodynamics of fascism. First, the question arises of how individuals come to be in a position where masochistic surrender to a fascist leader appears attractive. Second, the nature of the libidinal bond between leader and follower requires explanation. Third, these issues bear on the murderous aggression associated with fascism.

Adorno links the problem of susceptibility to fascist propaganda to the doctrine of the "end of the individual" which the Institute had begun to develop in the 1930s. The erosion of traditional family-based (paternal) authority undermines those patterns of individual development which produced that "mature" modern individual which is the subject of psychoanalysis. This development has a specific economic and social context. In a nice analogy Adorno and Horkheimer³⁰ liken the fate of the individual to that of the corner-shop which gives way to the economically more advanced supermarket. The individual is "the psychological corner shop" which emerged from feudal restraints as "a dynamic cell of economic activity." Freudian psychoanalysis "represented the internal 'small business' which grew up . . . as a complex dynamic system of the conscious and unconscious, the id, ego and super-ego." In late-modern society, however, the psychodynamically complex and autonomous individual is an anachronism. Individual decision and reflection give way in more and more spheres of life to corporatist policy-making and the repetitive formulae of mass-culture. For Adorno there is a fundamental symmetry between mass-culture and fascism, both of which feed-off and reproduce immature character

structures with high, almost child-like, dependency needs.³¹ Radio soap operas, newspaper astrology columns and fascist propaganda share the characteristic that they operate by at once meeting and manipulating the dependency needs of the pseudo-individual.³²

In a discussion of Freud's "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" Adorno identifies the central principle as the "libidinal" character of the link between the individual and the mass,³³ and transposes this principle into his own account of fascism and fascist propaganda. Adorno frequently remarks that few fascist leaders present themselves as traditionally "patriarchal" authority-figures, a development he ascribes to the decline of the family: "as the father ceases to be the guarantor of the life of his family, so he ceases to represent psychologically a superior social agency".³⁴ He quotes with approval Erikson's characterization of Hitler as not a paternal Kaiser or President but "the Führer: a glorified elder brother, who replaces the father, taking over all his prerogatives without over-identifying with him."³⁵ This image of a fraternal leader is particularly well-suited to the libidinal attachment between leader and follower, an attachment which fuses elements of identification and narcissism. The leader's power and charisma function for the follower as a narcissistic projection of his³⁶ own ego-ideal, a projection with which he then identifies. However, the judicious leader must take care not to appear entirely awesome, entirely severed from the ordinary life of the follower. To paraphrase Adorno, the leader must remain enough like the follower to appeal to those elements of narcissism which remain attached to the follower's own ego. This is why, in Adorno's colourful phrase, "Hitler posed as a composite of King Kong and the suburban barber."³⁷ The fascist leader is the "great little man," embodying in enlarged form all the collective virtues of the little men who are his followers.

Two further points connect with this relationship, one of which will be taken up shortly and the other of which leads

directly to the question of aggression. First, nobody who is now King Kong, now a suburban barber, should expect to be taken altogether seriously. It is a major theme in Adorno's analysis of fascist propaganda that it is in fact *not* taken altogether seriously by its audiences. As he writes, "Hitler was liked, not in spite of his cheap antics but just because of them, because of his false tones and his clowning."³⁸ These elements of parody, pastiche and simulation in fascism are critical to an understanding of its contemporary revivals. Second, and more immediately, there is consequential ambivalence in the figure of "big brother" who both stands in for and challenges the authority of the father: big brother can "sanction", in the name of authority, a collective violence which paternal authority itself would forbid.

Violent atrocities are much more than accidental "excesses" of fascism: for Adorno they are a manifestation of its basic psychodynamic principles in at least three important senses. First, aggression and destructiveness are at the core of the sadomasochistic ambivalence of fascism. Either more or less explicitly, depending upon context, fascist propaganda incites sadistic violence against the "enemy." German Nazis might explicitly demand that "Jewish blood must flow," while Martin Luther Thomas can only hint that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin," but the promise is the same: what authority had forbidden, the authority of the leader now requires.³⁹ In the promise and performance of permitted blood-letting, fascism enacts the fusion between its fundamental conformism and its pseudo-revolutionary activism as a "movement." Second, the masochistic counterpoint to this sadistic other-directed aggression is a drive to self-destruction. For the fascist, "destruction [is] a substitute for his deepest and most inhibited desires . . . annihilation is the psychological substitute for the millennium."⁴⁰ In this spirit, Hitler promised (and delivered) "night and fog" to the nation which had failed him. Third, Adorno frequently draws attention to the ritual character

of fascist, and particularly anti-Semitic, violence: “at the hub of the fascist, anti-Semitic, propaganda ritual is the desire for ritual murder.”⁴¹ The ritual element serves a number of functions. Most obviously, it connects with the syncretic paraphernalia of uniforms, insignia, oaths of loyalty and initiation rites which served to bind the follower to the Nazi “movement.” The syndrome is re-enacted by those criminal gangs for whom the commission of murder is a final initiation rite. At a deeper psychodynamic level the ritual elements of fascist aggression are “simply the organised imitation of magic practices, the mimesis of mimesis.”⁴² Here, the element of pretense, of an acting out which is not altogether real fuses with the notion of ritual as a sanctioned expression of affect. Reasserting his dominant theme, Adorno insists that “this loosening of self control, the merging of one’s impulses with a ritual scheme is closely related to the universal psychological weakening of the self-contained individual.”⁴³

DEPENDENCE AND CONFORMITY: LINKING FASCISM AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

For Adorno the prejudice, aggression and conformism of fascism could not be dismissed as a heteronomous intrusion into the otherwise civilized order of modern society. On the contrary, fascism is at home in capitalist modernity. If it is a form of “irrationalism” its roots are none the less also those of what now passes for “reason.” It was because he saw fascism as a possibility built into the very fabric of modern capitalism that Adorno was muted in his celebration of the defeat of its Italian and German manifestations. To state the case crudely, Adorno saw the commodified American culture of mass-consumption, movies, jazz and radio serials as putting into play the same basic psychodynamic principles that formed the basis of fascism: psychological dependency and social conformism. The homologies

between fascism and the culture industry can be explored in a discussion of three themes which are common to “The Stars Down to Earth” and “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda.” They can be labeled “the rhetoric of dependency,” “seriousness and unseriousness” and “rationality and irrationality.”

The rhetoric of dependency

When Adorno made a study of radio broadcasts by the anti-Semitic preacher Martin Luther Thomas and compared them to other similar materials he was struck by “the amazing stereotypy of all the fascist propaganda material known to us,” observing that the “cliches” or “devices” employed by fascist agitators “could be boiled down to no more than thirty formulas.”⁴⁴ The rather loose structure of the “Thomas” study consists of discussions of thirty-four such “devices” assembled in four larger groups. The first group of devices concerns the “self-characterization” of the agitator. For example:

“Lone Wolf”: “I have no sponsors, and no politicians ever put one dollar into this movement.”

“Persecuted Innocence”: “they write everything against me, they write that they are going to kill me.”

“Indefatigability”: “I am asking you only to sacrifice with me. I don’t ask you to work as hard as I work.”⁴⁵

In the second group of devices Adorno identifies what he takes to be the kernel of “Thomas’s method,” in the third he examines the specifically “religious” dimension of Thomas’s propaganda and in the fourth he lists the political topics which Thomas most frequently uses as “ideological bait.” For Adorno, the stereotypy of these devices is itself a psychologically well-judged ploy which he sees reflected in the wider culture industry and the

ritual element of fascism: "the prospective fascist follower craves this rigid repetition, just as the jitterbug craves the standard pattern of popular song . . . Mechanical application of these patterns is one of the essentials of the ritual."⁴⁶

Beyond this, Adorno documents the way in which each device sets off a series of psychological resonances which will further bind the vulnerable listener to Thomas's "movement." Many of these resonances have already been discussed in general terms. The "listen to your leader" device veils the emptiness of the Führer principle in a "fetish" akin to the principle of all advertising slogans. The "tingling backbone" device alludes to the atrocities committed by the enemy to mobilize the sado-masochistic ambivalence of authoritarianism. The "great little man" device portrays the leader as the mixture of "pettiness and grandeur"⁴⁷ which encourages two levels of narcissistic identification (with the suburban barber and King Kong). One particular device, or rather a collection of devices which Adorno terms the "*fait accompli* technique," is of particular interest because of its closeness to the theme of "Stars." The psychological appeal of many specific rhetorical devices turns on "presenting an issue as one that previously has been decided."⁴⁸ In fascist propaganda the movement has unstoppable momentum, the leader has unconquerable strength, and a final blood thirsty settling of accounts with the enemy is inevitable. The technique has many superficial attractions: people want to be associated with a successful concern and are likely to think twice before opposing it. However, the technique has an objective basis in the fact that "to most people their life actually is decided in advance." By resonating with this experience "the *fait accompli* technique . . . touches upon one of the central mechanisms of the mass psychology of fascism: the transformation of one's feeling of one's own impotence into a feeling of strength."⁴⁹ That feeling arises "mysteriously and irrationally" from the acknowledgement of weakness and identification with the victor.

As an afterthought, Adorno adds “by the way” that the same mechanism is activated “throughout modern mass culture, particularly in the cinema.”⁵⁰ The promotion and manipulation of fatalism is a central theme of “Stars.” Carroll Righter’s “Astrological Forecasts” column

indulges in a symbolic expression and psychological fortification of the pressure that is being continuously exercised upon people. They are simply to have faith in that which is anyway . . . they are trained to identify themselves with the existent *in abstracto* rather than with heroic persons, to concede their own impotence, and are thereby allowed as a compensation to go on living without too much worrying.⁵¹

The trade-off to which Adorno alludes here is the formula for a quiet life of dependency and conformism that is as appropriate to “getting by” in the consumerist United States as in Nazi Germany.

Adorno arrives at the most basic rhetorical principle of Righter’s column by nothing a powerful obstacle to its aim, which he takes to be “promoting conventional, conformist and contented attitudes.”⁵² The obstacle is simply that people “find out from everyday life experience . . . that everything does not run so smooth as the column seems to imply it does and that not everything takes care of itself.”⁵³ The column’s readers will experience life as making *contradictory* demands of them, and as Adorno notes, “the column has to take up these contradictions themselves if it really wants to tie the readers to its own authority.”⁵⁴ Adorno observes that the majority of “forecasts” in the column recommend different activities for different times of day, the chief division being between “A.M.” and “P.M.”. In short, “the problem of how to dispense with contradictory requirements of life is solved by the simple device of distributing these requirements over different periods mostly of the same day.”⁵⁵