

Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society

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Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society

Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas champion the goal of a rational society on the basis of many shared premisses. Yet they not only disagree about prevailing social conditions, they have profoundly different views about what a rational society should look like and how best to achieve it. This book defends Adorno against the influential criticisms that Habermas levels against both his account of existing conditions and prospects for achieving reasonable conditions of life.

Surveying these critical theories of Western society, the first chapter focuses on their accounts of relations between the economic, political, and social spheres. Since Adorno and Habermas follow Georg Lukács when they argue that domination consists in the reifying incursions of a one-dimensional form of rationality into all areas of human life, their disagreements about reification are discussed in the second chapter. Chapter 3 explores their conflicting claims about the historical development of the type of rationality now prevalent in the West. Given that both theorists claim to provide a critical purchase on reified social life, Chapter 4 appraises the critical leverage their theories actually offer. The final chapter describes their views about what a rational society would look like, and evaluates their claims about the prospects for establishing such a society.

Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society will be essential reading for students and researchers of critical theory, political and social theory, and the work of Adorno and Habermas.

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Introduction

What is distinctive about the work of Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas is its potent combination of philosophy and social science in the interest of developing a critical theory of Western society. Although a generation separates Adorno from Habermas, both theorists were affiliated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt – also known as the Frankfurt School – which once housed thinkers as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Eric Fromm, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. Habermas' sojourn at the Institute may have been brief, but he continues to pursue the project that animates the Institute's interdisciplinary studies: to formulate a critical theory of society that examines the impact of economic and political institutions on social life and the development of individuals. Addressing perennial philosophical issues in the course of pursuing this project, Adorno and Habermas often cross over into critical sociology. Their work has ranged from theoretical accounts of morality, aesthetics, and epistemology to empirical analyses of democratic and fascist tendencies in the West, and the psychological and social pathologies prevalent today. In addition, their views on methodological problems, such as the relative merits of understanding and explanation, and value-freedom in the social sciences, have had a lasting influence on the disciplines of sociology and anthropology.¹

Adorno and Habermas lay claim to the tradition of critical theory in their concern for establishing what Horkheimer once described as “reasonable conditions of life:” an association of free individuals in which each enjoys the same possibilities for self-realization and self-determination as all the rest.² Like other Frankfurt theorists, Adorno and Habermas critically target whatever impedes the emergence of such conditions. As Adorno's junior associate at the Institute in the later 1950s, Habermas was much influenced by Adorno's acute criticisms of the damage that has been inflicted on life under late capitalism. That influence is especially marked in one of his first books, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (published in 1962), where Habermas denounces the manipulation of public opinion and the deterioration of the public sphere in the twentieth century. His trenchant commentary in this early inquiry won Adorno's

2 Introduction

explicit approval. According to Adorno, Habermas had succeeded in demonstrating the contradiction that exists “between the modern emancipation of critical spirit and its simultaneous dampening” when he argued that the public sphere had become a mere commodity that “works against the critical principle in order to better market itself.”³

In his intellectual history of the Frankfurt School, Rolf Wiggershaus reports that *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* “was a disillusioning book for those who believed in democracy.” When they reviewed this book, sociologists Renate Maynatz and Ralf Dahrendorf objected that Habermas had “set himself an extremely high standard – one that was too utopian.” However, Wiggershaus contends that no other viable assessment emerged to counter Habermas’ claim that “dominant conditions in the post-war European democracies were far from what they claimed to be and far from what was desirable.”⁴ According to Habermas, rational-critical debate had been superseded by the machinations of special interest groups, political parties, and public administration;⁵ these institutions generate “nonpublic opinion” that substitutes for opinion-formation in the public sphere. Now required solely for the purpose of acclaiming decisions made elsewhere, the public has effectively been removed “from the processes of the exercise and equilibration of power.”⁶ To cite Adorno, democratic nations actually prevent individuals from making autonomous decisions about the social arrangements that would best serve their interests.⁷ If reasonable conditions of life would entail a society composed “of free, equal, and emancipated people,” the organization of society today “hinders all of that and produces and reproduces a condition of permanent regression among its subjects.”⁸

Adorno and Habermas are staunch champions of democratic processes and institutions. The rational society to which they devote their work would certainly be a more emphatically democratic one. Along with other researchers at the Institute, Adorno and Habermas also orient their theories towards the normative ends of freedom and autonomy. Indeed, as Horkheimer pointed out in his programmatic 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory,” critical theory has a profoundly ethical thrust. It is just this normative orientation that distinguishes critical theory from other theories. Horkheimer also states that the goals endorsed by Frankfurt theorists have been forced upon them by “present distress.”⁹ With its two World Wars, the conflicts, famines and diseases that have killed tens of millions of people since 1945, fascism, Stalinism, McCarthyism, the Cold War, globalization, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and environmental disasters, the twentieth century exhibited highly destructive tendencies that persist today. It is the suffering these phenomena have caused that gives rise to the normative goals of a critical theory of society. Speaking for the entire tradition, Adorno once wrote that the goal of a rationally organized society “would be to negate the physical suffering of even the least of its members, and to negate the internal reflexive forms of that suffering.”¹⁰

The image of a future society where suffering would be reduced to a minimum can only spring “from a deep understanding of the present.”¹¹ On this, Adorno and Habermas also agree. Both theorists tackle the problems responsible for suffering in their penetrating and extensive analyses of social life in the West. From his essays on fascism, the culture industry, the welfare state, and the pervasiveness of exchange relations, to his more esoteric works on aesthetics and negative dialectics, Adorno plumbed the problematic aspects of life under late capitalism. He insisted that positive change could be effected only on the basis of undiminished, critical insight into our current predicament. For his part, Habermas attempts to gain insight into this predicament by exploring such problems as the crises that periodically afflict capitalism, reification, civil privatism, democratic deficits in the West, and globalization. Sounding a strongly Adornian note, Habermas remarks in *Between Facts and Norms* that what the twentieth century, more than any other, has taught us is “the horror of existing unreason.” To put that horror behind us, reason must first put itself on trial.¹²

Some of the more important precursors of critical theory are Kant, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, and Weber. Adorno and Habermas not only draw on aspects of Immanuel Kant’s three critiques, they declare themselves partisans of the enlightenment tradition that Kant described in “What is Enlightenment?” Each sees himself as carrying forward this tradition with its emphasis on rational, autonomous, and critical thought. Adorno claims that his work contributes to enlightenment by promoting the self-critical spirit of reason (*ND*, 29). His ideal of a rational society in which humanity would no longer be “entrapped by the totality it itself fashions”¹³ cannot be dissociated “from the immanent process of enlightenment that removes fear and, by erecting the human being as an answer to human beings’ questions, wins the concept of humanitarianism that alone rises above the immanence of the world.”¹⁴ While Habermas will question the extent to which Adorno remains faithful to this process, he places his own work squarely within the modern enlightenment tradition. His work is intended to contribute to the project of enlightenment in which individuals progressively free themselves from superstition and authoritarian belief systems and submit to the unforced force of the better argument alone.

Although many critical theorists denounce the affirmative conception of reason that emerges in works such as *The Philosophy of Right*, where reason no longer stands against itself in “purely critical fashion,”¹⁵ they recognize that Hegel also advanced the project of enlightenment. With his dialectical conception of reason, Hegel tried, among other things, to resolve the tension between the universal (society) and the particular (the individual). Adorno does not believe that Hegel succeeded, but he agrees that this crucial tension must be resolved dialectically if enlightenment is ever to be fully attained. For Habermas too, the reconciliation of universal

and particular, which Hegel broached in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is crucial for enlightenment. Equally critical of Hegel's solution to this problem, Habermas nonetheless endorses the "idealizing supposition of a universalistic form of life, in which everyone can take up the perspective of everyone else and can count on reciprocal recognition by everybody" because this supposition "makes it possible for individuated beings to exist within a community – individualism as the flip-side of universalism."¹⁶ Furthermore, both Adorno and Habermas emphasize the importance of self-reflection in their social theories. The imperative that reason should criticize itself owes a great deal to Hegel's *Phenomenology* where the progressive development of rationality presupposes that reason has become self-critical.

Arguably, the work of Karl Marx is more significant than that of either Kant or Hegel for the development of Adorno's and Habermas' work. While Adorno, along with other first generation critical theorists, questioned Marx's claim that the proletariat could play the role of the universal subject of history (and Habermas followed suit), he remained indebted throughout his work to Marx's critical analysis of capitalism and the commodity form. Adorno also adopted Marx's view that all aspects of society are mediated or, in the words of Martin Jay, that no aspect of society can be understood "as final or complete in itself" because social life consists in "a constant interplay of particular and universal."¹⁷ Even Habermas, who progressively dissociates his social theory from a strictly economic analysis, directly links his critical concept of colonization to the problematic of reified social reality which Marx originally targeted in his critique of commodity fetishism.¹⁸ Although he rejects the Marxist premiss that the economic base determines the political, social, and cultural superstructure (an idea that Adorno will revise, but not completely abandon), Habermas accepts the claim that the economy defines the path of development of Western society.¹⁹ Indeed, from the early 1950s to the present day, Habermas' work has been marked by an extensive polemic with both Marx and Marxism.

Adorno and Habermas follow the early Marx in their criticisms of Western reason. While Habermas is a far more circumspect critic, both theorists would agree with the comment Marx made in a letter to Arnold Ruge in 1843 to the effect that "reason has always existed but not always in a rational form." Assigning to critics the task of deriving from the form of "existing actuality" a truer form of actuality – truer because it is more rational – Marx endorses the ruthless criticism of everything that exists in order to reveal the better potential that inheres in contemporary states of affairs.²⁰ As Seyla Benhabib points out when she quotes Marx's letter, this project of a critique of reason can be traced back to Hegel who rejects the idea that reason is "a mere principle of thought." Because reason "must embody and externalize itself in the world," its embodiment "may fail to give reason its most adequate expression."²¹ This conception of reason as

an imperfect historical phenomenon was also adopted by Georg Lukács who devoted some of his early work to a critical exploration of the form of objectivity or thought that currently shapes our social institutions, procedures, and practices.

Lukács' early work was crucial for the development of critical theory. In particular, his concept of reification had a significant impact on the work of both Adorno and Habermas. If Adorno deemed reification less important than its cause – namely, the “conditions that condemn humankind to impotence and apathy and would yet be changeable by human action” (ND, 190; translation altered) – he dedicated much of his work to understanding both the causes of reification and its various manifestations under late capitalism. Like Lukács, he claims that “the imposition of formal rationality on the social world” is largely to blame for those aspects of life under capitalism that Marx first criticized.²² Railing against the pervasiveness of formal rationality in the West, Adorno also argues that its damaging effects are so extensive that they may never be repaired. Although Habermas later rejects this ostensibly blanket condemnation of Western reason, he too adopted and revised the concept of reification that Lukács had drawn from Marx's critique of capitalism. In fact, *The Theory of Communicative Action* was written expressly to address the problem of reification.²³ Habermas derives his colonization thesis from Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* which, as Wiggershaus remarks, fascinated him when he first read it in 1953.²⁴

Lukács' notion of reification relies in part on Max Weber's theory of rationalization. To cite Andrew Feenberg, Lukács follows Weber in *Economy and Society* when he argues that reification involves “the extension of formalistic, quantifying reason to the phenomena of social life.”²⁵ This idea reappears in works such as *Minima Moralia* where Adorno laments that “[a]nything that is not reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist.”²⁶ Recently, J. M. Bernstein has even advanced the controversial claim that Adorno's entire philosophical enterprise is “best seen as an inflection of Weber's analysis of disenchantment and societal rationalization.”²⁷ Less controversially, Adorno recasts Weber's claim that rationalization not only adversely affects science, but subjects social institutions and practices “to the norms of instrumental rationality (efficiency, calculability, standardization, etc.).”²⁸ Indeed, Weber's underdeveloped rationalization thesis probably had a greater influence on Habermas who borrows extensively from it, while modifying the thesis in line with an insight he attributes to Lukács, namely that “the seemingly complete rationalization of the world has its limit in the formal character of its own rationality,”²⁹ or that the formal rationality Adorno condemned can never be totalizing. For Habermas, the process of rationalization has been beneficial in many respects. The rationalization of everyday life not only contributes to enlightenment, it also serves to counter the colonizing incursions of the economic and political systems.

Given the intellectual background they share, it is not surprising that Habermas' earlier work sounded so many Adornian themes. Nevertheless, with his positive assessment of the rationalization of the lifeworld, Habermas ends by taking a very different path from the one that Adorno followed. Indeed, in retrospect it is somewhat ironic that, in his review of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Dahrendorf disparages Habermas' disillusioning view of life in Western democracies on the grounds that domination has never been as unlimited as Habermas believes, and that there are countervailing powers which have had a decisive and positive influence on society.³⁰ In hindsight, this criticism is ironic because what Habermas now holds against Adorno himself is just his disillusioning view of life under late capitalism – a view that Habermas describes as biased because it focuses on the pathological tendencies in modernity to the virtual exclusion of countertendencies (*TCA* II, 391). In my comparison of the two theories, I shall also offer a critical assessment of Habermas' positive claims about the development of Western society and Adorno's largely negative dialectics of social life.

Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of the two social theories. It describes in very general terms Adorno's and Habermas' critical accounts of Western societies. Rejecting the claim advanced in much of the secondary literature that Adorno adopted Friedrich Pollock's state capitalism thesis, I argue that Adorno actually claimed the economy had become such a dominant force that exchange relations now permeate all aspects of life in the West. I then examine Habermas' account of the relations between the economic and political systems and social life today before contrasting Adorno's and Habermas' views about the nature and extent of domination in the West. Habermas argues that the economy and the state are autopoietic systems that exhibit a type of rationality which must be distinguished from the rationality characteristic of everyday life. While the functionally rational economic and political subsystems have had some adverse effects on life in the West owing to their colonizing incursions into the lifeworld, Habermas maintains that these effects are far less damaging than Adorno believes.

At the end of the first chapter, I take a critical look at Habermas' conception of the lifeworld. This examination introduces the more extensive discussion of reification in Chapter 2. Making use of Lukács' critical concept as a tool for diagnosing what ails modern life today, Adorno and Habermas nonetheless differ significantly in their views about reification. Adorno's concept of reification remains close to its Marxist origins in commodity fetishism; Adorno was interested in the social and psychological problems that had developed as exchange relations extended their reifying effects throughout society. However, Habermas objects to Adorno's predominantly economic interpretation of reification. Despite the obvious benefits it confers on individuals, the welfare state is equally to blame for reification, and Habermas focuses on the colonization of the

lifeworld by the political system. At the same time, he claims that communicative rationality, which characterizes action in the lifeworld, acts as a countervailing power to reification. I examine these arguments at some length before proceeding at the end of the chapter to assess Habermas' critical remarks about globalization in works such as *The Postnational Constellation*.

Since it is the prevailing form of rationality that Adorno and Habermas put on trial in their work, Chapter 3 focuses at greater length on their distinct conceptions of reason. Adorno's claim that Western reason currently takes the destructive form of identity-thinking is further contrasted with Habermas' contention that communicative practices in the lifeworld remain basically rational despite the colonizing incursions of functionalist rationality. In this chapter, I also discuss their ideas about the historical development of reason. Agreeing that reason has evolved, Adorno claims that reason cannot (and, indeed, must not) ever break free from the natural drive for self-preservation, while Habermas argues that reason has already broken with nature in an emancipatory fashion. These contrasting views about the relationship between nature and reason figure prominently in Chapter 3. It is here that Adorno's debt to Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis sharply distinguishes his work from that of Habermas. In the last section of the chapter, I evaluate Habermas' claim in *Legitimation Crisis* that he exhibits the greater partiality for reason. Arguing that Adorno can no longer make any appeal whatsoever to reason because he believes that reason is utterly distorted, Habermas restates his longstanding objection that Adorno lacks a viable foundation for his critique.

The problem of whether Adorno has adequately grounded his critique of late capitalism is one I explore in Chapter 4. Beginning with a discussion of the views of each theorist about ideology and ideology critique, I examine Adorno's claims about liberal ideology and its contemporary positivist counterpart before turning to Habermas' description of the historical genesis of ideology in the West, and his controversial thesis (borrowed from Daniel Bell) of the end of ideology. Where Adorno focuses his criticisms on the ideological effects of the identificatory reason that underlies exchange relations, what is ultimately at issue for Habermas is not ideology critique, but a critique of the colonization of the lifeworld by the economic and political subsystems. Targeting different phenomena, both critical theorists must nonetheless demonstrate that their theories offer a solid basis for a critique of the damage caused to human life by reification. Once I have examined Habermas' objection that Adorno's critical social theory lacks a viable foundation, I scrutinize the basis for Habermas' own critique of colonization. The chapter ends with an evaluation of the critical leverage offered by Habermas' discourse theory of democracy in *Between Facts and Norms*.

For Adorno and Habermas, critical theory has a practical intent: it is designed to provide the theoretical basis for surmounting reification by

examining its manifestations within human life while locating the rational potential in reified reality that points beyond it. Yet, given their conflicting accounts of the damage caused by the economic and political systems, it is not surprising that Adorno and Habermas disagree about what should be done to repair it. Chapter 5 explores these disagreements with a view to contrasting their ideas on emancipation. Adorno was so pessimistic about prospects for change that he questioned whether it is possible even to conceive of a more rational society. Yet he also maintained that a critical theory of society is needed if we are ever to achieve this emancipatory goal. Habermas advances a markedly different idea of what constitutes a rational society when he argues that social conditions need be reformed only because they already exhibit a rational character. It is in the context of their discussion of emancipation that Adorno and Habermas address the Hegelian problem of reconciling society and the individual. Chapter 5 concludes with an appraisal of their ideas on reconciliation.

In *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society*, I explore themes and ideas that are central to Adorno's and Habermas' social theories. This book is in part an expository tract that simultaneously maps the theoretical terrain occupied by both theories while examining some of the more important issues that divide them. Throughout their work, Adorno and Habermas pursue a common goal on the basis of shared premisses. While they disagree about what ails Western society and what can be done to solve its many problems, these disagreements should not obscure their common belief that there is an intrinsic connection between Occidental rationality, or the form of thought prevalent in the West, and social conditions today. Starting from this premiss, their critical social theories diverge in their claims about the character of Western reason, the pathologies that reason both exhibits and causes, and the prospects for remedying these pathologies. By comparing the two theories, I have been able to plumb the properly critical dimension of Adorno's and Habermas' work. For what is critical about their theories is just their evaluation of the existing organization of Western society, its institutions, practices, and forms of social life, in the interest of establishing a rational society.

Apart from its expository aim, this book also has a polemical dimension to the extent that it engages with the controversial issues treated by first and second generation critical theory with a view to taking a position on them. In fact, throughout this book, I shall defend Adorno against Habermas' influential critique. The problem of deciding which theorist offers the better account of Western society is not academic in the pejorative sense of that term; it has ramifications for the way we think about ourselves and the world in which we live. Among the issues that divide Adorno and Habermas are the effects of exchange relations on individuals and social groups, the plight of the family and the public sphere today, and prospects for establishing more fully egalitarian human relations in order to foster greater social solidarity. Moreover, the two theorists dis-

agree about the negative impact of welfare state agencies and procedures on our personal and interpersonal lives, and the scope and limits of democratic institutions in the West. By raising these issues in a critical and comparative context, I hope that readers will be encouraged to reflect further on our contemporary social predicament. I also hope that this book will be judged as much by the cogency of its defence of Adorno as by whether it brings to life the controversies generated within critical theory; that is, whether it succeeds in demonstrating that these controversies remain relevant to our self-understanding because they touch on problems that no one endowed with the capacity for self-reflection can plausibly ignore.

1 Society

Adorno and Habermas agree about the primacy of the capitalist economic system in Western nations today. Although the liberal democratic welfare state occupies a prominent place in both social theories because social welfare schemes have helped to pacify class conflict even as they foster dependency on state agencies and institutions, Adorno and Habermas contend that the welfare state remains subordinate to the economic engine of Western societies. They also share the view that action within both the economic and political spheres exhibits a distinct type of rationality that has increasingly made itself felt outside of these spheres. Adorno often uses the terms “identity-thinking” and “exchange principle” (*Tauschprinzip*) to designate this rationality, while Habermas variously refers to it as “functionalist rationality,” “cognitive-instrumental rationality” and, in a Weberian vein, “purposive rationality.” On a very general level, then, Adorno and Habermas view late capitalist societies as characterized by a “form of objectivity” (a term that Georg Lukács borrowed from Wilhelm Dilthey, which Habermas also adopts¹), or by a specific type of rationality that not only shapes our interaction with the environment but determines our “inner and outer life.”² They also maintain that the negative effects of this form of objectivity are currently felt throughout society.

Equating “the commodity character of the commodity” with “the abstract, quantitative mode of calculability” that determines a commodity’s exchange value,³ Georg Lukács argued that the process of societal rationalization consists in the coercive extension of such abstract calculability to “every aspect of life.”⁴ Adorno aligns himself with Lukács when he inveighs against the damage that the exchange principle has inflicted on human beings both within and outside of the economic sphere. By contrast, Habermas maintains that the rationality characteristic of the economic and political systems is not problematic when it is confined to regulating the action of agents within those systems. In fact, he argues that systems rationality is beneficial because it ensures the indispensable material reproduction of society. Yet Habermas does concede that instrumental or functionalist rationality becomes problematic when it extends beyond the economy and the state, and penetrates “into areas of action that resist

being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialized in cultural transmission, social integration, and child rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action.”⁵

According to Habermas, what is distinctive about Western societies is just this unilateral penetration of systems rationality into the area of action that is coordinated by mutual understanding, an area he calls the lifeworld. With his concept of the lifeworld, Habermas distances himself from the Marxist tradition to which Adorno remains tied even as he modifies Marxist theory by, among other things, supplementing it with Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Recognizing that the reifying incursions of the economic and political systems have damaged life in the West, Habermas expressly opposes Adorno when he contends that the symbolically self-reproducing lifeworld inherently resists these incursions owing to its multivalent communicative rationality. On Adorno’s far more sombre view, late capitalism’s *ratio* – the exchange principle – has reduced human beings to fungible, commensurable values, expunging what makes them particular or unique. This levelling of difference, or of heterogeneity, by exchange relations is now so extensive that thought and behaviour, instincts and needs have also been corrupted.

Adorno maintains that exchange relations have invaded human life to the point where, to cite the bleak epigraph to *Minima Moralia*, life no longer lives. He devotes his work to understanding the myriad ways in which individual, social, and cultural life have been subordinated to, and distorted by, the exchange principle. Sharing some of Adorno’s concerns about the reification of life in the West, Habermas nonetheless argues that, in the course of social evolution, distinct modes of symbolic interaction developed that continue to protect the lifeworld against the functionalist rationality of the autopoietic economic and political systems and the instrumental rationality of their agents. As a result, Habermas strongly disagrees with Adorno about the nature and extent of domination today. In this chapter, the divergent claims of these critical theorists about the structure and organization of Western societies will be examined with the aim of broadly characterizing the differences between their views on domination under capitalism. Since the differences between the two theorists may ultimately be traced to Habermas’ adoption of the lifeworld concept, the chapter will end with a critical discussion of this concept.

1 State capitalist or late capitalist society?

In the secondary literature on Adorno, the claim is often made that he (along with Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse) adopted Friedrich Pollock’s thesis to the effect that there has been a transition in Western countries “from a predominantly economic to an essentially political era.”⁶ Although Pollock also qualified what soon came to be known as his state

capitalism thesis, he did claim that the power motive was in the process of supplanting the profit motive in both command economies (Nazi Germany, for example) and mixed economies (such as the economy of the United States under Roosevelt's New Deal). Pollock's thesis generated a great deal of controversy among co-workers at the Institute for Social Research. In *Behemoth*, for example, which offers a detailed critical analysis of economic conditions under the Third Reich, Franz Neumann rejects the application of this thesis to Nazi Germany, asserting that the German economy under Hitler remained "a private monopolistic economy." Conceding that the monopolistic economy was "regimented by the totalitarian state,"⁷ Neumann also maintained that economic activity in Nazi Germany retained much of its independence from state control. In their accounts of Adorno's position on the state capitalism thesis, commentators such as Helmut Dubiel, David Held, William Scheuerman, and Douglas Kellner maintain that he sided with Pollock against Neumann, applying the state capitalism thesis to both Nazi Germany and other Western countries.⁸ According to these commentators, then, Adorno argued that political domination had superseded economic domination in the West; they thereby imply that Adorno rejected Marx's view of the primacy of the economic sphere over the political one.

It is important to understand Adorno's position on Pollock's thesis, not only in order to situate Adorno's critical and theoretical endeavours with respect to the Marxist tradition, but also to understand his ideas about the underlying structure and dynamics of Western society. Adorno discussed the relationship between the capitalist economy and the welfare state throughout his work.⁹ For example, in an early 1942 essay entitled "Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie" (Observations on the Theory of Classes), Adorno remarks on the growing "liquidation of the economy"¹⁰ while continuing to stress its primacy. In this essay, however, he neither explicitly nor implicitly condones Pollock's view that state control over the economy characterizes the most recent phase of capitalism in the West. Furthermore, even though he remarks on the emergence of a new oligarchical ruling class in many Western countries, Adorno also maintains that this class has disappeared "behind the concentration of capital." This concentration has reached such a "size and acquired such a critical mass that capital appears to be an institution, an expression of the entire society" (RK, 380). Owing in part to the concentration of capital, the ruling class has become "anonymous" in the sense that it has become difficult to identify the groups and individuals who actually wield power today. In this early essay, Adorno describes the economy as "totalitarian"; its totalitarian character is due in part to the lack of competition under monopoly conditions.

To be sure, Adorno did make reference to "the immediate economic and political command of 'the great' [*der Großen*] that oppresses both those who support it [the bourgeoisie] and the workers with the same