

‘Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society’ by Theodor W Adorno reviewed by Christian Lotz

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With this newest addition to translations of Adorno’s lecture courses given at the University of Frankfurt after his return from the US in 1949, the English-speaking reception of critical theory and Adorno will receive a new push, since this book allows the English-speaking world to develop a much clearer picture of Adorno’s social philosophy during the 1960s. Reading this text together with Adorno’s lecture course *Introduction to Sociology* (1968) and his contributions to the positivism debate (1968/1969), it becomes clear how deeply Adorno’s thinking was based on and influenced by Marx and political economy (which continued through to his sudden death in 1969). His shorter pieces on social theory, social concepts and social phenomena, including the essays on static and dynamic social categories (1961), and the short, but revealing essay entitled *Society* (1965), only strengthen this thesis. It is safe to assume that these central aspects of his social thought have taken on a more prominent place in his work in large measure because of the politization of the German student movement that Adorno encountered in Frankfurt. However, although recent scholarship has returned to some Marxist aspects in Adorno, the general reception and considerations of his work is still heavily focused on culture, aesthetics and psychoanalytic theory, and while these topics are undeniably central for developing a proper understanding of Adorno’s wide-ranging thinking, with this book, we can now view Adorno’s work more broadly, making it more challenging to deny the centrality of materialist thought to his work, which, in turn, allows us to appreciate the concept of society as the all-encompassing meta-concept that

provides the foundation for his thinking. Furthermore, once the untranslated lecture course on epistemology and the important *Philosophical Terminology* become available, this will serve to foster the understanding of Adorno's concept of philosophy as 'traditional' (e.g. Kant and Husserl), since, taken together, these texts will demonstrate that his philosophy includes not only epistemology and social philosophy, but also ontology, metaphysics, aesthetics and ethics. Indeed, even in its fragmentary form, a careful reader knows that Adorno's thought remains motivated by the idea of system and totality – despite the interruption of this idea through his negative dialectics.

The main topics that Adorno discusses in this lecture course on philosophical elements of a theory of society are the relation between rationality and irrationality, the technological veil, the relation between integration and disintegration, the separation of method and social phenomena, the fetishization of science, the constitution of social totality, political economy, class, ideology (most prominently visible in what he calls the 'enjoyment of exchange value' (45), and ego psychology.

The concept of social totality, though no longer spelled out in a Hegelian fashion, remains the guiding clue for Adorno's theory of society, given that only the concept of the whole – even if it can no longer be spelled out in all its details – can secure the vision of a better world and a praxis that goes beyond the goals and scope of social engineering. Adorno argues that this idea of social totality can only be grasped through the concept of 'tendency' which allows us to think social development as a contradictory process in which society moves forward *as a whole*. 'Tendency', as Adorno puts it, 'exists only in so far as society is already the totality, the system that is presupposed as soon as one speaks of tendency' (22). Accordingly, the concept of the social whole is a negative concept, whereas the concept of tendency points to 'the dynamic laws of totality' (24) and are introduced via a critique of Weber's theory of rationality and modernity. Adorno argues that history has shown that these Weberian concepts, once thought of as

fixed ways to understand modern society, turn into their opposite under fascism and in capitalist society. What Weber conceived of as separate ideal types of authority [*Herrschaft*] tend to turn *into each other*. For example, charismatic authority, as we find it in figures such as Hitler, Mussolini and Trump, are the *internal* consequence of what Weber calls 'legal-rational authority', and therefore they can no longer be ideally separated since capitalist social developments bring them together in one, *though contradictory*, development. Put differently, Weber's strict division between enchantment and disenchantment can no longer be upheld once we grasp both as belonging to the developmental tendency of the social whole. As such, according to Adorno, we can generate the content of abstract concepts only if we relate them to the social totality, which, for Adorno, is characterized by social antagonism, integration and irrationality.

According to Adorno, totality, once projected in the idea of a philosophical 'system', has now become an empty 'schema' (120) in scientific and empirical sociology through which phenomena are ordered and classified via 'procedural rules' (Ibid) that are no longer truly grasped as what they are. Productive thought and spontaneity disappear (122), and administered thought becomes more central. Against this, Adorno poses a critical thinking that returns to the things themselves and relates empirical research to a theory of the whole, now negatively conceived. It becomes clear throughout this lecture course that Adorno thinks this can be achieved not only through a critique of political economy, but also through a 'concept of transcendental reflection' (125) that synthesizes the static aspect of social categories with their contemporary changes and evolutions.

Totality and unity are established by what Adorno calls 'exchange society'. Exchange is the central social mechanism through which social interactions become not only abstract, calculable and instrumental (25), but also 'false', insofar as the apparent equality of these relations are based on their opposite, namely inequality, asymmetry and exploitation (78). Noteworthy is that in these

lectures Adorno connects his otherwise loosely used term 'exchange' to political economy (including money), as he becomes more concerned with contradictory tendencies in liberalism, markets and the 'interventionist economy' (29) through which the 'increasing bourgeoisification of the proletariat' (37) leads to ever tighter integration into capitalism (30) and 'growing socialization' (64) through technological standardizations. These tendencies render true liberation invisible, although, as Adorno underlines, the class structure is still in place beneath the surface of wages (58), beneath internal divisions of the classical binary class system and beneath ideology. The 'transition to the whole is blocked' (52) which, in turn, leads to a 'politics of the smallest step' (52) that results in social totality no longer providing the guiding light for praxis.

Moreover, Adorno argues that these developments are contradictory, insofar as integration is at the same time leading to social disintegration. Here Adorno follows a long-held view of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Pollock in particular) that liberal capitalism deteriorates into a society of 'rackets'. In this connection, Adorno diagnoses a 'collective schizophrenia' (66) in which integration and disintegration go hand in hand. Since larger social goals, still present in traditional class struggle, disappear behind increased social integration, the disintegration of the classes through group interests, family ties and criminal activities become more important than class interests. Whereas class and praxis are still oriented towards the whole, self-interested cliques and rackets now fight for *their own* social power and wealth: 'cliques cutting each other's throat' (Ibid). What we are seeing, according to Adorno, is the 'intensification of antagonism through integration' (67). Put differently, the more we need to subject ourselves to the increasing demands of 'technological rationalization' (81) and instrumental reason, the more the objective class structure becomes ruptured by rackets. On the side of social subjects, this means that increased social pressures and integration mean an increase in psychic deterioration and other mental health problems.

These tendencies can also be applied to sociology and social theory itself. Adorno spends extended time critically analyzing what he calls the ‘fetishism of science’ (86). In his analyses, it is important to acknowledge that the object of his critique is not science as such, but scientific methods as they are applied to social science: Adorno argues that their application leads to the disconnection of sociological research from the phenomena themselves. Fixed methods lead to a reification of social thinking and tend to dismiss the specificity of the phenomena in question and as a consequence, they become ideology, since methodology and technocratic understanding appear to be fused (106). Though he does not say this explicitly, with his critique of the separation of method and phenomena, Adorno remains close to the main insights of the German phenomenological tradition.

As a consequence of the fusion of empirical research and the administered world, nominalism prevails, insofar as nominalism denies the reality of concepts. As Adorno puts it, ‘the reality of concepts that once served the purpose of clarification, has largely changed its function and today serves primarily to prevent anything like objective definitions of social phenomena beyond subjectivity, both the subjectivity meant by these definitions and cognizant subjectivity’ (62). Put differently, the true task of critical social theory, namely, the task of grasping social *reality* becomes dissolved into subjectivism both on the side of method and on the side of social individuals. Empirical research obsessed with methodological procedures remains subjective and removed from the phenomena, as these methods are largely based on polling and other instruments; put differently, on the side of the researched reality, claims are based on subjective aspects of phenomena in the form of what people ‘believe’ and what kind of opinions they have. In this way, the concept of society becomes itself subjective and emptied out of all objective content. Instead of asking *what* we want to know we focus on *how* to know it.

The fetishization of science in sociology is, Adorno argues, the faint echo of what he calls the 'bourgeois spirit.' The bourgeois spirit is characterized by the loss of experience through 'concretism' (112), the instrumental focus on means instead of ends (138), and the middle-class obsession with securing what one possesses (115). This in turn not only leads to 'ego-weakness' (115) and the loss of autonomy, but also to increasing anxiety on the side of the bourgeois individuals (127). According to Adorno, this anxiety indicates that society is no longer in control of itself. Similarly, the fetishization of methods and empirical sociology leads to an instrumental view of social theorizing, which brings with it the danger of losing all insight into social reality as social totality: the focus on method, he argues, 'dispenses with truly understanding anything' (86). This loss of experience and understanding on the side of both sociology and the members of society is a sign of the increasing irrationality of the whole (128), which Adorno illustrates with simple examples, such as the increasing administration, the 'accumulating means of destruction' (133), the growth of military power (134) of nation states, increasing consumerism (134), and the 'consciousness industry' (135), which, finally, leads to a reified consciousness being 'incapable of remembrance, gratitude or contemplation' (138). There's no doubt that Adorno's picture of modern society is sometimes rather bleak; however, it reminds us of why, in his essay on Beckett's *Endgame*, Adorno points to Beckett's mutilated figures as true symbols of our time.

In large measure because Adorno remains general in his considerations, these lectures offer a rich source for ideas, concepts and reflections on phenomena that are still central for today's world. Adorno discusses not only social theory in the narrow sense, but also ego psychology, ideology, Weber, positivism and the increasing irrationality of our contemporary society. In contrast to a lot of contemporary critical theory, In Adorno, we see a thinker 'at work' who is authentic, fascinating and invigorating. The reviewer had the pleasure to teach last fall a senior seminar on Adorno's social philosophy, and everyone in this

seminar agreed that Adorno's thought is a beacon of light in our contemporary race through a dark tunnel. Reading Adorno's writings from the 1960s ought to be compulsory, as they remind us of the fact that not much has changed in a world in which, to use a formulation of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, 'life no longer lives' [*Das Leben lebt nicht*], inasmuch as '[s]ociety presses people to its breast, almost suffocates them and degrades them to planning objects' (126).

Finally, the lectures are not only meticulously translated and rendered into very readable English, they also include the critical apparatus from the German edition of the lecture course, which is very helpful for understanding Adorno's implicit and explicit references to other authors and the biographical and social context in which these courses were delivered. Overall, this lecture course in this translation is a joy to read!

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