



Adorno and Critical Theory

Hauke Brunkhorst

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The cover notes erroneously suggest that this is the first English assessment of Adorno's life and work. Even leaving aside the more specialised works on Adorno, this claim neglects several excellent introductions, most notably those of Rose (1978), Jay (1984) and Jarvis (1998). Since the first two of these are listed in the author's bibliography, I think we can point the finger at overzealous marketing by the publisher. Compared with these authors Brunkhorst is pitched at a level of accessibility between Jay and the more complicated Rose and Jarvis. Brunkhorst focuses on a few selected themes, and his book is perhaps not as well rounded as some of the other introductions. But he makes up for this by providing more than Rose or Jay on Adorno's relation to his philosophical contemporaries (especially Heidegger) and to recent continental critical theory, without becoming as dense as Jarvis's sustained philosophical study.

Published as part of a series on *Political Philosophy Now*, Brunkhorst's book actually places more emphasis on philosophical aesthetics than on politics, perhaps inevitably, given Adorno's scanty contribution to political theory *per se*. But Brunkhorst cleverly turns this round by emphasising that, for Adorno, in their very alienation from practical politics, experimental forms of art and philosophy make an important political intervention by preserving forms of freedom which have vanished from actual political life.

Brunkhorst focuses on Adorno's central dialectic of identity and non-identity. The closed-in identity of the modern subject is reactively constructed through its fascinated horror at anything non-identical to it, at otherness and difference. So are the totalising systems of thought and closed societies with which that subject is entwined. What is feared and envied is projectively terrorised and forced to conform to the dominant order, by either conceptual or actual violence. Genocide is the ultimate expression of this twisted logic of exclusion: the other is not merely rejected, but exterminated.

Brunkhorst examines the connection between Adorno's theory of freedom and his experience of exile from and return to Germany, steering a course between biography and intellectual history. Adorno's privileged upbringing and hot-house education as a musician and philosopher with the Schönberg school in Vienna and the Horkheimer circle in Frankfurt is covered, as are



Adorno's sometimes strained relations with the ideas of his other main theoretical mentors: Lukacs, Kracauer, Bloch and Benjamin. The roots of these thinkers in Kant, Hegel, Marx and Weber are clarified, but Brunkhorst does not provide a great deal on Nietzsche and Freud, who were crucial to Adorno's philosophy and social psychology. A little more on the precise nature of the relationship between theory and practice in Frankfurt School neo-Marxism and its uneasy relationship with more committed political variants of Communism would also have been useful.

Political upheaval and war soon pulled the rug out from under the half-Jewish Adorno, whose family was persecuted by the fascists and fled the country. During his exile in America Adorno produced with Horkheimer the text for which they are most famous: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In a critical move familiar from Habermas, Brunkhorst endorses their dark critique of totalising enlightenment, but is keen to emphasise that it is open to correction, seeking to avoid what he sees as the pessimistic side of Adorno's negative-theological critique, which runs the risk of going 'along with Heidegger and a broad stream of conservative cultural criticism. Critical theory falls back upon a negative philosophy of the history of decay' (p. 75).

Brunkhorst briefly treats Adorno's return to post-war Germany, his involvement in the attempt to rebuild German society, and his role as a public educator and critic (which is contrasted with Heidegger's hermetic withdrawal), but the political controversy which dogged Adorno's relations with his own radical students during his last years is neglected. Adorno was cautiously sympathetic but could not endorse the students' methods. Disruptive protests at the Institute for Social Research culminated in his calling the police — an action for which Marcuse berated him. Lessons for our times could be gleaned from these events, given the recent renaissance of ecologically motivated anti-capitalist street-fighting wo/man. The debate between Adorno, Marcuse and the students on how best to protest in a social situation which is not even pre-revolutionary, never mind revolutionary, is being unconsciously repeated today, usually at a lower level of reflection.

In choosing to sideline such issues in order to concentrate on philosophy and aesthetics, Brunkhorst follows Adorno, who was convinced that his own best political contribution was to complete his *Aesthetic Theory*. Brunkhorst devotes a lot of attention to this key text, which uses modernism to attack modernity, but does not devote as much space to the flip side of Adorno's commitment to the avant-garde: his more well-known critique of the culture industry.

For me, Brunkhorst's most extensive and valuable contribution is his attention to the complex of disputes on Adorno's legacy in modern critical philosophy, a complex which forms the philosophical background to many of the issues of cultural theory. Different lines of theoretical relationship to



Heidegger are crucial here, and Brunkhorst's book is dominated by an effort to clarify Adorno's complex theoretical relationship to Heideggerian thought, with Brunkhorst being careful to make clear the commonalities as well as the differences. Brunkhorst develops his analysis of Adorno and Heidegger into an interesting series of juxtapositions with post-modern, analytical and pragmatic schools of thought, carefully unpicking a range of affiliations which place aspects of Adorno as close to pragmatism (especially Dewey) and post-modernism (especially Rorty), whilst being well aware of the areas of distance which are emphasised more strongly by other receptions of Adorno.

References

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