Review

Adorno and democracy: The American years

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Ruthlessly negative, gloomy, and elitist, Theodor Adorno is often considered to be a poster child for all the worst tendencies of critical theory. Shannon Mariotti asks political theorists to consider a different Adorno – an Adorno who, by way of numerous essays and radio addresses composed for popular audiences in the United States, combines a critique of existing social conditions with a deep concern for and active engagement with the everyday practices and institutions of American democracy. Adorno shows how putatively democratic cultural objects like the radio or astrology columns function to produce passive, obedient, and potentially fascistic political subjects. He articulates and performs a practice of "democratic leadership as democratic pedagogy" (p. xi) that aims to strengthen the critical capacities of everyday Americans to identify and cultivate these objects' "nonidentical" counter-tendencies in order to become self-governing democratic subjects. Mariotti contends that Adorno's English-language essays and addresses fundamentally challenge what we think about Adorno, revealing him to be "not just a social theorist, but a political theorist, and not just a political theorist, but a democratic theorist" (p. x).

Adorno and Democracy makes significant contributions to Adorno studies, democratic theory, and critical theory. First, the book fills a void of serious reflection on how Adorno's exile in the United States influenced his development as a theorist. For Mariotti, the pieces Adorno penned during this period highlight the deeply embedded, constructive, and *political* dimensions of his overall critical project. Second, Mariotti successfully demonstrates that Adorno is a democratic theorist. Adorno understands democracy not as a formal institutional arrangement or a diffuse political ethos but rather as a *critical activity.* "Democracy," Adorno writes, "is nothing less than defined by critique" (p. 67). Third, and relatedly, Mariotti reveals how Adorno's philosophy of critique, or "negative dialectics," is itself loaded with democratic potential. Rather than reflecting reason's exhaustion with itself (as Habermas contends), negative dialectics makes possible new

practices of collective world-building. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *Adorno and Democracy* points to the need to reassess the relationship between democratic and critical theory. If Adorno – the figure perhaps most closely associated with critical theory's so-called "democratic deficit" (p. 14) – is in fact a full-fledged theorist of democracy, then how should we understand the relationship between the projects of democratic and critical theory? The Adorno presented by Mariotti suggests that critical theory and democratic theory must both become more deeply enmeshed in the objectives and methods of the other if either enterprise is to be worth its salt. In late modern society, a democratic theory must also be a critical theory, and a critical theory must also be a democratic theory.

Adorno and Democracy begins by examining Adorno's views on democratic life in the World War II-era United States. Despite his affection for the famous American democratic spirit, Adorno worries that modern cultural forces like radio music and newspaper astrology columns appeal to this spirit only to undermine actual, "substantive" democracy: "The American attack on democracy usually takes place in the name of democracy" (p. 25). A particularly powerful example of this dynamic can be found in the radio addresses of Martin Luther Thomas, a popular 1930s Christian right-wing, proto-fascist radio personality, who claims to speak for the "little guy" left behind during the Great Depression (pp. 35–41). Adorno argues that while Thomas's performances make generous use of democratic rhetoric, they function to intensify his listeners' sense of economic powerlessness and racial resentment and to generate a cult of personality around Thomas himself. The resonances between Thomas's (mis)uses of popular media and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign are unmistakable and – to Mariotti's great credit – testify to Adorno's relevance to democratic theory today.

The book's second and third chapters unpack Adorno's account of what "substantive" democracy might entail in modern capitalist society. Adorno argues that the ability of everyday people to govern themselves requires the cultivation of capacities for critique – that is, for thinking, feeling, and acting against society's various apparatuses of control and discipline. Democracy involves an experiential "comportment" toward seeing and hearing the "nonidentical," or those rebellious qualities of modern life that resist the profit motive or imperatives of conformity (p. 47). Mariotti writes: "listening to the dissonant calls of the nonidentical can prompt the critical and negating mode of thinking and acting that represents the essence of democracy" (p. 46). Through such critical activity (which is really nothing other than negative dialectics), modern subjects strengthen their ability to govern themselves. Adorno thus associates democratic autonomy with *receptivity*, or an openness to difference that can stimulate projects of collective world-building. With this concern for material experience and receptivity, Mariotti understands Adorno as anticipating the work of contemporary affect theorists like Berlant, Ahmed, and Cvetkovich (pp. 58–65).

The book's final three chapters explore the possibility of cultivating these critical capacities on a broad social scale without resorting to models of leadership and education that re-inscribe hierarchy and dependence. Adorno believes that truly democratic modes of leadership and education are possible provided that we dispense with the conventional focus on a leader or educator's extraordinary qualities (e.g., strength, wisdom, charisma). A democratic leader works with everyday people – as equals – to identify and cultivate the possibilities for resistance and self-government already present in their lives: "anyone who can stimulate other people's capacity for critical thinking is a democratic leader" (p. 92). The democratic leader is necessarily a democratic *pedagogue*, akin to Paulo Freire's revolutionary educator. Rather than seeking to fill a student's brain with information, the democratic pedagogue seeks to foster critical consciousness. The democratic educator speaks to her "students" on their own level and encourages them to see the "everyday twinges, pauses, interruptions, and anxieties" of modern life (i.e., the nonidentical) as openings for resistance and becoming-otherwise (p. 143). The book's sixth and final chapter reviews how Adorno himself enacts this vision of democratic leadership as democratic pedagogy in his essays and addresses on radio, astrology, and music that were introduced in Chapter One.

Adorno and Democracy offers a carefully researched, well-written, and long overdue rethinking of Adorno's contributions to political theory. I suspect, however, that Mariotti unduly limits the scope of her book's intervention with a somewhat curious rendering of the relationship between modern capitalist society and democratic politics in Adorno. In particular, Mariotti repeatedly notes how, according to Adorno, capitalism and its cultural products impair one's ability to see social relations for what they truly are. Making frequent use of metaphors of depth and filtering, she argues that critique, and by extension, democracy, break through these illusions and delusions by reconnecting with the rebellious elements (the nonidentical) that persist beneath capitalist relations. Mariotti writes: "We habitually experience life in a way that is largely filtered. But if we can try both to learn to see the outlines of these mediating conventions and to perceive our world more directly, we can better appreciate the forces that take power away from us by obstructing our ability to think and feel for ourselves" (p. 74).

This is a decidedly undialectical – and thus very un-Adornian – view of the material and intellectual forces capable of resisting modern capitalism. Mariotti's claim that for Adorno "humans fundamentally possess a capacity for critical thinking and intellectual emancipation that is then dulled and deadened by the dependency-inducing culture of modernity" (p. 107) seems at odds with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s core argument that the power of human reason is both dulled *and* sharpened by bourgeois historical development. The capacity for critique is not an "aboriginal" human endowment that is "bound, gagged, and blindfolded" in capitalist society (pp. 12–13); this capacity is itself the *product of* capitalist historical development. Similarly, the nonidentical is not a "quality" of things that

persists despite capitalism (p. 7), but is rather what capitalism produces amidst its ceaseless identitarian activity. Mariotti's exhortations to seek "deeper" (p. 17) or more "dynamic," (p. 53) "immediate," (p. 7) and "direct" (p. 74) forms of life *beneath* capitalism reify the contradictions that the historical development of capitalism makes possible. The task for critical thought (and thus democratic leadership and democratic pedagogy) is not to heed a call emanating from some nonidentical substrate, but rather to *cultivate nonidentity*. An Adorno-inspired democratic theory would involve intellectual, affective, and collective encounters that foster, heighten, and actualize the contradictions within a social order that assumes and promises democratic self-government but that produces passive, dependent, and isolated subjects.

Refusing to ground the contradictions of modernity in a static conception of pre- or non-capitalist human life might allow for a more radical articulation of the democratic theory that Mariotti so skillfully recovers in Adorno. Despite this limitation, Mariotti's *Adorno and Democracy* makes a giant leap forward in demonstrating the importance of Adorno's critical theory for contemporary democratic politics, and I expect that this book will generate additional scholarship on the connections between Adorno, critique, and democracy.

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