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Adorno's Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany's 1960s*

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Adorno inspired much of Germany's 1960s student movement, but he came increasingly into conflict with this movement about the practical implications of his critical theory. As early as 1964, student activist lamented what they saw as an unbearable discrepancy between his analysis and his actions.¹ As one of his PhD students later expressed it:

[...] Adorno was incapable of transforming his private compassion towards the “damned of the earth” into an organized partisanship of theory engaged in the liberation of the oppressed. [...] his critical option that any philosophy if it is to be true must be immanently oriented towards practical transformation of social reality, loses its binding force if it is not also capable of defining itself in organizational categories. [...] Detachment [...] drove Adorno [...] into complicity with the ruling powers. [...]. As he moved more and more away from historical

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¹ For example, they produced leaflets with passages from Adorno's own work – passages such as the following: “There can be no covenant with this world; we belong to it only to the extent that we rebel against it” – and invited students to contact Adorno to complain that he did not act accordingly (see Esther Leslie, ‘Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence on the German Student Movement’, *New Left Review* I/233, January-February 1999, pp. 118-123, here p. 119).

praxis, Adorno's critical theory fell back into traditional forms of contemplation which could hardly be justified.²

Similarly, a group of socialist students distributed leaflets in December 1968 that accused Adorno of being "critical in theory, conformist in practice."³ Others joined the students in accusing Adorno of a quietism that is politically objectionable and in contradiction to his own theory – including, as we will see, his friend and colleague Marcuse.

In this paper, I will reconstruct, and partially defend, Adorno's views on theory and (political) praxis in Germany's 1960s in eleven theses. The defence is partial because I do not think Adorno's take on Vietnam and the international situation is convincing, and I also readily admit that he seriously misjudged the situation on that fateful 31.01.1969, when he called the police to clear students from the premises of the Institute of Social Research (see Thesis 9 below). Still, for the most part, I will suggest that there is no contradiction between Adorno's theory and practice, but the latter followed naturally from the former, and that we can learn much from his stance. By way of preamble, consider this statement by Marx:

What is to be done, and done *immediately*, at any given, particular moment in the future, depends, of course, wholly and entirely on the actual historical circumstances in which action is to be taken.⁴

² Hans-Jürgen Krahl, 'The Political Contradiction in Adorno's Critical Theory' [1975], in Jay M. Bernstein, ed., *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*, London: Routledge, 1994, Vol. IV, pp. 117-9; translation amended.

³ Quoted in Leslie, 'Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence', p. 119. As we see later, Adorno works with, but also questions, the (stark) distinction between theory and praxis operative in such criticisms (see esp. thesis 5 below).

⁴ Karl Marx, 'Letter to Nieuwenhuis', 22.02.1881, MEW XXXV: 160/MECW XLVI: 66; Marx' emphasis; quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972ff, Vol. 10.1, p. 291. Future references will be simply to volume and page numbers.

This statement reminds us of a commonplace in politics and political philosophy, but it is one that that is perhaps not always sufficiently appreciated. I want to suggest that for Adorno it is absolutely pivotal: his often attacked and maligned stance during the 1960s is based on his analysis of these historical circumstances, according to which we have to navigate, in Cook's words, "between the Scylla of quietistic withdrawal and the Charybdis of pathological forms of collection action."⁵ As we see, Adorno situates himself concretely in response to how various tensions between theory and praxis play out historically.⁶

1

The transformation of the world failed.

The above first thesis is perhaps most directly expressed at the beginning of *Negative Dialectics*:

Philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive because the moment of its realization was missed. The summary judgement that it had merely interpreted the world is itself crippled by resignation before reality, and becomes a defeatism of reason after the transformation of the world failed.⁷

⁵ Deborah Cook, 'Ein Reaktionäres Schwein? Political Activism and Prospects for Change in Adorno', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 1/227, 2004, pp. 47-67, here p. 66.

⁶ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models*, trans. by H.W. Pickford, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 131, 261.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 3; alternative translation by D. Redmond (available online: <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>; last accessed 22/08/2011 at 12.22h) used for this passage.

The first remarkable aspect of this passage is Adorno's claim that the moment of the realisation of philosophy was *missed*.⁸ This suggests that Adorno thought there was a window of opportunity for a revolution – presumably, he is thinking here of the period from the Russian Revolution and the later stages of the First World War to fascism taking power in Italy, Germany, and Spain and the show trials in Moscow. During this period, class conflict was often openly fought, with a number of failed revolutionary attempts in Germany and elsewhere, while the Soviet Union was struggling to survive and establish a socialist society. The factors which explain the failure of the revolution in Germany and elsewhere are manifold – ranging from open repression to more subtle hindrances – and I cannot do justice to them here. The crucial point is that the missed opportunity had world-historical significance for Adorno. Indeed, it presents the foundational problem for (what was later known as) the Frankfurt School. Its members asked: Why and how was this opportunity missed? How could it happen that the proletariat – and humanity as a whole – remained in servitude? In particular, how could this be, despite the fact that, at least in the industrial West, the objective conditions for a social world without hunger and the need for domination had been in place?

One of the most damaging disappointments of these tragic times was the tyrannical nature of the Soviet Union. The Moscow show trials of 1936 are a turning point for Adorno and Horkheimer, and after these trials, they refused to support the regime or, even, place any hope in its future. These trials brought down the final curtain on freedom of expression and the possibility of critique, and revealed this supposedly socialist society as the bureaucratic dictatorship that it had become. Turning Marxist theory into dogma and suppressing (critical) thinking were – at least in Adorno's view – important factors for why the transformation of

⁸ See also *Critical Models*, pp. 15, 276.

the world failed,⁹ both in the Soviet Union and later nominally socialist regimes. This necessitated renewed reflection – as Adorno says in the above quoted passage, “Philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive *because* the moment of its realization was missed.”¹⁰ If the transformation of the world has failed, then this does not leave unaffected the theory that said we should transform, not merely interpret, the world.¹¹ Critical scrutiny of Marxist theory and its wider philosophical background is required,¹² with some of its elements having been shown to be deficient (about which more later).¹³ Not least, what we need is an analysis of the Soviet Union and of how and why it embarked on the wrong path – a path that included the use of forced labour and torture,¹⁴ and the repressions of the more progressive socialist developments in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.¹⁵

⁹ See *Negative Dialectics*, p. 143; and 20.1:391; see also *Critical Models*, p. 290.

¹⁰ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 3; my emphasis.

¹¹ See also *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 204f.

¹² *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 3, 144.

¹³ It is impossible to characterise what Adorno means by philosophy (or “theory”) in a way that is both accurate and succinct. However, it might help the reader to note that philosophy is not seen by Adorno as radically distinct from or discontinuous with sociology, history, and other theoretical endeavours (in this way he remains indebted to Horkheimer’s interdisciplinary programme). His thesis that philosophy survives extends, thus, not only to what would be traditionally recognised as philosophy. Having said this, one important reason for why Adorno defends even philosophy traditionally understood – and not just theoretical endeavours further down the continuum of abstract reflection, such as historical, economic, or sociological analysis – is that ideas and theories shape the way we see and experience the world; and, in the absence of revolutionary transformation, combating distorted consciousness falls to theory (see also theses 4-5 below).

¹⁴ See 20.1:391.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? – A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, trans. by R. Livingstone *et al.*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 114.

2

Praxis is postponed for the foreseeable future.¹⁶

To understand this second thesis, we need to clarify first what Adorno means by “praxis [*Praxis*]”. Like many of the terms he uses, this term has multiple meanings in his writings and often more than one of them is at play. We might want to distinguish at least six meanings:¹⁷

1. Praxis as activity/behaviour [*Tätigkeit*].
2. Praxis as productive labour.
3. Praxis as revolutionary/transformational activity.
4. Praxis as resistance [*Widerstand*] and not joining in [*Nicht-Mitmachen*].
5. Praxis as actionism [*Aktionismus*].¹⁸
6. Praxis as activity in a free society.

When Adorno claims that praxis is postponed for the foreseeable future, then what he means is that *revolutionary activity* is postponed for the foreseeable future.¹⁹

¹⁶ See *Negative Dialectics*, p. 3; see also p. 245; *Critical Models*, pp. 14, 190; 11:430; Letter to Grass 04/11/1968, reprinted in R. Tiedemann, ed., *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VI*, München: edition text und kritik, 2000, pp. 78-82, here pp. 79f, 81; and Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, ‘Correspondence on the German Student Movement’, *New Left Review* 1/233, January-February 1999, pp. 123-36, here Adorno to Marcuse 19/06/1969, p. 131.

¹⁷ These distinctions are for analytic purposes, and I am not denying that there are interrelations between the six senses (for example, 1 might be seen as the *genus* of which 2-6 are (some of) its instances).

¹⁸ I’ll explain what Adorno means by this later; see thesis 10.

¹⁹ Adorno holds this thesis, despite the fact that he thinks that two of the conditions for revolutionary activity identified by Marx have been in place since the missed opportunity in the first half of the 20th century: (1) the development of the forces of production has advanced to a point where humanity could live without hunger and domination while radically reducing labour time (see *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, pp. 118, 121; 8:585; see also T.W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, ‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, *New Left Review* 1/65, September-October

What explains this pessimistic assessment of the historical conditions? One of the decisive factors – perhaps *the* decisive factor – is that, according to Adorno, the proletariat has been integrated into the capitalist social world in such a way as to blunt its revolutionary potential.²⁰ As early as 1942, Adorno highlights this factor as key in understanding the failed opportunities of the 1920s and 30s,²¹ and it remains significant in the years after the World War II.²² There are at least three aspects at play here. Firstly, Adorno claims that Marx’ Immiseration Thesis – in a nutshell, the thesis that capitalism would tend to immiserate and impoverish more and more people, so that in the end they would have nothing to lose but their chains – turned out to be false, at least as far as the industrialised West is concerned.²³ In other words, substantial parts of the working class had been *materially integrated* into capitalist society by way of higher living standards. Secondly, the proletariat has been integrated in terms of their *consciousness*²⁴ – in fact, generally the social control of late modernity extends to people’s minds. Thus, while the class structure persists objectively,

2000, pp. 33-61, here pp. 54f); and (2) late modern society, especially in its openly capitalist guise, remains antagonistic as well as a class society (Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Society’, in S.E. Bronner & D.M. Kellner, eds., *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, New York/London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 267-75, here p. 272; and *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, p. 114). Adorno maintains that a better world is, these conditions notwithstanding, *objectively* blocked (*Critical Models*, pp. 287f; see also 20.1:399) and that revolutionary attempts are bound to fail (as Adorno remarks when commenting on the events of May 1968 in Paris; see ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower? A conversation with Theodor W. Adorno’, edited, translated, and introduced by G. Richter, *Monatshefte* 94.1, Spring 2002, pp. 10-23, p. 17).

²⁰ *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, pp. 96, 99f, 103, 107; and *Critical Models*, pp. 14, 72.

²¹ *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, pp. 96, 99f, 102-5, 107.

²² *Critical Models*, 14, 72.

²³ ‘Society’, p. 272; *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, pp. 103, 112, 114, 116; and 20.2:676.

²⁴ ‘Society’, p. 272.

class consciousness is largely lacking and has been diminishing since the 1920s and early 1930s.²⁵ Specifically, Adorno repeatedly highlights the use of mass media and culture (the “culture industry”, as he calls it) as socially integrative forces – they distract people from their own real concerns, mould their desires and wishes (not least via advertisement), and provide ample room for the projection of their dreams and fears (see, most notably, the culture industry chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*).²⁶ Thirdly, the tyrannical outcome of nominal socialism in the Soviet Union, later in its satellites, and then in China and Asia presents a key barrier for emancipation.²⁷ In a postscript to a 1955 study of workers at a factory in Germany, Adorno writes that the fact that the workers operate completely within the capitalist system – even when they complain and criticise capitalism – is to a large extent explained by their rejection of the Soviet Union and disillusionment about socialist alternatives.²⁸

With the integration of the proletariat, the key element is missing from the Marxist view of a radical transformation: a social group that is (a) capable of gaining consciousness of the social world; (b) also capable of transforming this world as well as (c) required by its increasingly miserable condition to transform it (and in such a way, so as to free the whole of humanity, not just to replace one set of particular interests with another). These various elements now come apart. Those who can gain insight into the deeply problematic nature of late modern society might no longer be able to transform it and often rely on material and other privilege to gain the critical vantage point (they inhabit the “Grand Hotel Abyss”, in

²⁵ ‘Society’, p. 272; and *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, p. 114.

²⁶ See also *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, pp. 117f, 120; 8:455f.

²⁷ 20.1:337, 393; 20.2:675, 676.

²⁸ 20.2:675, 676.

Lukács' memorable phrase).²⁹ Those who could transform the social world are no longer best placed to understand it and are often too materially integrated to enter into radical opposition to this world, but instead pursue narrow interests within it (say when the German, highly skilled working class pursues their narrowly conceived interests against less skilled working classes in Germany and other countries). Finally, those who are most miserable might neither have the capacity to understand nor, crucially, to transform the social world. According to Adorno, no other social subject that reunites the three aspects has replaced the proletariat or could do so in the foreseeable future.

A second decisive factor for why revolutionary practice is blocked is that such practice would presuppose free and possibly autonomous individuals, but – according to Adorno – they do not exist any longer.³⁰ While Marx might have been wrong in claiming that capitalism will impoverish more and more people *materially*, the Immiseration Thesis has proved to be correct if understood differently: capitalism – despite appearances and ideological claims to the contrary – has diminished increasingly the freedom of its members, and the same holds true of the nominally socialist regimes that sprung up in opposition to it. Capitalism presents itself as offering an unprecedented expansion of choice, but this choice is mainly one among its “an immense accumulation of commodities.” Underneath this shallow appearance, genuine freedom and autonomy are, in fact, denied to all of us – either in ways we do not realise (because we internalised external pressures) or, if need be, by open repression.³¹ Ever since the end of the liberal phase of capitalism and the transition to the

²⁹ G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, translated from the German by Anna Bostock, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971, p. 22.

³⁰ See *Critical Models*, p. 270; see also ‘Society’, pp. 274f; and *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, p. 120.

³¹ See *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 215f, 218f, 221, 232, 262, 273f, 297.

administered phase in the 1930s, the internal mechanisms of the modern social world no longer (re-)produce the kind of freedom that would be required for revolutionary activity.³²

One further factor for Adorno is that no appropriate forms of revolutionary, but non-repressive collective agency have yet developed.³³ While I briefly return to this issue below, it is already noteworthy that he suggested that every organisation has an internal tendency to expand and to become divorced from the purposes for which it exists.³⁴ Again, the nominally socialist regimes serve as cautionary tales in this regard.

³² Similarly, Adorno thinks that identification and solidarity with the suffering of others is structurally eroded in modern societies – survival in both capitalism and nominal socialism requires people to be cold (see *Negative Dialectics*, p. 363; and *Critical Models*, pp. 201, 274; see also ‘Correspondence’, Adorno to Marcuse 05/05/1969 and Marcuse’s reply 04/06/1969, pp. 127, 129). This also makes revolutionary activity more difficult.

³³ One might think that the absence of a genuinely socialist party in Germany is a related obstacle. Attempts to ban the communist party (KPD) as unconstitutional had begun in 1951 and eventually succeeded in 1956; its successor party (DKP) was even more in line with Moscow’s dogmatism; and the social-democratic party (SPD) had definitely renounced its socialist heritage for good in 1959 at Bad Godesberg. Horkheimer repeatedly points to the absence of a genuinely socialist party as a problem in a set of private discussion with Adorno in 1956 about writing a new communist manifesto (‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, pp. 44, 46, 47, 52, 53, 57, 58, 60, 61). Still, Adorno seems less wedded to this: “When Marx and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto there was no party either. It is not always necessary to join up with something already in existence” (‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, p. 60). Later in the same conversation, he adds: “Any appeal to form a left-wing socialist party is not on the agenda. Such a party would either be dragged along in the wake of the Communist Party, or it would suffer the fate of the SPD or Labour Party. It is not a political issue that there is no party” (‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, p. 61).

³⁴ 8:442; see also ‘Society’, pp. 273f.

3

There is no right life in the wrong [life], not even in politics.

The famous claim that wrong life cannot be lived rightly is originally the conclusion of Adorno's reflections about the damaged individual's life within the private sphere (and emblematically for it, the home).³⁵ Yet, it is warranted to extend this thesis to the political sphere too. Indeed, what is characteristic for Adorno about the impossibility of right living in the private sphere, is characteristic also for the public and political sphere: the modern social world engenders an antinomical structure of our option space, such that whatever we do, we cannot but act and live wrongly.³⁶ In the private sphere we, among other things, should not make ourselves at home in the world, but cannot but do so in order to survive at all. Similarly, in the political sphere, the various options open to us individually and collectively are also problematic. We have already seen that Adorno thinks that revolutionary practice is blocked (see thesis 2), but this is not the only form of political and public activity that is wrong for him.

The closest Adorno comes to recommending a form of living is to endorse a defensive stance of resistance against the bad forms of life that late modernity, on his view, structurally cannot but produce. This form of not joining in may range from refusing to go to the cinema to criticising sexual morality and laws based on it to – as we will see later – fighting fascist regimes. Still, at the same time, Adorno always insists on the fact that even resistance and not joining in are not without their faults – even in pursuing them, we do not and cannot achieve right living. For a start, he is keenly aware that resistance against repression can itself easily

³⁵ T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, translation by E.F.N. Jephcott, London: Verso, 1978, aphorism no. 18.

³⁶ See *Critical Models*, pp. 4, 84; and 20.1:399.

become repressive,³⁷ presumably despite the best intentions of the actors involved and for structural reasons. One might think here of how the nascent Soviet regime became internally repressive partly as a consequence of civil war and external pressure. To take another example, resistant movements against German occupation during World War II probably had to be organised in such a way as to involve blind command structures and severe punishment of suspected collaborators or traitors without the usual safeguards of due process. All things considered, these steps might have been necessary and unavoidable, but Adorno's point is that we would be mistaken to think that this means that nothing has gone wrong here – he denies that what is practically necessary always coincides with right living. Even in less extreme settings, there might be a tendency to suppress reflections and doubts among the ranks of a party or protest movements or to accept “collateral damage” in order to achieve maximum effect without delay. Indeed, even where resistance does not involve repression by those engaged in it, there is the further danger of its provoking repression,³⁸ and this might in turn lead to the resistance's becoming more violent and repressive, resulting in an escalation of violence and a net increase of repression. An illustration of this is the German student movement of the 1960s, the state's reaction to it, the left-wing terrorist cells that emerged in the 1970s in response to that, and, in turn, the state's reaction to them. For example, the terrorist group “Movement 2 June [*Bewegung 2. Juni*]” was named after the day at which a peaceful demonstrator – Benno Ohnesorg – was shot dead by a German policemen in Berlin. It responded, in part, to the fact that the policemen in question was cleared of having committed any offence by the courts, which sparked mass protest and led to disillusionment with the German state. The action of groups such as Movement 2 June then led to restrictions of liberties and other forms of state repression. Invoking this example is not to say that

³⁷ *Critical Models*, p. 290; and 11:504.

³⁸ See, for example, ‘Correspondence’, Adorno to Marcuse 19/06/1969, p. 131.

Ohnesorg should have not gone demonstrating in the first place, but merely to note that such acts of peaceful non-conformity do not guarantee right living, partly because they can have – however unintended – negative consequences that detract from any unqualifiedly positive appraisal of them.

Even when we move along the spectrum to more ordinary politics, to reformist attempts of ameliorating current conditions, Adorno suggests that we will fall short of right living. He thinks that the late modern social world would require fundamental change – for broadly Marxist reasons: this world is so structured that it cannot but produce misery, alienation, and even tendencies towards totalitarian domination, with Auschwitz not an accident, but an example of “[...] the indifference of the life of every individual, which history is moving towards: already in their formal freedom they are as fungible and replaceable as under the boots of the liquidators.”³⁹ However, the required transformation cannot be achieved by way of piecemeal reforms.⁴⁰ Such reforms might have a role to play in preventing the worst (more on this below under thesis 8); but reforms will always be limited and ultimately not threaten the current social world. Moreover, constructive and positive engagement with the social world – in short, making suggestions for improvements – is also problematic for another reason: if not repressed, then such contributions make one an accomplice of a social world that deserves to be changed, not made more inhabitable;⁴¹ it suggests that we could administer this world for the better, when, in fact, it is unadministrable.⁴²

³⁹ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 362; Redmond’s translation used.

⁴⁰ See 8:579f; see also *Critical Models*, p. 268.

⁴¹ *Critical Models*, p. 4.

⁴² ‘Society’, p. 275.

Right living is also not found beyond the public or political sphere. Adorno repeatedly criticises the idea of an ethics focused exclusively on individual conduct.⁴³ Such an ethics overlooks that right living requires a political transformation of our social world – “[...] the quest for right living is the quest for the right form of politics.”⁴⁴ Moreover, Adorno objects to withdrawing from society and not intervening in it at all – for, even when this is done out of protest or disgust, it just leaves in place or even inadvertently strengthens a *status quo* which deserves to be changed.⁴⁵ In fact, he even criticises withdrawing into pure contemplation, rejecting it as resignation,⁴⁶ despite his otherwise positive comments on contemplation.⁴⁷ Surprisingly perhaps, he even admits that a focus on the aesthetic realm – something of which he himself it is often said to have been guilty – is an expression of false consciousness.⁴⁸ Perhaps more surprisingly still, Adorno also concedes that even theory is affected by the illness of our social world.⁴⁹ In particular, the failure of the revolutionary practice and especially the integration of the proletariat mean that theory no longer has a social referent of the sort that Marx and Marxism envisages: a subject that is both capable to change the social world and forced by its own dire situation to do so. Critical theorists can no

⁴³ *Critical Models*, pp. 263f; and T.W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. by R. Livingstone, Cambridge: Polity, 2000, 176.

⁴⁴ *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 176; translation amended.

⁴⁵ *Critical Models*, p. 4; and *Negative Dialectics*, 6:241/243.

⁴⁶ 20.1:288. Elsewhere Adorno concedes that there is “[...] the element of subjective weakness that clings to the narrowed focus on theory” (*Critical Models*, p. 289). This seems also what Adorno has in mind in a cryptic remark in 1966 “that he feels an increasing aversion to praxis, in contradiction to his own theoretical position” (20.2:738; see also 20.1:399; Letter to Grass 04/11/1968, Tiedemann, *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VI, p. 81).

⁴⁷ See, for example, ‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, p. 50; and *Negative Dialectics*, p. 244.

⁴⁸ See R. Tiedemann, ed., *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VIII, München: edition text und kritik, 2003, p. 18.

⁴⁹ See, for example, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 245.

longer think of themselves as the avant-garde of a revolutionary class; they completely lack a connection to social or economic power.⁵⁰ Where Marx could still talk of philosophy as the head and the proletariat as the heart of the movement,⁵¹ only the head remains and this – Adorno concedes – leaves matters in a worse state: to stay with the metaphor, the head is drained of its life-blood.

In sum, for Adorno, whatever one does in this social world, one does it wrongly – be it political activity or private decency, be it praxis or theory. Good intentions and readiness to act on them do not suffice to change this;⁵² as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved by good intentions, and the experience of nominal socialism would provide ample examples here. This leads us to the fourth thesis, for as Adorno writes:

Those, however, who can do nothing that does not threaten to turn out for the worse even if meant for the best, are constrained to thinking; that is their justification and that of the happiness of spirit.⁵³

4

Theory has priority in the current conditions.

While this fourth thesis might seem to contradict what I just said in respect to the third thesis, this is only so, if we ignore one important aspect of Adorno's claim that there can be no right living in our social world: this claim is compatible with saying that some forms of living are

⁵⁰ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 144; and *Critical Models*, p. 15; see also *Minima Moralia*, aphorisms no. 34, 86.

⁵¹ 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction' [1844], MEW, I:391/MECW III:187.

⁵² See *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 143f; *Critical Models*, pp. 4, 264, 265.

⁵³ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 245; translation amended; see also *Critical Models*, p. 15.

worse than others, and that engaging in critical theory (along with a certain defensive political praxis – something I will come back later in thesis 8) is the *least bad* form of living. There are three main, interrelated reasons for this: firstly, the failure of revolutionary practice requires us to reflect critically on the revolutionary theory (as mentioned earlier, if the transformation of the world failed, its interpretation also requires rethinking); secondly, thought has – at least in the current context – more resources to avoid negative, unintended repercussions than praxis (revolutionary or otherwise); and, finally, one of the main obstacles to revolutionary practice and one of the main factors towards renewed barbarism is the integration, even poisoning of consciousness, against which theorising can offer some immunisation strategies. Let me expand on each of these three reasons in turn.

In a dialectical inversion not untypical of Adorno's thinking, he writes:

The desperate state of affairs, that the praxis on which everything depends is thwarted, paradoxically affords thinking the breathing-space which it would practically be criminal not to use.⁵⁴

One of the key reasons why Adorno thinks that praxis demands that theory takes precedence now is that the failed transformation of the world revealed problems in revolutionary theory – some of which I mentioned already above. Specifically, one of the important elements that have been missing for revolutionary praxis to become possible again is a renewed analysis of the situation and its constraints.⁵⁵ Prior to having this analysis, revolutionary praxis or

⁵⁴ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 245; Redmond's translation used; see also pp. 143f; and *Critical Models*, p. 264.

⁵⁵ *Critical Models*, p. 264; and 8:454, 579. The idea that the priority relation between theory and praxis is reversed in certain historical situation is something which Adorno claims is true also of Marx, whose famous "[...] 'Theses of Feuerbach', for example, cannot be correctly understood *in abstracto*, or severed from the historical dimension. They take on their meaning only in the context of the expectation of the imminent revolution which existed at the time; without such expectation they degenerate into mumbo-jumbo. Once this

attempts to resurrect it are doomed. One important aspect here is the issue of finding forms of organisation and, more generally, praxis that are not repressive. Crucial for this is to analyse those well-intentioned forms of praxis that backfired, sometimes terribly – such as the nominally socialist regimes.

Adorno sometimes overstates his case in ways that conflicts with some of his other key insights.⁵⁶

The Archimedian point – how a nonrepressive praxis might be possible, how one might steer between the alternatives of spontaneity and organization – this point, if it exists at all, cannot be found other than through theory.⁵⁷

given possibility failed to be realized, Marx spent decades in the British Museum writing a theoretical work on national economy. That he did so without having engaged in much praxis in reality is not a matter of mere biographical accident; an historical moment is imprinted in this” (*Introduction to Sociology*, trans. by E. Jephcott, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, p. 150).

⁵⁶ One might also complain – as Wiggershaus has – that Adorno does not actually provide the revised and updated theory of society required for an analysis of the situation and its constraints (R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: its history, theories and political significance*, trans. by M. Robertson, Cambridge: Polity, 1994, p. 600). Also, his critical reflections on nominal socialism are rather limited. It seems to me that the first part of this complaint is overstated – while Adorno might not have provided the sort of complete theory that Marx aspired to (albeit, arguably, also failed to deliver), he does provide reasons for why capturing the social whole in one theoretical construction is not, or at least no longer, possible. He also engaged in various sociological critiques of the current social world. The second part of the complaint seems more warranted – perhaps Adorno thought that others, like Marcuse (in his *Soviet Marxism: a critical analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), had already provided the critical analysis of nominal socialism or that he was not best equipped to undertake this task. Also, perhaps he focused on, so to speak, the devil he knew – especially given how little reliable sociological data from the Soviet block there was and that he would have been unable to undertake or commission independent studies there. Still, it strikes me as a lacuna in his work.

⁵⁷ *Critical Models*, p. 274 [translation amended]; see also p. 291.

This claim is in tension with Adorno's otherwise Hegelian thinking that theorising cannot anticipate practical solutions, but – like the owl of the Minerva flying at dusk – can only reflect upon them and bring them to consciousness. Indeed, Adorno often rejects the view that theory, that philosophy, could provide immediate, concrete instructions or directives for praxis.⁵⁸ Similarly, he rejects that praxis is mere implementation of theory.⁵⁹ Indeed, according to Adorno, it is not accidental that Marx's theory lacks an account of the concrete steps of transformation – the emancipation of the proletariat could only be its own doing, with an emphasis on *doing*.⁶⁰ However, Adorno does not, in fact, require making the very strong claim of the just quoted passage – a weaker claim would do, namely, the claim that the first step towards a non-repressive praxis is to analyse how praxis can and has become repressive, despite the best intentions of the actors. Admittedly, it would leave room for some forms of practical attempts at finding non-repressive praxis, but this should be welcome, even from Adorno's own perspective.⁶¹

The second reason why engaging in theory has currently priority is the following. Adorno claims that theorising has more resources that prevents it from sliding into repression or inadvertent support of the *status quo*. For a start, theory can reflect on itself, whereas

⁵⁸ See 'Who's afraid of the ivory tower?', pp. 15, 16, 19; TNM, 46; see also *Critical Models*, pp. 85, 275; and 'Who's afraid of the ivory tower?', pp. 19f.

⁵⁹ *Critical Models*, pp. 85, 276.

⁶⁰ *Critical Models*, p. 277.

⁶¹ In fact, it is striking about his (so far unpublished) 1956-7 lectures on moral philosophy that in them Adorno suggests that individuals should – at least in their private sphere – experiment with different ways of living (*Probleme der Moralphilosophie (1956/7)*, Adorno Archive, Vo1289-1520, here Vo1327, 1519). Presumably, this serves the purpose of maintaining a critical spirit or even helps to develop alternatives to the *status quo*.

praxis requires theory for this task.⁶² Insofar as revolutionary activity is blocked and reflection on both revolutionary praxis and theory is both required and the only thing radical we can genuinely undertake in the historical situation, theory has priority within this situation. Also, theory's reflectiveness means that it is further away from repression than immediate action, which has an affinity with blind violence, with "striking out [*Zuschlagen*]."⁶³ Moreover, while theory is also implicated in what is wrong with our social world in various ways, it also points beyond it. According to Adorno, thinking is essentially characterised by not accepting things passively or at face value.⁶⁴ While critical thinking can be suppressed as much as critical praxis can, the validity of what is thought outlives those who thought it and in this sense its critical potential cannot be completely eradicated:

Whatever has once been thought can be suppressed, forgotten, can vanish. But it cannot be denied that something of it survives. For thinking has the element of universality. What once was thought cogently must be thought elsewhere, by others: this confidence accompanies even the most solitary and powerless thought.⁶⁵

This might strike us as unrealistically optimistic, especially if Adorno's otherwise bleak analysis of our social world and human history is true. Moreover, it is not clear that one could not make a similar claim about praxis – cogently carried out practice will be (re-)discovered once again, at least if the problems to which it was the solutions are encountered again. Still, Adorno's thought might be that cogently carried out revolutionary practice in response to the late modern social world has not yet seen the light of the day, but cogently thought out critical theory of this world has. This might explain why Adorno places his trust first and

⁶² 'Towards a New Manifesto?', pp. 57f; see also *Critical Models*, pp. 13f.

⁶³ *Critical Models*, p. 274, translation amended; see also p. 290.

⁶⁴ *Critical Models*, pp. 35, 264f, 292f.

⁶⁵ *Critical Models*, p. 293.

foremost in theorising. In any case, the initial consideration continues to hold: critical reflection on what went wrong is the order of the day, and, thus, it is to theory, not to praxis, that we have to turn.

There is another aspect here: while the individual theorist lacks power because he or she is at the margins of society (and no longer the avant-garde of a major social class), this very marginal existence also means that theorists are exempted or excluded from practices of the kind which integrates the majority of people into the social world – be it via the disciplinary effects of the workplace or other integrative social pressures inherent in many practices.⁶⁶ There is dialectic irony here: by lacking real force and being good for nothing in the current world, philosophy has critical potential.⁶⁷

A third reason for theory's priority is that an analysis of and an enlightenment about distortions in our consciousness is necessary both, in the first instance, as a defensive act against irrational and fascist tendencies objectively present in our social world, and, secondly, for revolutionary practice. In a nutshell, Adorno thinks that one of the main reasons why Auschwitz happened and why a capitalist society in the West and a repressive bureaucratic regime in the East can sustain themselves, despite both disregarding the real interests of the individuals living in them, is a distortion of consciousness and an increasing reduction of genuine experiences that could reveal this distortion. Of utmost practical importance is thus to change our consciousness and enhance our ability to have as unrestricted experiences as possible. Yet, in line with the dialectical inversion mentioned above, this practical necessity

⁶⁶ *Negative Dialectics*, 6:337/343; 8:455; 'Towards a New Manifesto?', 53.

⁶⁷ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 143; and *Critical Models*, p. 16; see also *Minima Moralia*, aphorisms no. 6, 86.

Similarly, the hope for a better social world finds its current refuge not so much in politics and collective action, but in the private sphere and existence of the individual (20.1:391; see also 8:455; *Minima Moralia*, aphorisms no. 43, 83, 97).

is a task for theory. This is so because our consciousness and abilities to experience are partly distorted by the way we conceptualised the world – and the critique of this conceptualisation can, at least in our historical situation (where transformative practice is blocked), only be the work of theory. It is here where *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno's *magnum opus*, and also his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* have their place: as philosophical critiques of ways of conceptualising and experiencing the world. Generally, one of the main aims – perhaps *the* main aim – of Adorno's theorising was to contribute to immunising people against those factors and tendencies that distort consciousness and restrict experience (not least because such distortions and restrictions can contribute to the re-emergence of fascism, which remains a latent possibility in our social world).⁶⁸ Adorno's contribution mainly consisted in criticising distorted thought forms.⁶⁹ Still, his theorising also has a more directly practical implication: namely, educating the educators.⁷⁰ Adorno's public engagement throughout the 1950s and '60s in radio and television involved a number of talks on education and how it can and should instil critical thought in pupils and students.⁷¹ Similarly, he was very active in

⁶⁸ 8:456; and 20.1:278f; see also 20.1:272, 338, 371ff.

⁶⁹ See *Critical Models*, pp. 277f; and 20.1:268f, 271.

⁷⁰ See *Critical Models*, p. 100.

⁷¹ See *Critical Models*, pp. 19ff, 177ff, 191ff; 20.1:318ff, 327ff; and T.W. Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit: Vorträge und Gespräche mit Hellmut Becker 1959-1969*, ed. by G. Kadelbach, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971.

As Wilding rightly emphasises, Adorno was aware that education involves a tightrope walk of “[...] using the authority of the speaker to empower the addressee in non-pathological ways”, specifically without becoming a guru or triggering “[...] masochistic debasement before charismatic power” (A. Wilding, ‘Pied Pipers and polymath: Adorno's critique of praxisism’, in J. Holloway, F. Matamoros & S. Tischler, eds., *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*, London: Pluto Press, 2009, Ch. 3, p. 26; see also pp. 29, 36; and *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 2).

teaching and examining future teachers and writing about their profession.⁷² A striking aspect of this work is that Adorno rejected any forms of propaganda or other forms of manipulative persuasion,⁷³ at least in democratic settings.⁷⁴ To become a subject requires for Adorno that one is treated as one, or at least *as if one were one*. In this way, theory's role in practice is not to provide concrete directives, but to enable a change in the consciousness of the actors – it is, thus, a largely indirect role. Crucially, though, theory changes by remaining theory; it intervenes *qua* theory.⁷⁵

In these ways, theory for Adorno has priority – or as he puts it more emphatically at one point, “Despite all its unfreedom, theory is the guarantor [*Statthalter*] of freedom in the midst of unfreedom.”⁷⁶ Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind both the historical index of this claim – theory's priority is restricted to the current, non-revolutionary situation – and the fact that there is something decidedly sub-optimal, second best, about this situation – for given the deeply problematic nature of our modern social world (and its thought forms), it would be far preferable if we were in a context where (revolutionary) praxis could have priority over interpreting the world. It is just that we are not in such a context, however much we (have reasons to) regret this. Adorno's point is not that it is always best to concentrate one's efforts on theorising, but that doing so (along with undertaking certain defensive acts to which we come below) is the least bad form of living in what is a very bad

⁷² See also *Critical Models*, pp. 19ff.

⁷³ 20.1:269ff; see also Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 613.

⁷⁴ 20.1:279. In the case of avoiding gross inhumanity, propaganda and even force may be justified – Adorno notes with seeming approval that kindness is forced on people in the US, which might have allowed them to achieve a certain level of decency (*Critical Models*, p. 740), contributing perhaps to the absence of fascism in the USA.

⁷⁵ *Critical Models*, p. 277; and ‘Who's afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 19; see also 15:159; and thesis 5 below.

⁷⁶ *Critical Models*, p. 263.

context. Moreover, the situation may change – given the antagonistic nature of the modern social world, “[...] situations may arise today or tomorrow which, while they are very likely to be catastrophic, at the same time restore the possibility of practical action which is today obstructed.”⁷⁷ However, such a change cannot be forced into existence (neither by theory nor direct political activism), and until it occurs, theorising retains its priority.

5

Theory is a form of practice.

Adorno would not be the thinker he is, if he simply accepted the dichotomy between theory and praxis. While for him there is, indeed, a distinction between practical and theoretical activity, this distinction should not be absolutised or overstretched. For one thing, both are forms of activity (the first sense under thesis 2 above). At least in this minimal sense, theory is just as much praxis as revolutionary activity.⁷⁸ However, this is not the only sense in which the distinction breaks down: theory, according to Adorno, is also praxis in at least two other senses – theory is praxis-as-resistance;⁷⁹ and it is even a constitutive part of practice-as-revolutionary-activity.⁸⁰ As far as the first is concerned, what I said under thesis 4 reapplies here: thinking is resistance in both (a) not accepting state of affairs for what they are or appear to be,⁸¹ and (b) its capacity to immunise us from the distorting influences on

⁷⁷ Letter by Adorno to Horkheimer, 31/01/1962, quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 466.

⁷⁸ See *Negative Dialectics*, p. 245; and *Critical Models*, pp. 261, 293.

⁷⁹ *Critical Models*, p. 263; and ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 19; see also *Critical Models*, pp. 264f.

⁸⁰ See *Critical Models*, pp. 122, 264, 265, 291; see also *Negative Dialectics*, p. 143; 20.2:456; and ‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, pp. 52f, 59, 61.

⁸¹ *Critical Models*, p. 264; see also pp. 35, 292.

consciousness. Indeed, to see through the hostility to theorising – that is, to realise how this hostility is encouraged by the social world and serves to maintain it – is itself a form of praxis-as-resistance.⁸² Its very existence is already an act of defiance against the repression of independent thought that is essential for the smooth working of *status quo*. Similarly, theory is a (necessary but not sufficient) part of practice-as-revolutionary-activity insofar as revolutionary activity builds on the analysis of the current situations, and, in fact, is animated by this analysis. Indeed, if praxis is not so animated (as it was insufficiently in the nominally socialist regimes), it fails and becomes wrong – and as such, it is, in fact, no longer praxis at all:

Praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail, and praxis, in keeping with its own concept, would like to succeed. False praxis is no praxis.⁸³

In sum, contrary to what Adorno's critics on the New Left believed, theory is not something other than praxis, but rather is in, at least three senses, itself a form of praxis. If anything, theory is often too practical for those hostile to it, albeit here in a further sense still: it requires laborious and patient work;⁸⁴ in contrast to the immediate gratification that actionism promises (see thesis 10 below).

⁸² *Negative Dialectics*, p. 343; and *Critical Models*, pp. 265f.

⁸³ *Critical Models*, p. 265.

⁸⁴ *Critical Models*, p. 263.

6

Theory should not be beholden to political activity.

Adorno thinks that theory should maintain a certain independence especially vis-à-vis direct political action and tactic.⁸⁵ The reasons for this are manifold.

Firstly, Adorno argues that division of labour produces here, as in many other areas of life, better results than merging two activities and having them carried out together by the same actors. At one point, he offers an interesting analogy: the rigorous pursuit of physics has yielded many useful results for practical activities in other human spheres, and, specifically, nuclear physics might have enabled the development of a new form of energy-generation, but this happened as a by-product of autonomous theorising, not as a consequence of aiming for a new energy source or of having been commissioned to find one.⁸⁶

Secondly, Adorno also criticises the demand that theory should be practically applicable, utilisable, or exploitable by pointing out that what is practically applicable, utilisable, or exploitable is determined by the wrong social world that we should change.⁸⁷ It is the nature of this world that it allows only reforms and activities which stay within it, so that whenever we limit theory by what is practically possible, we make radical social critique

⁸⁵ *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 143, 245; *Critical Models*, pp. 187f, 264, 265, 276, 291, 292; 15:159; 20.1:292f; and ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, pp. 15f, 18, 19; see also *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 28.

⁸⁶ *Critical Models*, p. 277; see also ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, pp. 18f. A further analogy might be extracted from his writings on art: Adorno often criticises politically engaged art and the demand for it as yielding bad art and bad politics (see, for example, 11:421); and, conversely, suggests that Kafka’s prose or Beckett’s dramas have a much more important impact on awakening critical consciousness and praxis (at least praxis-as-resistance) for not directly aiming at political effects.

⁸⁷ *Critical Models*, pp. 259f; see also M. Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, in his *Critical Theory: selected essays*, trans. by M.J. O’Connell, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, pp. 188-252, here pp. 206f.

impossible. Thus, rather than enabling revolutionary practice, such a demand would be to abandon it. Moreover, this demand is also infected by the constant pressure to contribute to social production characteristic of both capitalist and nominally socialist regimes⁸⁸ – by the productivist ethos to utilise every minute to the full and to keep all wheels constantly turning. Rather than accepting and partaking in these pressures, we should criticise them and refuse to join in, where we can.⁸⁹

Thirdly, and picking up a theme from earlier (see thesis 4), it would be too much to ask of theory to require that it provides a blueprint for a better world:⁹⁰ at least when it comes to ethical and political activities, theory is a reflective, not so much a predictive medium. Theory cannot solve problems in this area of life, but has to rely first on the development of practical solutions which it can then help refining. Theorising, even imagining, is bound by the materials of the *status quo* and, if at all, it can yield only something radically different from it at a too abstract level to be directly applicable in practice.

All of this is not to say that critical theory has no practical *telos* – according to Adorno, every thought has such a *telos*.⁹¹ However, this practical orientation is merely indirectly prescribed in theoretical activity – otherwise, it sabotages thinking and thereby itself. To return to an earlier analogy: nuclear physics has a connection to possible praxis, not because it stands under the imperative of yielding practical implementations, but because it involves an exercise of reason, which by its nature has a connection to the practical *teloi* of humanity; similarly, critical theory should not be subjected to the demands of practical applicability (as measured and shaped by the current social world), but retains nonetheless a

⁸⁸ See *Critical Models*, pp. 289f.

⁸⁹ See, for example, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 167f.

⁹⁰ See, for example, 8:454.

⁹¹ *Critical Models*, pp. 264f.

connection to the possible practice of a freed humanity, which is its orientating interest. In this way, “The theory that is not conceived as an instruction for its realization should have the most hope of realization; [...]”⁹² and philosophy “[...] effects change precisely by remaining theory.”⁹³

7

Democracy has only shallow roots in post-war [West] Germany.

This thesis is based, in part, on sociological work of the Institute, particularly in the 1950s but also the 1960s.⁹⁴ This mostly qualitative research revealed that there remained significant scepticism about democracy among the West German population. While democracy was formally adhered to under the watchful eyes of the Western allies, it had not become part of people’s convictions and activities in the way it had in the USA.⁹⁵ Instead of a healthy public sphere, there was a mentality of subordination to authority as well as distrust of intellectuals and public criticisms of the state.⁹⁶ An active citizenship was largely lacking. For the most part, people quietly accepted Adenauer’s politics of restoration, despite the fact that its democratic credentials were questionable – notably when it came to (a) permitting previous NS officials back into positions of power; (b) outlawing the communist party; and (c) barring from any positions in the civil service all members from the (mainly communist)

⁹² *Critical Models*, p. 277.

⁹³ ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 19; see also *Critical Models*, p. 264; 15:159.

⁹⁴ R. Schmidt & E. Becker, *Reaktionen auf politische Vorgänge: Drei Meinungsstudien*, Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967.

⁹⁵ See *Critical Models*, pp. 239f; see also Tiedemann, *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VI, pp. 171f.

⁹⁶ *Critical Models*, pp. 284, 287.

Society of People Persecuted by the Nazi Regime – Federation of Anti-Fascists (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes – Bund der Antifaschistinnen und Antifaschisten*) (VVN-BdA). The fragile state of West German democracy and rule of law also emerged vividly during the so-called Spiegel-Affäre (1962), in which the editor of a German weekly magazine (*Der Spiegel*) was illegally deprived of his liberty and imprisoned for months after this magazine had revealed NATO's rather negative assessment of the West German armed forces. Starting in 1966, a right-extreme, racist party, the NPD, had entered parliaments in several states of the West German federal republic, and threatened to pass the 5% hurdle at the national level too.⁹⁷ Adorno was particularly worried by the state of emergency legislation [*Notstandsgesetze*] accepted by the German *Bundestag* in 1968 and spoke out publicly against it – referring back to how similar clauses in the Weimar Republic's constitution had led to an erosion of democracy in the early 1930s and ultimately to Hitler's gaining power.⁹⁸ There were also actual signs of violent repression: as already mentioned, a student named Benno Ohnesorg had been shot at a demonstration in Berlin in 1967, but the police officer who shot him was let off scot-free. Adorno denied that West Germany was a fascist state during the 1960s. Still, he feared that it might develop into one.⁹⁹ Indeed, even in the USA, where democracy had reached into everyday life, a “veering towards totalitarian forms of domination” was a latent possibility in Adorno's eyes, if only because he thought that “[s]uch a danger is an inherent tendency of modern society.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ As a matter of fact, it fell narrowly short in the national election that took place shortly after Adorno's death in 1969, polling 4.3%.

⁹⁸ 20.1:396.

⁹⁹ Tiedemann, *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VI, 166f.

¹⁰⁰ *Critical Models*, p. 240.

In sum, Adorno saw Western Germany as a fragile democracy which needed nurturing, not least because the existing and past alternatives to it were so much worse, including the nominally socialist regimes to the East – which brings us to the next thesis.

8

Political activity in the West should be critical but broadly defensive.

While the liberal-capitalist West deserves radical change – a change that is, however, blocked for the foreseeable future (see thesis 2) – its socio-political system provided *the least bad alternative available* in the 1960s. In this context, its positive gains – such as freedom of expression, rule of law, material wealth, and public health systems – should be defended. Such defence might even include trying to extend the range of areas of life that benefit from these gains (for example, campaigning to secure for same sex couples the legal rights that so far only heterosexual couples enjoyed). The defensive stance is directly related to the previous thesis about the fragility of democracy in West Germany and, ultimately, in every country. Democracies need active participation of citizens in public life¹⁰¹ – with Adorno’s radio and TV appearances as a good example of what he might have had in mind. Interestingly, the defence of the liberal-capitalist West might be best served critical engagement with it.¹⁰² Presumably, this is partly because a lively public sphere of accountability is more likely to preserve the gains in question than glorifying adoration or an unqualified defence. However, in rare cases, more emphatic support might be required – or at least, even stronger criticism of the alternatives.¹⁰³ Adorno goes as far as to suggest that

¹⁰¹ 20.1:292.

¹⁰² ‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, p. 41.

¹⁰³ See Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism of the Soviet Union in 1950 (20.1:390-3).

under the current circumstances even paltry reforms have more legitimacy than they would otherwise have.¹⁰⁴

It is important to emphasise that Adorno's defence of Western liberal democracies rests on instrumental and historical grounds – on avoiding the worst in a given situation. It is not an endorsement of these regimes as such. To rephrase Churchill: liberal democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others available in the 1960s.

This view puts Adorno at loggerheads with his friend and fellow-member of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse, who – partly because of the war in Vietnam – thought that it was far from certain that the West-dominated *status quo* was better than anything else that could take its place, despite also doubting that there was a revolutionary situation.¹⁰⁵ Marcuse candidly asks whether this *status quo* really is the lesser evil for the majority of people, when one considers the plight of those who live in Vietnam or in the ghettos of South America.¹⁰⁶ This disagreement is intimately linked with to the next thesis.

9

Political violence should be restricted to resistance in fascist contexts.

While Adorno did not exclude the use of (political) violence categorically for all circumstances, he was adamant that it had no place within democratic societies.¹⁰⁷ One of the main considerations seemed to have been that violence tends to breed further violence,

¹⁰⁴ *Critical Models*, p. 4; and *Introduction to Sociology*, 52f/28.

¹⁰⁵ 'Correspondence', Marcuse to Adorno 05/04/1969, 04/06/1969 and 21/07/1969, 125, 130, 134.

¹⁰⁶ 'Correspondence', Marcuse to Adorno 21/07/1969, p. 134.

¹⁰⁷ *Critical Models*, p. 268; and 'Who's afraid of the ivory tower?', pp. 17f.

leading to an ever expanding cycle of violence, not its end.¹⁰⁸ In this way violent protest might make things much worse, inadvertently fostering more repression than would otherwise have been used in democracies. Only against a fascist regime are violent means of resistance legitimate – for example, Adorno accepted that it would be permissible to use violence for this purpose against the Greek military junta.¹⁰⁹ Presumably, such a regime is so morally reprehensible that the danger of a violent backlash is not decisive anymore as a consideration. While ends are not indifferent to means,¹¹⁰ in certain emergency situations almost all means are legitimate – just that 1960s West Germany was no such emergency situation.¹¹¹

Adorno here was in disagreement with the student protest movement, or at least the most radical wing of it. In fact, as early as April 1968, activists, who later formed the core of the Red Army Faction [*Rote Armee Fraktion*], committed arson attacks against two retailers in Frankfurt in protest against the war in Vietnam and the complacency about this war among the German public. Beyond his moral objections, Adorno also thought it foolish to import guerrilla tactics into the Western democracies, remarking in 1969 that “[m]odels that do not prove themselves even in the Bolivian bush cannot be exported.”¹¹² But even those who did not want to realise Adorno’s theory with Molotov-cocktails, but only with sit-ins and occupations, came into opposition to him.¹¹³ He accepted that sit-ins may be a legitimate

¹⁰⁸ ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, pp. 17f; see also *Critical Models*, p. 268; and thesis 3 above.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, 19.

¹¹⁰ ‘Correspondence’, Adorno to Marcuse 19/06/1969, p. 132.

¹¹¹ Torture might be one exception for Adorno (see below).

¹¹² *Critical Models*, p. 270.

¹¹³ During one of his lecture series, Adorno explicitly asked students to refrain from disrupting the lecture series of a conservative colleague (*Introduction to Sociology*, 257f/153f). He seemed to view the prevention of

form of protest in some contexts. For example, Adorno thought that the smearing campaign by right-wing newspapers and magazines against the left had already indirectly contributed to an assassination attempt on a leader of the student movement, Rudi Dutschke; and he considered sit-ins to prevent or disrupt the distribution of these publications among the permissible means to respond to this.¹¹⁴ However, he remained concerned about any breaches of rules and any forms of criminal activity, even if done for progressive aims.¹¹⁵

Most famously perhaps is the episode that took place on 31.01.1969: Adorno (along with the co-directors of the Institute of Social Research) called the police to clear 70 students from the premises of the Institute whom he/(they) perceived to be in the process of occupying it. (It is, actually, unclear whether the students wanted to occupy the building – they always maintained that they were just wanting to use the rooms for a meeting to discuss their future actions, having been thwarted in (re)occupying the sociology department. Still, they refused to leave despite being repeatedly asked to do so by Adorno and his co-directors.) This episode and the subsequent trial of the perceived leader of this group – Adorno’s own PhD student Krahl – accelerated the already simmering fall-out with the students, who subsequently twice disrupted Adorno’s lectures, leading him to abandon the lecture series. At the end of the semester, he left distraught for a mountain vacation, during which he succumbed to a heart attack at the age of 65.

This fall-out with the students was also at issue in Adorno’s disagreement with Marcuse in 1969, who bluntly noted that “if the alternative is the police or left-wing students,

discussion and exchange of ideas – by hissing or other noise aimed at making it impossible to hear the speaker – as a form of violence and as not acceptable (at least not within a democratic context).

¹¹⁴ ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 18.

¹¹⁵ Tiedemann, *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VI, pp. 162, 164.

then I am with the students.”¹¹⁶ Beyond Adorno’s negative attitude to many forms of protests in the West, another matter of contention was his view that whoever deplores the violence and repression of the South Vietnamese and US forces also has to deplore the means employed by the Vietcong (notably its use of torture) – seemingly equated the two in moral terms.¹¹⁷ Against this, Marcuse insisted on a clear moral distinction between violence used in fighting aggression and that employed by the aggressor and in repression.¹¹⁸ Although Adorno might have accepted the validity of this distinction for some contexts – most obviously for the context of fighting fascist regimes – he clearly rejected it for the context of the democratic West and also seemed to think that the torture employed by the Vietcong was indefensible, even if used as part of a liberation movement.

Undoubtedly, some of Adorno’s calls in this late 1960s context were mistaken – most obviously his decision to call the police to clear out the Institute, when there was no real danger to persons and it was not even clear that an occupation was taking place. Marcuse is also right that Adorno largely neglected the plight of people at the peripheries; how this plight was, at least in part, the implications of the West’s maintaining its high living standard; and how the countries of the West were (formally) democratic at home, but far from respectful of democracy and individual rights abroad. Still, Adorno’s rejection of using of violence in democratic settings has much to be recommended, not least because history contains many a tale of how violence can spiral out of control (something about which he repeatedly warned). The conservative critics of the 1970s who accused him, and the Frankfurt School generally, of paving the way for left-wing terrorism were clearly mistaken: whatever

¹¹⁶ ‘Correspondence’, Marcuse to Adorno 05/04/1969, p. 125.

¹¹⁷ ‘Correspondence’, Adorno to Marcuse 05/05/1969, pp. 127f; see also *Critical Models*, p. 274; T.W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. by E. Jephcott, Cambridge: Polity, 2000, p. 101.

¹¹⁸ ‘Correspondence’, Marcuse to Adorno 04/06/1969 and 21/07/1969, pp. 129, 134f.

influence his writings might have had on Ulrike Meinhoff and the other members of the Red Armee Faction, they blatantly disregarded the letter and the spirit of his work in what they did. In the post-war West German context, Adorno's work licensed only the weapons of criticism, not criticism by weapons.

10

Assigning primacy to political activity, actionism [*Aktionismus*], is the true resignation in the face of our social world.

By eschewing much political activity and insisting on doing theory instead, Adorno was accused by the student movement, and others outside it, of resignation. Many of those inspired by his critical theory felt betrayed by what they perceived as a failure to draw the practical consequences from this very theory. Adorno, however, retorted that it is the opposite position – the one he entitles “actionism [*Aktionismus*]” – that is in truth expressive of resignation and, more even, that it is regressive and bordering on authoritarianism. Actionism is less idiomatic in English than in German, and so it might be worth spelling out what Adorno has in mind here. The German *Duden* notes two meanings: (a) striving to change people's consciousness or the existing state of affairs in society, art or literature by engaging in targeted provocative or revolutionary actions; and (b) exaggerated urge to engage in activities (often derogatory). This ambiguity is very fitting: while the first meaning is what the student protest aimed for, the second is what Adorno accused them of. Many of the reasons for this we have already encountered: the fact that the current situation calls for renewed reflection and analysis, not action; the dangers that even practice that aims at resistance and progressive change might provoke a net increase in repression; the lack of non-repressive forms of collective agency; and the absence of a revolutionary subject and

situation. The following four considerations add to and partly draw on the picture presented so far.

Firstly, Adorno suspects that actionism is actually a vain attempt to compensate for both (a) the fact that revolutionary activity is blocked and (b) the disintegration and paranoia of individuals by engaging in largely blind activities for their own sake.¹¹⁹ Presumably, what he means here is not that this is the result of a conscious decision, but rather that the self-styled acts of resistance and provocation are, in fact, mere compensatory measures of keeping busy – indeed, he once likens them to captured animals that frantically pace up and down in their cages.¹²⁰ In this way, the activities are more like pseudo-activities, such that the tragedy of the failed transformation of the world in the early 20th century is now repeated as the farce of pseudo-revolutions.¹²¹

Secondly, actionism is driven by the pleasure principle,¹²² even by narcissism.¹²³ This explains why it is attractive to its participants and also why critique of it is so unwelcome. Still, the foregrounding of pleasure itself cannot be what Adorno criticises – after all, he himself argues that the postponement of pleasure for greater satisfaction latter rarely lives up to its promise, whether at the individual or social level, and that we should resist this

¹¹⁹ *Critical Models*, pp. 260, 265f, 291; and ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 17.

¹²⁰ Tiedemann, *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* VI, pp. 46, 152. Also, the actions are premised on a mistaken view of reality, with the actors’s hugely overestimating their own importance, and overlooking the fact that what they are doing – trying to provoke a revolutionary situation – is a hopeless undertaking in the current circumstances (*Critical Models*, pp. 271, 273, 275; see also 20.1:399; and ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 17); an illusionary aim (‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 16, see also 20.1:399).

¹²¹ *Critical Models*, p. 276, with reference to Marx.

¹²² *Critical Models*, pp. 264, 266, 271f.

¹²³ *Critical Models*, p. 275.

postponement strategy.¹²⁴ Rather, his point seems to be that the satisfaction in question is merely an *Ersatzbefriedigung*, a vicarious satisfaction.¹²⁵ Also, what he criticises is that the pursuit of instant gratification is replacing the one of critical reflection – making it more likely that the protest movements are co-opted into the mainstream. Instead of a real analysis of the concrete situation and its possibilities, actionism is blindly pursuing narcissistic gains at the expense of the pain-staking and demanding reflective work that is necessary. This is partly revealed in the activists’ refusal of critical introspection.¹²⁶ Moreover, Adorno highlights the danger that actionism develops a dynamic of its own, whereby actions are undertaken merely to maintain the momentum of the movement (often by way of publicity stunts), independently of the wisdom or necessity of undertaking the acts in question.¹²⁷

Thirdly, Adorno objects to what he perceives as a refusal and also inability to make genuine and unrestricted experiences.¹²⁸ As seen already (thesis 4), Adorno emphasises that it is exactly in this area where those that were lucky enough not yet to be co-opted should act – by criticising the conceptualisations that distort and narrow our experiences, and by educating people to develop their experiential capacities. Adorno thinks these crucial efforts are undermined by people’s jumping headfirst into political activities and cutting short debate with reference to practical urgency. Generally, he criticises the lack of analysis and the fact that, in the absence of theory, praxis becomes delusional.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ See, for example, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, lecture 14, esp. pp. 137-41; and Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 54-6.

¹²⁵ *Critical Models*, p. 291.

¹²⁶ *Critical Models*, p. 271; see also pp. 262, 273.

¹²⁷ See *Critical Models*, pp. 268f; and ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 18.

¹²⁸ *Critical Models*, pp. 260, 269, 271.

¹²⁹ 20.1:398; and *Critical Models*, pp. 260f; see also *Metaphysics*, p. 126.

Fourthly, he objects to the various coercive, authoritarian aspects of actionism. For a start, he is concerned how debates are reduced to instrumental considerations about tactics.¹³⁰ Actual open discussion of the genuine issues is repressed. Instead, appeals to solidarity are used to shame and coerce people into action, even when they do not agree with what is being done or with the reasons for doing it.¹³¹ This can go as far as requiring people to sacrifice themselves for the movement – something Adorno finds reminiscent of fascist political repertoires.¹³² Generally, he accuses the actionists of exhibiting fascist character traits, such as drawing a sharp and exhaustive distinction between the in-group and others (between friends and enemies); or viewing critical attitudes as destructive; being indifferent to the content and shape of that against which one revolts or the complexities and the unintended consequences of doing so; cherishing decisionism and voluntarism; identifying with the collective at the expense of individual; being full of anger and indignation in a way that involves the readiness to inflict one's rage on others.¹³³ One might argue that this accusation overshoots the target – Marcuse certainly thought it did.¹³⁴ Specifically, Marcuse defends the actionism of the students as a legitimate reaction of those who cannot bear any longer the suffocating and demeaning state of the world.¹³⁵ Interestingly, Adorno rejects this, and

¹³⁰ *Critical Models*, pp. 268f; see also p. 291; 'Who's afraid of the ivory tower?', p. 18; and 'Correspondence', Adorno to Marcuse 19/06/1969, p. 131.

¹³¹ *Critical Models*, pp. 269, 274; 'Who's afraid of the ivory tower?', p. 15; see also *Critical Models*, p. 263.

¹³² *Critical Models*, p. 275.

¹³³ 20.1:274f, 280f, 282, 379; 'Correspondence', Adorno to Marcuse 19/06/1969, p. 131.

¹³⁴ He particularly criticised Adorno's use of Habermas's portrayal of (parts of) the student movement as "left fascist" ('Correspondence', Marcuse to Adorno 05/04/1969 and 04/06/1969, pp. 125, 129). I agree that the label "left fascism" is ill-advised, but the phenomena to which Adorno points will be familiar to anyone who ever seriously engaged in radical political practice.

¹³⁵ 'Correspondence', Marcuse to Adorno 05/04/1969, p. 125.

elsewhere explains why: while situation-based reaction to injustice and suffering has legitimacy in certain contexts – indeed, in such contexts, such reactions have more legitimacy than reasoning¹³⁶ – this is true only of the most extreme circumstances, when faced with the “uttermost horror,”¹³⁷ by which he presumably means fascism and other totalitarian domination. Within liberal democracies, such immediate reactions do not have the legitimacy that trumps the need for critical reflection. Moreover, if Adorno is right that the objective conditions breed certain authoritarian and fascist tendencies and character traits, then foregoing critical reflection and introspection is to forego perhaps the only counterstrategies at our disposal. By ignoring the dangers within, we sabotage the resistance to the dangers without. To face up to this, to assign critical reflection priority, is not a sign of resignation, but the only way to keep the flame of resistance alive.

There is also a further coercive element that is internalised by the actionism of the student movement: the compulsion to positivity.¹³⁸ Rather than objecting to the social trend of demanding always a positive, constructive element, even as part of radical criticism, actionism aligns itself with this trend. In contrast, Adorno is an avowed negativist:¹³⁹ we can only know the bad (or parts thereof), not the good or what a free social arrangement would be; and the bad has normative force by itself to demand its own abolition. The reason for epistemic negativism is that our consciousness is determined by the current, radically evil social world, so that we cannot even imagine what a reconciled society and the human good

¹³⁶ See *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 285, 365; *Critical Models*, p. 85; *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 8, 97; and *Metaphysics*, pp. 115f.

¹³⁷ *Critical Models*, p. 274.

¹³⁸ *Critical Models*, pp. 287f; ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 19; see also p. 17.

¹³⁹ See ‘Society’, p. 275; 8:456; and *Critical Models*, pp. 287f; see also *Critical Models*, pp. 190, 292f; and ‘Towards a New Manifesto?’, pp. 47, 61.

emerging in it would be like.¹⁴⁰ In line with the Hegelian-Marxist critique of abstract utopianism, theory cannot anticipate what utopia would (concretely) consist in.¹⁴¹ What is bad and that we should avoid it, on the other hand, we can recognise and identify – history has taught us this painful lesson over and over again. Radical critique cannot be constructive or positive – for all positive or constructive suggestions will remain within the confines of the *status quo*, not point beyond it. Instead, radical critique should orientate itself on the basis of great evils; it should oppose barbarism¹⁴² and the recurrence of Auschwitz.¹⁴³ To accuse critical thinkers of resignation, when they do not offer positive goals, is to blame the messenger, to act “[...] as though the obstruction were [their] fault, not the signature of the thing itself.”¹⁴⁴

Despite his criticisms, Adorno also praises the student movement. He acknowledges that it helped in reforming and democratising universities as well as in highlighting stultification processes and open repression, such as the murder of Benno Ohnesorg.¹⁴⁵ He would have also welcomed some of the longer term changes it contributed to achieve in Germany (after his death), such as a more permissive sexual morality, or greater equality between the sexes.

¹⁴⁰ *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 299, 352; *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, p. 120; and *Critical Models*, p. 4.

¹⁴¹ See, for example, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 245. Rejecting utopianism in this sense does not necessarily exclude accepting utopianism in another sense – longing for things to be otherwise, without being able to provide a description of how it would then be. Adorno accepts, even insists on, a utopian moment in this second sense (see, for example, *Critical Models*, pp. 292f). As it does not include a positively described alternative (but merely a sense that things could and should be different), it is consistent with his negativism.

¹⁴² See, for example, *Critical Models*, pp. 190, 268.

¹⁴³ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 365.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Society’, p. 275.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 17: see also ‘Correspondence’, Adorno to Marcuse 06/08/1969, p. 136.

Moreover, Adorno also acknowledges that the student movement was born in response to objective social tendencies,¹⁴⁶ such as the integration of formerly progressive organisations (for instance, unions or social-democratic parties) into the capitalist mainstream.¹⁴⁷ (Notably, the German social-democratic party (SPD) had entered into a “grand coalition” with the conservatives in 1966, leaving hardly any opposition in parliament and none that was on the political left.) Indeed, Adorno blames some of failures of the student movement on objective social tendencies: for example, its personalisation (including personality cult of leaders) is a response to “[...] the fact that within the anonymous apparatus the individual does not count anymore [...],”¹⁴⁸ its tendency to formal process and institutionalisation, even in protesting against institutions, exhibits how society has formed them to the core; as does its fetishising of means and technical gadgets.¹⁴⁹ In fact, primacy of practice is the implicit credo of late modernity and just repeats the blind supremacy of material praxis (that is, praxis as productive labour) originally in the pursuit of survival for the species, but now surplus-value augmentation.¹⁵⁰ Rather than an expression of freedom, its origin as a reflex to deprivation marks praxis even now as a form of unfreedom.¹⁵¹ Indeed, prioritising praxis is “[...] the programme of absolute domination of nature [...],”¹⁵² an arch-bourgeois project that deserves to be criticised, not accepted, as (Adorno thought) even Marx wrongly did.

¹⁴⁶ *Critical Models*, p. 269.

¹⁴⁷ *Critical Models*, p. 292.

¹⁴⁸ *Critical Models*, p. 270.

¹⁴⁹ *Critical Models*, p. 270; see also ‘Correspondence’, Adorno to Marcuse 05/05/1969 and 19/06/1969, pp. 128, 132.

¹⁵⁰ *Critical Models*, pp. 266f; and *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 389f.

¹⁵¹ *Critical Models*, p. 262; see also 14:81f; and Wilding, ‘Pied Pipers and polymath’, esp. 25f.

¹⁵² *Negative Dialectics*, p. 244; translation amended.

Instead of subscribing to the primacy of praxis, Adorno would agree with Habermas that the student movement should concentrate mainly on democratising universities, on preventing the “interlocking of instruction and research with power and prestige” (i.e. on maintaining the autonomy of research and teaching), and on securing a critical education for an increasing share of the population.¹⁵³

11

Participation in political activity requires justification to each individual.

More implicit than explicit, Adorno’s theory and practical engagement contain a criterion for participation in political activity. In effect, he demands that political activity has to be such that the justification and nature of the proposed activity is transparent to those who are asked to participate in it.¹⁵⁴ As examples of activities where this criterion was met in his eyes, he highlights both his participation in protests against the introduction of state of emergency legislation and his attempts to reform the penal code, specifically by removing those elements that are based on a restrictive sexual morality. Indeed, once this criterion was met, Adorno would throw his weight behind the measure in question – as a former assistant and then co-director of the Institute of Social Research, Ludwig von Friedeburg, attests: “One could completely rely on him [Adorno], once he had appreciated the justification for a cause: he would stand firm and support you through thick and thin.”¹⁵⁵

One might argue that the criterion in question is too demanding – indeed, that it is practically crippling. While radical political organisations should be as democratic as possible,

¹⁵³ See J. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, trans. by J. Shapiro, London: Heinemann, 1971, pp. 46-9.

¹⁵⁴ See ‘Who’s afraid of the ivory tower?’, p. 17.

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in W. Schütte, *Adorno in Frankfurt*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003, 191; my translation.

this should not come at the expense of political effectiveness. Lenin's idea of "democratic centralism" is often presented as squaring that particular circle. However, Adorno would have been suspicious of this proposal. For, while it might secure freedom of discussion, it also entails that the minority can be outvoted and is strictly bound to act on the majority's decision. Indeed, as Leninism is often understood and as it was practiced, the decisions of the higher bodies of a party organisation are binding on lower bodies and party members, whatever the latter's view of the matter. At least Adorno's settled view is incompatible with this, requiring as it does that those participating have to receive a justification that is acceptable to each, not just to the majority or the higher bodies within an organisation.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, in a clear dig against Brecht, Adorno notes already in 1953, "[t]he sentence that a thousand eyes see more than two is a lie and the exact expression of the fetishism of collectivity and organisation, which to pierce is the highest obligation of social insight today."¹⁵⁷

It should be clear that the proposed criterion presents a norm, but that this norm is neither derived from an ideal-theoretical account of political activity in a just society, nor based on the ideal speech situation, nor in any other way departing from Adorno's negativism. Rather, it is a norm that arises from the historical experience of misfiring emancipatory politics and "a concrete analysis of the concrete situation" (and thus, according to Lenin, "[...]

¹⁵⁶ Admittedly, in a remark contained in minutes of a private discussion with Horkheimer in 1956, Adorno seems to advocate adopting "a strictly Leninist manifesto" for a possible socialist party in Germany ('Towards a New Manifesto?', p. 57). However, this needs to be treated with caution, for these minutes are merely bookmarks of the actual discussion, and taking the discussion as a whole, one must seriously wonder whether Gretel Adorno (who minuted the meetings) forgot to include a question mark in what is more likely a provocative comment on Horkheimer's enthusiasm for a socialist party than Adorno's endorsement of democratic centralism.

¹⁵⁷ 8:455; my translation; see also *Minima Moralia*, aphorism no. 31; and *Critical Models*, p. 276.

the very gist, the living soul, of Marxism [...]”¹⁵⁸ This norm might not apply in a revolutionary situation or in the emergency of resisting fascist regimes, but has its time and place in the actual historical circumstances of West Germany’s 1960s.

Summing up the discussion in a slogan is probably unwise and Adorno would have not approved of it, but let me take up the provocative stance that he sometimes assumes, and conclude that Adorno’s view comes down to saying that people have tried to change the world, in various ways; the point in the 1960s was to interpret it.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ V.I. Lenin, ‘Kommunismus. Journal of the Communist International’ [1920], reprinted in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 4th English Edition, 1965), vol. 31, pp. 165-167, here p. 165.

¹⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek recently made a similar claim about the 20th and early 21st century: ‘My advice would be – because I don’t have simple answers – two things: (a) precisely to start thinking. Don’t get caught into this pseudo-activist pressure. Do something. Let’s do it, and so on. So, no, the time is to think. I even provoked some of the leftist friends when I told them that if the famous Marxist formula was, ‘Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the time is to change it’ ... thesis 11 ..., that maybe today we should say, ‘In the twentieth century, we maybe tried to change the world too quickly. The time is to interpret it again, to start thinking’.’ (‘Don’t Act. Just Think’, <http://bigthink.com/videos/dont-act-just-think>; posted: July 8, 2012, 12:00 AM; last accessed: 13.06.2013, 17.32h.).