Adorno’s Politics Revisited

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Abstract

Ever since the West German student movement came into conflict with T. W. Adorno in the 1960s, the question of whether his theory and praxis were in some sort of problematic relationship has not gone away. In this chapter, the author partially defends Adorno’s views on theory and (political) praxis, focusing particularly on the 1960s. It is a defense because the author will suggest that, in significant respects, Adorno’s theory and practice were not in contradiction with each other but cohered well.

Moreover, the author will suggest that we can learn from his stance how to think about and engage in politics—specifically from his contextualism and his emphasis on immersion in a local context. It is, however, merely a partial defense. The author identifies some tensions between Adorno’s theory and practical stance that have gone unnoticed so far, contrasting his stance to that of Marcuse, notably in relation to paying sufficient attention to interrelations between local contexts and the lack of an account of a global subject of change.

Keywords

Adorno, Marcuse, contextualism, critical theory, theory and praxis, student movement, Vietnam, social critique, revolutionary situation

Adorno's Contested Political Stance

One of the puzzling aspects of Adorno's life and work is his stance in the 1960s vis-à-vis the student movement, culminating as it did in the fateful events and months of 1969, which begun with Adorno calling the police to clear (what he perceived as) the occupation of the Institute for Social Research by students; then unfolded with his seminars, subsequently, being disrupted by student activists and then canceled by him, and, finally, ended with his suffering an untimely death in the Swiss mountains. Adorno had initially 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 activists 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 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 his friend and colleague Marcuse.[4]

The existing scholarly literature on Adorno tends to emphasize that he had been anything but inactive as a public figure in the postwar years.[5] Much is made of the enormous presence Adorno had on the radio and TV, trying to shape a more democratic Germany, including jolting it into starting to work through its Nazi past and keeping a vigilant eye on any re-emergence of fascist tendencies, whether in personality structures or in overt neo-Nazi parties.[6] Similarly, beyond such contributions to the wider public sphere, commentators also emphasize that Adorno actually supported and partook in political events, such as in taking a public stance against the proposed new state-of-emergency legislation in 1968.

Still, the question of whether Adorno's theory and praxis were in some sort of problematic relationship has not gone away.[7] The following will offer a partial defense of Adorno's views on theory and (political) praxis, focusing particularly on the 1960s. It is a *defense* because, in significant respects, Adorno's theory and practice were not in contradiction with each other but cohered well. Moreover, we can learn from his stance how to think about and engage in politics, notably his contextualism. It is, however, merely a *partial* defense. Adorno seriously misjudged the situation on that fateful January 31, 1969, when he called the police to clear students from the premises of the Institute for Social Research. More importantly, there are tensions between Adorno's theory and practical stance that have gone unnoticed so far and that are connected to other misfired judgments on his part.

Adorno's Contextualism

Adorno is a contextualist about politics: following Marx and Lenin, he thinks that what we should do depends fundamentally on "a concrete analysis of the concrete situation" (to use Lenin's phrase).[8] Or to speak with Marx (in a passage that Adorno quoted approvingly in a 1960 text), "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."[9] This passage might seem to be merely stating the obvious—who would want to deny that what is to be done depends on the context (the "historical circumstances") one finds oneself in? As a matter of fact, there are those who would want to deny this. Most clearly this can be seen when we consider that some are what we might call *absolutists*—they think that there are certain absolute moral precepts (typically these precepts are prohibitions) that one should never violate. Thus, to take a well-known example, Kant does not think that whether or not one is permitted to lie to another person depends "wholly and entirely" on the circumstances in which action is to be taken—the prohibition against lying holds absolutely, independent of context and circumstances.[10] And even leaving aside absolutists, the passage from Marx is unlikely to find universal acceptance, despite its appearance of being a commonplace, for a number of theorists would object that what we ought to do depends on the circumstances but *not* "wholly and entirely"—what we ought to do also depends on (purportedly) context-independent principles. Indeed, for these theorists, what is to be done should mainly depend on such principles, and it is merely the application of them that depends then on the circumstances. Think, for example, of the Rawlsian approach to political philosophy that has been so dominant since the 1970s: here there are meant to be fundamental principles of justice for a well-ordered society, and they then either apply directly or indirectly, whereby circumstances determine which of the two it is: if our historical circumstances are those of a well-ordered society, they apply directly; if we are less lucky and do not live in a well-ordered society, they provide the normative orientation for the derivative principles that should govern those circumstances.[11]

Adorno, in contrast to these thinkers, is a contextualist in that he—at least for the most part[12]—rejects absolutism. He also rejects the idea that we can develop context-independent principles, which we then, depending on the context we are in, simply apply in different ways.[13] What is to be done is, for Adorno, mainly a question about what historical situation we are in.

Notably, an essential question for Adorno—again following Marx and Lenin—is whether we are in a revolutionary situation or not. Adorno's judgment, for better or for worse, was that 1960s West Germany did not present a revolutionary situation,[14] despite the (persisting) structural contradictions of it (and other "late capitalist" societies). The proletariat had been materially and ideologically integrated into the capitalist system.[15] Mass media and culture (the "culture industry") are socially integrative forces—they distract people from their own real concerns, mold their desires and wishes (including 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*).[16] And the repression in the Soviet Bloc had led to a disillusionment with and rejection of communist ideas.[17] Even the formal freedoms available in Western liberal-democratic states were constantly in danger, especially in West Germany where the liberal-democratic system had been imposed from the outside, where it was hard to tell how much democratic ideas had actually been internalized by the population, and where various Nazi figures were still allowed to play a role with impunity.[18] Like Marx in the aftermath of the failed revolution of 1848, Adorno's judgment was that the 1950s and 1960s in West Germany were a context for (1) capacity-building actions (notably maintaining and expanding critical attitudes among the population through the education and public broadcast system) and (2) defensive action, such as protesting the state of emergency legislation accepted by the German *Bundestag* in 1968, where it had been exactly such measures that contributed to the downfall of the Weimar Republic just 30 years earlier.[19] Crucially—and again not unlike Marx in the aftermath of the failure of the

1848 revolution—the emphasis was on theorizing as praxis, not least because the failure to change the world in the right way during the revolutionary situation of the 1910s to 1930s was in part due—according to Adorno—to inadequacies of the theory, to problems in how the world had been interpreted.[20]

To substantiate these interpretative claims, we only need to look at the beginning of *Negative Dialectics* (1966):

> Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, keeps itself alive because the moment of its realisation was missed. The summary judgement that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the transformation of the world miscarried… . Perhaps the interpretation which promised the transition did not suffice.[21]

Adorno's claim that the moment of the realization of philosophy was "missed" suggests that Adorno thought there had been a window of opportunity for a revolution[22]—presumably, he is thinking here of the period from the First World War to fascism's 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 subtler hindrances—and I cannot do justice to them here. The crucial point is that the missed opportunity had world-historical significance for Adorno.

One of the most damaging disappointments of these tragic times was the repressive 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 the world failed,[23] both in the Soviet Union and later in other 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."[24] 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.[25] Critical scrutiny of Marxist theory and its wider philosophical background is required.[26] Adorno puts it typically tentatively in *Negative Dialectics* ("Perhaps the interpretation which promised the transition did not suffice"[27]), but, I submit, he actually held it to be true.[28]

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.[29] Prior to having this analysis, revolutionary praxis or attempts to resurrect it are doomed. One important aspect here is the issue of finding forms of organization and, more generally, praxis that are not repressive.[30] Crucial for this is to analyze those forms of supposedly emancipatory praxis that backfired, sometimes terribly—such as the nominally socialist regimes.

Before exploring this more, it is worth pausing and commenting briefly on the advantages of (Adorno's) contextualism. This approach avoids the abstract theorizing that non-contextualist approaches tend to engage in. This is an advantage because abstract theorizing comes with significant risks, of which I briefly note three: (a) *mistaken purity*, insofar as the real entanglement of the abstract theorizing with the actual sociohistorical context of theorizing is insufficiently reflected upon; (b) *empty formalism*, in that what remains after abstracting from context is, arguably, insufficient to be action-guiding or explanatorily significant; and (c) *wishful thinking*, whereby the goals and means devised in abstract (normative)

theorizing are too unmoored from the actual context. Moreover, Adorno's contextualism *avoids disciplinary silos*—such as a stark separation between normative theorizing in philosophy and historical or social analysis—since the "concrete analysis of the concrete situation" will require an interdisciplinary approach from the off. Ideology critique—a major political contribution theorizing can make on Adorno's view of it—requires such an approach, for ideology—as understood by Adorno—is not just an accidental feature of the social world but arises from its social structures and practices and consists not in a simple falsehood but in truths the one-sidedness or partial nature of which we cannot comprehend without attending to their context.

In addition, contextualism has the advantage of cohering with essential insights in (Wittgensteinian) philosophy of language and (Hegelian) social theory.[31] In particular, contextualism tends to come—and, in Adorno's case, does come—with holism, whereby we cannot separate the meaning of, say, "inclusivity" from the context of use or the satisfaction of hunger from the ensemble of social practices in which it takes place. This avoids the kind of atomism, whereby ideas or values or practices are treated in isolation from the whole of which they form part, such that, for example, it is overlooked how their meaning changes once divorced from the relations in which they stand in this whole and how they cannot be simply substituted by something else without changes to that whole. To take an example from Marx, it might appear undoubtably true that human beings always need to satisfy their hunger and true in a sense that has deeper normative or explanatory significance. Yet, once we realize that satisfying hunger typically with bare hands is fundamentally different from satisfying it typically with some sort of utensils (knife and fork or chopsticks), we have to jettison claims to such wider significance for such claims (and, at most, talk about them in terms of their being explanatorily inert truisms). We cannot simply add knives and forks to cave-dwelling prehistoric societies, for they depend on a whole assemblage of practices (and associated innovations); and despite certain advantages they might bring (say in hygiene), the overall, all-things-considered advantage might be harder or even impossible to judge (e.g., what if there is a direct, albeit complicated, line from introducing the metal industry to the climate emergency?).

Furthermore, Adorno's contextualism has the advantage that his theory can be adapted to changing circumstances—indeed, being configured so as to seek to detect such changes. This is something that is not appreciated sufficiently about Adorno's work, which is often treated as (too) static in his social or cultural analysis.[32] For example, it is still often overlooked how Adorno's view of the culture industry changed as time unfolded and different forms of producing TV and film as well as different forms of interacting with them emerged, meaning that even non-autonomous, mass art could be critical.[33]

Adorno's Localism

Here we are faced with another puzzling aspect of Adorno's work (and life): although his own theory calls for it, he did not produce a detailed analysis of the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes and of how and why they embarked on the wrong path. Perhaps Adorno thought that others, like Pollock and Horkheimer in the 1940s and Marcuse in the late 1950s, had already provided the critical analysis of these regimes and their emergence and development.

Still, perhaps something else is going on—something that has a wider significance, including for the question of what Adorno can contribute to navigating our contemporary challenges of a globalized world. I wonder whether at least part of the reason why Adorno did not engage in detail with the Soviet Union is that he is not just a contextualist in the sense already noted but also a certain kind of *localist*. By this I do not mean that he supported making democratic decisions as local as possible—there is no evidence I am aware of that he either endorsed or rejected localism of this sort. Instead, what I mean by "localism" is something

else—that is, the view that we have to be immersed in a particular context in order to criticize it meaningfully.[34]

More would need to be said to unpack this, but the driving thought here again is about avoiding abstract thinking and the (risks of) disadvantages that come with it that I enumerated above. In particular, the meaningfulness of criticism arising from local immersion has a number of dimensions that abstract thinking will lack: the local immersion provides a deeper kind of understanding and thereby higher epistemic standing; it is required to unpick the ideological claims of the context which, for the most part, can only be recognized through the immersion since these claims, as noted, do not tend to consist in simple falsehoods but subtle shifts of agenda or various forms of being one-sided or deflecting while saying something true; and it means that the critic has, as the saying goes, "skin in the game," rather than engaging in the easy moralism of someone not endangered or directly implicated by the actions (or inactions) they take.

What I call Adorno's localism relates to the wider research tradition he is part of. Notably, it is constitutive of critical theory that it is dependent on historical and cultural experiences, but Adorno takes this perhaps furthest. For Adorno, it is only by way of being immersed in a language, culture, and history of a particular society that one can meaningfully criticize it—only such immersion enables the kind of studies that both focused on something specific (such as what a particular name or term invoked in a native speaker or the peculiarities of Hegel's Swabian dialect) and unlocked something about the wider context of which the specific was a part.

It is for this reason that Adorno found exile particularly challenging—not just because going into exile is almost always going to be a difficult experience but also because his work specifically relied on immersion in a rich local context and was not something that could be just transposed easily to a different local context. This is not to say that he had nothing to say about the local context he then experienced in his US exile. He clearly did, and, in fact, here too we find the micrological studies of something specific (like doorknobs) that had wider significance. Still, even in these studies, we encounter a kind of localism—an immersion in the experience of the displaced person's encounter with a new local context and a close attention to what is jarring for such a person in that context. It might be that this particular sideways-on view of American culture might have also something to say to those who grew up in it and might not notice certain peculiarities of their taken-for-granted social world, but first and foremost, it was telling about the experiences of a European intellectual thrown involuntarily into the New World.

I would, thus, like to suggest that Adorno did not analyze the Soviet context despite his own theory calling for this *not merely* because others in his circle (like Marcuse) might have done the job already or because he concentrated on the more general background story about the emergence of a truncated rationality in modernity or because he could not draw on or conduct in the Soviet Union the kind of sociological work he and others associated with the Institute for Social Research—qualitative research and surveys of workers or the general population—used as part of their social analysis and diagnosis of social ills. Rather, there is *also* something about the very way he operated in his theorizing and contributions to the public sphere—his immersion in and internally working through a local context—that prevented him from writing anything detailed about this topic.

It is difficult to evidence this. There are no explicit programmatic proclamations in favor of localism I could cite, albeit explicit programmatic proclamations are anyway largely missing form his work. Interpretation becomes perhaps particularly speculative when one searches for explanations why something is *not* present in an author's work (or *not as much* as one would expect). Still, perhaps one way to strengthen the suggestion I made is to consider how little Adorno wrote on other contexts than the one he inhabited at the time of writing. This is itself indicative of the localism I am ascribing to him.

It is striking to consider how little Adorno comments on significant international political events in his *Gesammelte Schriften* and posthumously published texts, despite the fact that these works are not just philosophical treatises but include sociological works, radio broadcasts, interviews, newspaper articles, lectures, and more. For example, major events and developments, such as the foundation of Israel and the conflicts in the Middle East (notably the 1956 Suez Crisis), the Korean War, the Cuban Revolution and the 1962 missile crisis, and most decolonization struggles, do not even get a mention.[35] Even the emerging European links of West Germany in the postwar years—like the European Steel and Coal Community (1951) and subsequent European Economic Community (1957)—go uncommented. There are merely fleeting references to the repressions of the more progressive socialist developments in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968[36] and to Vietnam.[37]

Indeed, it is also indicative that when Adorno does comment on events outside of his local context, either he hesitates to make claims or his otherwise astute judgment seems to misfire and go astray. To bring this out, it helps to juxtapose two sets of near contemporaneous comments: those he makes on the political situations in Greece and Vietnam, respectively.

In one late interview in 1969, Adorno is pressed by the interviewer on whether he would condone violence in responding to some regimes, such as the Greek military junta (established there in 1967). He answers in characteristically contextualist fashion: "It goes without saying that in Greece I would approve of any kind of action. The situation that prevails there is totally different [from the one in West Germany]." He immediately adds, in a way that highlights his hesitancy to speak about a different context, "But for someone who is ensconced in safety to advise others to start a revolution is so ridiculous that one ought to be ashamed of oneself."[38] These statements are compatible with his contextualism (which would exclude an absolutist prohibition on using violence in resisting domination) and his localism (which would recommend not to advise about which actions to take if one is not immersed in the local context and has no skin in it).

Tensions, however, emerge when we consider what Adorno says about Vietnam in a written exchange he has with Marcuse in the same year (1969). Here it is not only that Adorno makes pronouncements beyond his local context in a way that suggests a misfired judgment but that what he writes seems in tension with his contextualism and localism.

Let me reconstruct briefly the written exchange. What emerges from it is that Marcuse was also a contextualist and in agreement with Adorno that the 1960s were not a revolutionary situation, in fact not even a pre-revolutionary one.[39] Still, Marcuse—partly because of the war waged in Vietnam—thought that it was far from certain that the West-dominated global status quo was better than anything else that could take its place.[40] 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.[41] Adorno answers that it would be "ideological" (of Marcuse and, presumably, others who take a similar line) to deplore only the violence and repression of the South Vietnamese and US forces but not the means employed by the Vietcong (notably their use of torture).[42] There seems also to be a hint of suggesting that it is not sufficient to mention only the US involvement, without also mentioning the meddling of the other side in the Cold War (in this case, China). Against this, Marcuse insists on a clear moral distinction between violence used in fighting aggression and that employed by the aggressor and in repression.[43] He suggests that Adorno might be—problematically—equating the two in moral terms and, in doing so, providing—however inadvertently—a justification and apology for the aggressor.

It is here that we get to the tensions. Adorno clearly accepts the validity of the distinction Marcuse draws for some contexts—most obviously for the context of fighting fascist regimes (recall the passage about the Greek military junta above). And yet he seems to reject making a distinction between initiating aggression and fighting back against it in the Vietnam context.[44] This looks inconsistent. And as much as we might want to emphasize that no one is living rightly in the wrong world and that resisting aggressors can involve

committing what we would normally class as evil acts, the complete flattening out of the moral landscape seems to lack the nuance that Adorno's contextualism and localism typically contain. Unless Adorno is, implicitly, committing himself to a kind of absolutist prohibition against torture, it is unclear what is going on here; and even if he does adopt such a prohibition, it seems to be in tension with his contextualism (recall, specifically, the comment he makes about the context of fighting the dictatorship in Greece, for which he says he "would approve of *any* kind of action"[45]). Moreover, Marcuse's worry about providing—however inadvertently—a justification and apology for the aggressor also chimes better with Adorno's localism then the position the latter takes. They inhabited a local context—the United States and West Germany—where there still was at the time (1969) mainstream support for the intervention in Vietnam and no chance of a Chinese takeover (with no troops amassing to cross the Rhine to invade Germany or the Pacific Ocean to invade the United States). In this local context, being more critical of the US involvement and methods (notably, the widespread use of napalm bombing) might be the issue to press and focus on, rather than a blanket condemnation of both sides. Sometimes, like arguably here, insistence on being comprehensive is a way to obscure the power imbalances and the lopsided nature of a situation and the significant differences between the actors. Things would be different if Adorno or Marcuse were in China or in North Vietnam or if a Chinese takeover of their social context was imminent. Finally, one cannot help but feel that Marcuse is also right that Adorno largely neglected the plight of those who are at the peripheries of the Western-dominated status quo, how this plight was, at least in part, the consequence of how the West maintained its high standard of living[46] and how the countries of the West were (formally) democratic at home but far from respectful of democracy and individual rights abroad.

These (misfired) judgments are in tension with Adorno's contextualism—his emphasis on the concrete analysis of the concrete situation. Indeed, one might think that despite the undeniable advantages of localism—notably the avoidance of abstract theorizing and cross-context moralism—it also contains a danger to mislead us: while overlooking how local contexts are interconnected is *not necessarily* an upshot of localism, this approach always contains such a result as a risk. In Adorno's case, this risk seems to have come to pass. Specifically, Adorno's localism seems to have led him to downplay the interrelation between what happened in the Western liberal core of the global north (notably in the United States) and what happened in the peripheries (such as Vietnam).

A different line of critique is to argue that Adorno was wrong even about his local context, and it is here where the dispute with the German student movement in the 1960s comes back in. One dimension of this dispute concerned whether West Germany in the late 1960s had reached the point where different forms of resistance to the state and capitalist apparatus—including potentially the use of violence—were called for.

Adorno's diagnosis was that there was no revolutionary situation in West Germany at the time, but he also was clearly of the view that too much escalation by the protest movements would make things worse in terms of having the unintended consequence of threating democracy even more than it already was and would lead to a vicious cycle of violence. Thus, even bracketing the dispute about whether there was a revolutionary situation, there was a separate dispute about how to respond to the threat of a fascist revival that both Adorno and the student movement were concerned about.

The student movement—especially the radical left in the *Sozialistischer Studentenbund* (SDS; Socialist Student League)—had by the late 1960s adopted a different perspective from Adorno's. This was partly in response to the concrete situation. As Kundnani rightly notes, "The shooting of Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer at a protest against the visit by the Shah of Iran in West Berlin on June 2, 1967—which the SDS said showed there was now 'an undeclared state of emergency' in West Germany—transformed the student movement."[47] Less than a year later, one of the significant figures in the SDS, Rudi Dutschke, was shot by a neo-Nazi sympathizer. (Dutschke survived but sustained severe injuries, which would mean an early death in 1979.) The students felt assaulted by both state and the media, which had—in their view—fueled an atmosphere where legitimate protesters were vilified and violence against them incited. They judged that

the situation in West Germany had become so problematic that more than traditional forms of protest were called for, even some forms of organized counterviolence. In particular, they were concerned that the country had entered a kind of proto-fascist stage and that the lesson of the early 1930s was that now was the time to intervene. As one of their sympathizers—Horst Mahler—put it,

> After 1945, people often asked what kind of accusations we could make of our parents' generation. Was it right to hold it against them that they did not resist the fascist dictatorship? Very quickly they raised the objection that it was a dictatorship of absolute terror in which control was all encompassing, and no one could be expected to commit suicide. But perhaps we can hold it against them that they did not resist at a time when resistance was still possible and had a point.[48]

In principle, Adorno's contextualism should allow for such a conclusion, but Adorno saw things differently. While he was very worried about a fascist revival and appalled by the killing of Ohnesorg, he disagreed that 1960s West Germany was a (proto-)fascist state and thought that the use of counterviolence would not help in that local context and, if anything, would make a fascist revival more likely to happen, not less so.

Hindsight was broadly on Adorno's side of the argument. A fascist regime in West Germany was not really in the cards at the time, so there was no real need to take special measures to prevent fascism from taking power. When some resorted to special measures, there was an escalating cycle of violence for some years to come: after Adorno's death, West Germany experienced a hot decade of violent engagement between a small fringe of radicals that turned to violence (the so-called Rote Armee Fraktion [Red Army Faction]), on the one hand, and the state apparatus, on the other). This included in the so-called *Deutscher Herbst* (German Autumn) of 1977, a particularly traumatic set of events for the young republic. The net effect was that the powers and capacities of the security apparatus grew, and the idea of a radical alternative became more discredited.

Adorno's (Lack of a) Global Subject

There is one more tension that I would like to flag up in relation to Adorno and politics. When it comes to the social change that Adorno thinks would be required to overcome our wrong social world, he explicitly endorses that we would need a collective agent of a particularly encompassing kind: "a self-conscious global subject."[49] Yet, for the most part, he seems to address only individuals, and he does not offer an account of how such a collective agent could emerge.

In part, Adorno in this radicalizes the move away from the proletariat as revolutionary subject that Horkheimer already performed in the seminal 1937 text "Traditional and Critical Theory." There, Horkheimer expresses that ideology can affect anyone[50] and implies that the proletariat has no particular epistemic privilege in the struggle for emancipation. He speaks of how truth has taken refuge in small groups of individuals, themselves decimated by state terror.[51] Adorno takes this one step further in focusing just on individuals (not even on small groups of them), notably in the "Dedication" to Horkheimer with which Adorno's *Minima Moralia* begins. There, while he notes the overwhelming (social) objectivity which makes the idea of individual autonomy or even the idea of individuals and individuality a lie, he takes the existence and experience of individuals—particularly his own—as his starting point for social analysis. He even goes as far as to say that "part of the social force of liberation may have temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere," as regrettable as this may be for critical theory.[52] Starting with his own subjective situation and experiences, Adorno then proceeds in the remainder of the book (and elsewhere) to offer a kind of exemplification of how to navigate this overwhelming social world and how to resist it and live less wrongly in it.

One might think that it makes sense that Adorno concentrates particularly—sometimes, it seems, exclusively—on individuals, not on collective agents. This fits with his contextualism, whereby what was missing in the mid-twentieth century were non-dominating collective forms of organization, different from the Stalinist party and state apparatus that had emerged in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. In the absence of such organizational forms, it would be empty talk or even wishful thinking to speak about collective agency. It also fits with his idea of capacity-building, starting with individuals and then—the thought might be—moving eventually to a more collective level.

However, here too a comparison to Marcuse is instructive. Marcuse was just as critical of the dominating organizational forms in question as Adorno was. Yet, Marcuse did not abandon the search for the emergence of different forms of collective agency and organization as much as Adorno did. This might have been in part because Marcuse was immersed in the US context, where he witnessed the civil rights movement, and in part because he clearly engaged more than Adorno with anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles beyond his immediate local context of living. As bleak as Marcuse's 1964 *One Dimensional Man* is—reminiscent of Adorno's own bleak social analysis—it contains an account of where collective opposition to the wrong social world might come from. Structurally similar to Marx's and Lukács' analysis of the position of the proletariat—as well placed in a social position to (1) understand how the system really operates (and at what human costs to people), (2) disrupt or even change it, and (3) be motivated to overcome it—Marcuse there focused on "outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable."[53] He describes their pivotal position as follows:

> Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force that violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, in order to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones, and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death. Their force is behind every political demonstration for the victims of law and order. The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact that marks the beginning of the end of a period.[54]

Here we have the beginning of an account for how a "global subject" of social transformation may emerge—outcasts both in the center of the Western-dominated world and in the periphery could bring about social change, both locally and, in uniting, globally. And we can see a direct line from Marcuse to something like the World Social Forum (founded in opposition to the World Economic Forum) and to ideas like feminism for the 99%.[55]

What the contrast brings out is that Adorno did not consider to the same degree as someone like Marcuse did how something like a global subject of social transformation could emerge, despite his own theory's insistence on the need for such emergence. There is, arguably, in Adorno also less real hunger to engage more with the experiences of outcasts from different groups—those of a different gender or sexual identity, those who were colonized, those racialized not along antisemitic lines but with reference to the color of their skin, etc.[56] Such engagement need not take the form of paternalistically speaking for those often denied a voice—something Adorno would be averse to do. Instead, it can, by way of witnessing or chronicling, amplify the voice they already have.

This is not to say that this comparative gap in discussing the emergence of collective agents and the variety of experiences of those outcast could not be overcome in a way that would have made the Adornoian position more coherent than the actual theorizing that the historical Adorno produced ends up being. One might, for example, think of the 1970s and 1980s endeavors of his students Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt as seeking to develop an account of how a global subject might emerge in an Adornoian fashion and of opening critical theory up to a greater variety of experiences—with their notion of "the proletarian public sphere" (whereby "proletarian" is understood broadly to encompass not just the traditional working class)

and their Benjaminian chronicling of obstinacy.[57] Their stance and that of Marcuse are the paths that were open to Adorno but he did not take, despite being compatible with, or even called for, by his overall outlook.

It is here where future research can take up the baton. Most pressing is an Adornoian concrete analysis of our changed concrete situation of the 2020s, preferably informed by Marcuse's and/or Negt and Kluge's consideration about how those outcasts and marginalized can begin to form a global subject of resistance or even transformation. In the face of the ecological and climate emergency crises, this might well take the form of trying to develop a critical theory of nature from among Adorno's work and seeking to connect it to the social movements that exist in this area. It might also involve the kind of conceptual innovation for which his theory is rightly known or mobilizing his earlier conceptual innovations, such as updating the concept of "culture industry" to our internet and social media age. A historically and contextually rich attempt to unify different marginalized groups behind an idea or concept would also fall under this broad heading—an example of this might be the ongoing attempt by Nancy Fraser to use "work" in building coalitions among those facing partially intersecting forms of domination (as workers in the material reproduction of society, gendered carers behind Marx's hidden abode of social reproduction, and/or those whose lives are still structured by the colonialism and slavery of the past and the structural racism of the present). Additionally, it would be fruitful to continue the recent trend of comparing and combining Adorno and Foucault, including to understand better how their lives and works intertwined (and might have come apart at times) during the postwar years as well as to develop problematizing genealogies. Moreover, the task remains to advance contextualism and localism in a way that maximally prevents succumbing to the danger of overlooking the interrelations of local contexts—as does the task of resisting the pitfalls of non-contextualist theorizing and politics. Last but certainly not least, the question of building and expanding critical capacities amidst a society that sabotages their formation and exercise will remain a pressing concern of Adornoian politics.

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Notes

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* 1, no. 233 (January–February 1999): 119.

2 Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "The Political Contradiction in Adorno's Critical Theory," in *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (1975; repr., London: Routledge, 1994), 4:117–119; translation amended.

3 Quoted in Leslie, "Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence," 119. Adorno works with, but also questions, the (stark) distinction between theory and praxis operative in such criticisms. See Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics: Theory and Praxis in Germany's 1960s," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 9 (2014): 867–893, esp. Thesis 2; and Deborah Cook, "Ein Reaktionäres Schwein? Political Activism and Prospects for Change in Adorno," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 1, no. 227 (2004): 47–67.

4 Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," *New Left Review* 1, no. 233 (January–February 1999): 123–136, here esp. Marcuse to Adorno (04/06/1969), 128–129.

5 See, notably, Russell Berman, "Adorno's Politics," in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 110–131; and J. Norberg, "Adorno and Postwar German Society," in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 335–348.

6 See, notably, "Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradicalismus," in *Nachgelassene schriften. Abteilung V: Vorträge 1949–1968*, ed. Michael Schwarz (1967; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), 440–467. There was an intriguing reaction that this essay is uncannily topical for the German context now, when it was reissued in 2019.

7 See, for example, Maeve Cooke, "Forever Resistant? Adorno and Radical Transformation of Society," in Gordon, Hammer, and Pensky, *Companion to Adorno*, 583–600.

8 Vladimir I. Lenin, "Kommunismus. Journal of the Communist International," in *Collected Works*, 4th Engl. ed. (1920; repr., Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 31:165.

9 Karl Marx, "Letter to Nieuwenhuis, 22.02.1881," MEW XXXV: 160/MECW XLVI: 66; Marx's italics; quoted in T. W. Adorno, "Ohne Leitbild: Anstelle einer Vorrede," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (henceforth GS), ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972ff.), 10:291.

10 Or at least this is what Kant's position seems to be in his notorious discussion of the would-be murderer at the door enquiring about the whereabouts of a friend one is harboring. See Immanuel Kant, "On the Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy," in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (1797; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 609–615.

11 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (1971; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), notably 8. The later Rawls seems to have moved in a more contextualist direction, indexing his theory to the political culture of modern liberal democracies. I will not enter here into the controversies surrounding the relation between the early and later work and simply trust that readers can recognize the possibility of a Rawlsian approach that makes (purportedly) context-independent principles central.

12 I write "for the most part" since his statements in some places might suggest an absolutist prohibition against torture (see below and Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics," 881).

13 Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), is—notably in his critique of the "ethics-first view" that tends to operate with context-independent principles, his drawing on Weber and Lenin, and his insisting on ideology critique and on politics as an art that requires judgment, rather than mere application of rules—a good example of Adorno's, or at least a recognizable Adornoian, approach.

14 Adorno maintains that *at that historical juncture* a better world is objectively blocked and that revolutionary attempts are bound to fail—see notably his remarks on the events of May 1968 in Paris in "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower? A

Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno," ed., trans., and intro. Gerhard Richter, *Monatshefte* 94, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 17. For further details, see Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics," Thesis 1; and Cooke, "Forever Resistant?"

15 See, especially, "Reflections on Class Theory," *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (1942, GS 8:373–391; repr., Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93–110; "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* (1968, GS 8:354–370, esp. 358), 114; "Why Still Philosophy," in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (1962, GS 10.2:469; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 14; "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," *Critical Models* (1963, GS 10.2:534), 72; and "Society," in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen E. Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (1966, GS 8:15; repr., New York: Routledge, 1989), 272.

16 See also "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* (1968, GS 8:343, 351, 364) 117f., 120; and "Individuum und Organisation" (GS 8:455–456).

17 "Zur Demokratisierung der deutschen Universitäten" (1959, GS 20.1:337); "'Betriebsklima' und Entfremdung" (1955, GS 20.2:675, 676); see also T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, "Die UDSSR und der Frieden" (1950, GS 20.1:391–393).

18 See Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics," Thesis 7.

19 "Gegen die Notstandsgesetze" (1968, GS 20.1:396).

20 For a fuller account of why Adorno thought theorizing had priority in 1960s West Germany, see Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics," esp. Thesis 4.

21 Theodor W. Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (GS 6:15; repr., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 3; translation amended. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, ed. Thomas Schröder (1963; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 13–14; trans. Rodney Livingstone as *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 4–5.

22 See also "Why Still Philosophy," in *Critical Models* (1962, GS 10.1:470), 14; "Marginalia to Theory and Practice," in *Critical Models* (late 1960s [unpublished], GS 10.2:780), 276.

23 See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, GS 6:146/143; and Adorno and Horkheimer, "Die UDSSR und der Frieden," GS 20.1:391f. See also "Resignation," in *Critical Models* (1969, GS 10.2:795), 290.

24 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, GS 6:15/3 (my italics).

25 See also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, GS 6:204–205.

26 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, GS 6:15, 147/3, 144; see also Cooke, "Forever Resistant?," 587.

27 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, GS 6:15/3; translation amended.

28 See notably *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (1965–1966; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 89; trans. Rodney Livingstone as *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 58.

29 "Marginalia to Theory and Practice," in *Critical Models* (GS 10.2:765), 264; "Individuum und Organisation," GS 8:454; and "Diskussionsbeitrag zu 'Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft?,'" (1968) GS 10.2:579. The idea that the priority relation between theory and praxis is reversed in certain historical situations 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 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." Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie*, ed. Christoph Gödde (1968; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 251; *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmond Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 150.

30 There is some evidence that suggests that Adorno shifted as to whether finding this was predominantly a practical or theoretical task. In his (so far unpublished) 1956–1957 lectures on moral philosophy, Adorno suggests that his students experiment with different ways of living (*Probleme der Moralphilosophie [1956/7]*, Adorno Archive, Vo1289-1520, here

Vo1327, 1519). While he does not explicitly say so, the thought might be that such experimentation could develop alternatives to the status quo from within it, including alternative collective organisations. It is unclear why exactly Adorno became more critical of such experimentation when it then took off in the 1960s, but there seems to have been a shift in his stance between the 1950s and 1960s. The more optimistic tone in the 1950s about collective organizations—also found in the "Towards a New Manifesto" 1956 discussion with Horkheimer—seems to have gone by the 1960s. By 1969, Adorno thinks that finding non-oppressive forms of collective organization can be done, if at all, *only* by way of theorizing ("Marginalia to Theory and Practice," in *Critical Models* [GS 10.2:777], 274)—a viewpoint that is in tension with his Hegelian–Marxist outlook, according to which theorizing can only get a hold once certain practical innovations have taken place. The changed stance might reflect his worries about authoritarian tendencies among the student movement (see Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics," Thesis 10).

31 This is not to say that Adorno was not critical of Wittgenstein and Hegel, or theorizing inspired by them—any superficial survey of his work will show otherwise. I cannot go into the question here how accurate and fair these criticisms always were. In particular in relation to the (later) Wittgenstein, I think there are some overlooked parallels, including overlooked by Adorno. See Fabian Freyenhagen, "The Linguistic Turn in the Early Frankfurt School: Horkheimer and Adorno," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 61, no. 1 (2023): 127–148.

32 For a notable example, see Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity," in his *The Persistence of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 1–35.

33 See *Einleitung in die Soziologie*, 255–256; *Introduction to Sociology*, 152–153. See also Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Introduction to Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film' (1966)," *New German Critique* 24–25 (1981–1982): 186–198; and R. Samaniego de la Fuente, "Adorno's Magic Lantern: On Film, Semblance, and Aesthetic Heteronomy," *New German Critique* 48, no. 2 (August 2021): 147–175.

34 Benjamin Randolph pointed out to me that Adorno, sometimes, let considerations guide his social criticism that were not strictly local. In what is perhaps a residue of Hegelian world history in Adorno's thinking, he, on occasion, refers to the United States as an example of a "late capitalist" society that had already traveled further down the road of such societies than West Germany had and used references to the former to foreshadow the directions of travel that the latter might take. On this reading, (Adorno's) social criticism requires *not only* immersion in the culture *but also* extra-local considerations about the "more advanced" tendencies of capitalist social evolution.

35 There is a brief comment on Algeria and torture in one of the lecture series (*Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 144/97), but it is not specific to decolonialization. Adorno comments twice about the formal end of colonialism and how (Rosa Luxemburg's?) old imperialism theory might nonetheless not be completely inapplicable ("Society," in *Critical Theory and Society* [GS 8:14], 271; "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* [GS 8:360], 116–117). And in one lecture he comments on a post-independence civil war context (in Congo) and the involvement of a former colonial power (Belgium) in this context (*Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und der Freiheit*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann [1964–1965; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001], 137f., 141f.; trans. Rodney Livingstone as *History and Freedom* [Cambridge: Polity, 2006], 93–94, 96).

36 "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* (GS 8:358), 114.

37 "Marginalia to Theory and Practice," in *Critical Models* (GS 10.2:777f.), 274; "Offener Brief an Rolf Hochhuth" (1967), GS 11:593; *Metaphysik*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (1965; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), 160; *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 101.

38 GS, 20.1:408f, "Who's afraid of the ivory tower?," 19.

39 "Correspondence," Marcuse to Adorno (05/04/1969), 125.

40 "Correspondence," Marcuse to Adorno (05/04/1969, 04/06/1969, and 21/07/1969), 125, 130, 134.

41 "Correspondence," Marcuse to Adorno (21/07/1969), 134.

42 "Correspondence," Adorno to Marcuse (05/05/1969), 127–128; see also "Marginalia to Theory and Practice," in *Critical Models* (GS 10.2:777–778), 274; and *Metaphysics*, 160/101.

43 "Correspondence," Marcuse to Adorno (04/06/1969 and 21/07/1969), 129, 134–135.

44 Similarly, in one of his rare comments on a post-colonial context, Adorno not only condemns both (what he calls) "the savages [die *Wilden*]" and the Belgium paratroopers battling it out in post-colonial Congo during the early 1960s but equates them in moral terms (*Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und der Freiheit*, 141–142/96; see also 137–138/93–94). One might think that he is right to point out that opposing social totality can involve one—however inadvertently—in "collaborat[ing] in weaving the web of disaster" and "degenerat[e] into something poisonous and bad" (141–142/96). Still, one might also think Adorno is too much flattening out the moral and political landscape and that this, in turn, is in tension with (his) contextualism.

45 GS, 20.1:408–409, "Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower?," 19 (my italics).

46 The two exceptions are the brief comments—already mentioned above—Adorno makes about how imperialism theory might still be applicable, despite former colonies' having largely achieved independence by the 1960s ("Society," in *Critical Theory and Society* [GS 8:14], 271; "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* [GS 8:360], 116–117).

47 Hans Kundnani, "The Frankfurt School and the West German Student Movement," in *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Axel Honneth (London: Routledge, 2020), 226.

48 Quoted in Kundnani, "Frankfurt School," 227; with reference to Bernward Vesper, ed., *Bedingungen und Organisation des Widerstandes. Der Kongreß in Hannover* (Frankfurt am Main: Voltaire, 1967), 104. In a twist of history, Mahler, who in the 1970s served a prison term for his involvement in the Rote Armee Fraktion ("Red Army Faction"), later turned against the left, joining a neo-Nazi party (National Democratic Party) and was convicted for Holocaust denial and glorifying Hitler and his fascist regime.

49 "Progress" (1962), in *Critical Models* (GS 10.2:618), 144.

50 "It is possible for the consciousness of *every* social stratum today to be limited and corrupted by ideology" (Max Horkheimer, "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Alfred Schmidt [1937; repr., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988], 4:216. English translation by M. J. O'Connell in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1972], 242 (my italics).

51 Horkheimer, "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie," 211/237–238.

52 T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (1951, GS 4; repr., London: Verso, 1978), 18.

53 Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 200. We would today—and many would have already then—insist on not speaking of other "races" but racialized groups or the like.

54 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 200–201.

55 For the latter, see Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019).

56 See, notably, Fadi A. Bardawil, "Césaire with Adorno: Critical Theory and the Colonial Problem," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (October 2018): 773–789; and E. Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 166–177. For a dissenting view regarding gender, see Rochelle DuFord, "Daughters of the Enlightenment: Reconstructing Adorno on Gender and Feminist Praxis," *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 784–800.

57 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience* (1971; repr., London: Verso, 2016); and Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History & Obstinacy* (1981; repr., New York: Zone Books, 2014).