

## Introduction

### *Thinking Otherwise*

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair [would be] the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.

Adorno, *Minima Moralia*<sup>1</sup>

I remember well the month when I began to read Theodor W. Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*. It was May 1977, during a lovely spring in Toronto. Joyce and I were house-sitting for a professor of political philosophy. In the quiet of someone else's study, surrounded by books that were not my own, I began to read Adorno's impenetrable, compelling, evocative German prose. Some days I made little headway. Other days I found myself swept along by the drama of the text, yet unable to tell anyone else where I had been or what I had learned. Gradually, however, I began to glimpse the submerged dialectical structures that sustain Adorno's thought.

My reading notes from 1977 show that I experienced *Ästhetische Theorie* as an array of potentially interconnected fragments held

An earlier version of section 1 in this Introduction was presented at the symposium "Adorno – Cultural Theory, Political Thought and Social Change," hosted in November 2003 by the Goethe Institut in Toronto to mark the centennial of Adorno's birth. I wish to thank Doina Popescu and Arpad Sölter of the Goethe Institut for organizing this occasion, and my fellow panelists for providing a lively discussion: Ian Balfour, Rebecca Comay, Lydia Goehr, Willi Goetschel, Richard Leppert, and Asha Varadharajan.

<sup>1</sup> *MM* §153, p. 247/283.

together by a provocative social vision. Although I had little understanding then of Adorno's emphasis on parataxis and constellations, I read bits and pieces, relying on intuitions about their relevance for my own concerns: first several pages on modern art (*AT* 33–45/56–74), next the chapter on truth content (*AT* 118–36/179–205), then some pages on progress (*AT* 190–9/284–96) and on society (*AT* 225–35/334–48, 256–61/380–7), and finally a few pages from the “Paralipomena” (*AT* 282–5/419–24). In the months surrounding this first exposure, my reading ranged through *Philosophy of New Music*, *Minima Moralia*, and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as some German secondary literature, seeking further illuminations of Adorno's text. This is how my reading of his unfinished *Hauptwerk* continued for several years – fragmentary, contextual, and out of sequence. Not until Christian Lenhardt sent me an autographed copy of his newly published translation in 1984 did I read the book continuously from beginning to end, in English now, with the German text alongside. By then the main lines of my own interpretation were firmly established.

A few months after the first partial reading, Joyce and I immigrated to West Berlin, where over several years I researched and wrote my doctoral dissertation. We arrived there in the fateful fall of 1977. Even before we could catch nuances of newscasts and conversations, we felt the tension tingeing the famous “Berliner Luft.” We had moved from spring to autumn, and my reading of Adorno took on a more somber cast. Awakened frequently in the dead of night by the ominous rumble of American tanks maneuvering down Teltower Damm, I soon lost the can-do optimism that came with growing up white, male, and middle class in the United States at the height of its Cold War empire. By the time we had lived in Berlin for three years, at the epicenter of geopolitical conflicts, Adorno's harshest criticisms of capitalist society seemed none too harsh. The “sadness” and “disappointment” lodged at the heart of Adorno's negative dialectic, as Max Pensky puts it, resonated with the world around.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Max Pensky, “Editor's Introduction: Adorno's Actuality,” in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 1–21.

Yet the book that eventually emerged from this experience received quite a different response.<sup>3</sup> At a book session organized by the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in October 1992, one commentator regarded *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* as a domesticating reconstruction of Adorno's thought. The other considered it a depoliticizing critique. Surprised by this, I began to wonder about an apparent gap between the book's presentation of Adorno and the lived hermeneutical experience from which this presentation emerged.

In retrospect, I can see that the gap arose from my intending the book to address a broad audience. This audience included analytic philosophers who might otherwise pay Adorno's philosophy little notice, university students around the world who needed a rigorous but accessible account of Adorno's contributions, and cultural workers who wanted to challenge the logic of consumer capitalism. Like most of my work since then, the book did not restrict its audience to continental philosophers, Critical Theorists, and Adorno cognoscenti, even though it invited engagement from scholars who had particularly strong reasons to read Adorno in the 1990s.

Nor did the book set out to provide either the passionate meditations or the anti-imperialist fireworks that my commentators would have preferred. Instead, it attempted to give an immanent critique with metacritical intent, focusing on the theme of artistic truth in Adorno's aesthetics. One commentator wanted the critique to be less immanent, and the other wanted the immanence of my critique to be less dispassionate. Neither expectation struck me as what was needed at the time. Yet by attempting an immanent critique with metacritical intent, I had left underdeveloped the critical passions and political relevance of Adorno's work.

Today I am in a position to close the gap. This is so in part because Adorno's thought has become better known in the English-speaking world, although it still does not receive the intensity and breadth of study it deserves. The gap can also be closed because the issues at stake in reading Adorno have become more transparent, not only for me but also for many others who address his work. It is not hard to see now that the future of a globalizing society is at stake. This is especially

<sup>3</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

clear if one considers the development of Critical Theory, in which the question of philosophy's social vision has always been central. A dramatic shift has occurred in this development, such that one can recognize two different visions of socially engaged philosophy.

### 1.1 WOZU NOCH PHILOSOPHIE?

A first approximation of two different visions comes from comparing essays by Adorno and by Jürgen Habermas, both titled "Wozu noch Philosophie." Adorno's essay, translated as "Why Still Philosophy," was broadcast as a radio lecture on January 2, 1962 (CM 1-17/459-73).<sup>4</sup> It comes from the time when he was writing *Negative Dialectics*. The essay objects to the formalism of much professional philosophy, and it criticizes other schools of thought for ignoring societal mediation: logical positivism, for ignoring the mediation of facts, and Heideggerian ontology, for ignoring the mediation of concepts.

According to Adorno, such immanent criticism of other philosophies has a larger societal purpose. It aims to expose the "unfreedom and oppression" at work in contemporary society (CM 10/465). It also aims to "catch a glimpse" (CM 15/471) of a world where they would end. Adorno does not hesitate to use strong language when he states philosophy's task. He speaks of "suffering," "salvation," and "hope":

The undiminished persistence of suffering, fear, and menace necessitates that the thought that cannot be realized should not be discarded. After having missed its opportunity, philosophy must come to know, without any mitigation, why the world – which could be paradise here and now – can become hell itself tomorrow. (CM 14/470)

Only a thinking ... that acknowledges its lack of function and power can perhaps catch a glimpse of an order of the possible and the nonexistent, where human beings and things each would be in their rightful place. (CM 15/471)

History promises no salvation and offers the possibility of hope only to the concept whose movement follows history's path to the very extreme. (CM 17/473)

<sup>4</sup> The original version of this essay dates back to a talk Adorno gave in 1955 for a study group in the Frankfurt Student Union, according to Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 416.

For Adorno, the pursuit of this vision requires a philosophy whose experience is unrestricted (*CM* 17/473).

Habermas's essay, translated as "Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?" also began as a radio lecture (*PP* 1–19/11–36). Broadcast on January 4, 1971, it forms the lead essay in a volume dedicated to Adorno's memory: "In Erinnerung an Theodor W. Adorno," reads the dedication in Habermas's *Philosophisch-politische Profile*. The book's English translation omits this dedication, however, just as Adorno's utopian passion had already vanished from Habermas's lecture. When Adorno asked "Wozu noch Philosophie?" he wondered what philosophy could contribute to transforming society as a whole. This is no longer Habermas's question.

One can detect the shift from how Habermas cites Adorno. The essay opens by quoting a passage where Adorno says philosophy must no longer consider itself in control of "the absolute," yet it must retain "the emphatic concept of truth." Habermas ends the quotation with Adorno's sentence "This contradiction is its element" (*CM* 7/461; quoted in *PP* 1/11). Significantly, Habermas omits the very next sentence in Adorno's text, a sentence that is equally important: "It [i.e., this contradiction] defines philosophy as negative," Adorno writes (*CM* 7/461). Habermas does not speak about negativity, about the negativity of suffering, say, or the negativity of a societal totality that needlessly produces and prolongs suffering. Resting content with a conception of nonabsolute truth, he becomes nearly elegiac about the distance of his vision from Adorno's. Adorno's death marks the end of a "great tradition" of German philosophy, Habermas writes, and with it a "style of thought bound to individual erudition and personal testimony" (*PP* 2/12). Quite rightly, I think, he wonders whether, in catching up with modernization in other Western countries, German philosophy itself will "fade away in the graveyard of a spirit that can no longer affirm and realize itself as absolute" (*PP* 9/22).

Habermas does not wish philosophy to fade away. Yet his essay limits philosophy's contemporary tasks to a "substantive critique of science" (*PP* 14/30) – a critique of *science*, not of *society as a whole*. Although the critique is supposed to be "substantive," the specific tasks are notably formal in their description: "to criticize the objectivist self-understanding of the sciences," "to deal ... with basic

issues of a methodology of the social sciences,” and to clarify connections between “the logic of research and technological development,” on the one hand, and “the logic of consensus-forming communication,” on the other (*PP* 16/33). Habermas relegates questions of suffering and hope to religion, which itself has become impotent in “industrially advanced societies” (*PP* 18/35).<sup>5</sup> One finds no sign of Adorno’s emphasis on philosophical experience, and little trace of his desire to expose the negativity of society as a whole. Whether, in abandoning Adorno’s struggle with “the absolute,” Habermas has also lost “the emphatic concept of truth” remains an open question.

Perhaps this comparison suffices to show a dramatic shift within Critical Theory less than two years after Adorno’s death in August 1969. The question I want to pose is whether the shift matters. My answer is that it does, in three respects. First, it supports serious misinterpretations of Adorno’s thought. Second, it blunts the political edge of Critical Theory. Third, it results in a truncated vision of philosophy at a time when passion, not simply precision, is required. This book attempts to retrieve some of Adorno’s passion without neglecting his dialectical precision. It pursues what I call a “critical retrieval.”

I aim to retrieve crucial insights in Adorno’s social philosophy. By “social philosophy” I do not mean a subdiscipline of philosophy that can be neatly arrayed alongside other subdisciplines such as epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. Rather I mean the entirety of philosophy as it addresses the challenges and the prospects of society as a whole. As Adorno demonstrated, such a philosophy is inherently interdisciplinary. It interacts with other disciplines in order to undertake a dialectical critique of society, and it necessarily crosses the boundaries of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, even as it

<sup>5</sup> This move occurs in an underdeveloped reflection on how contemporary philosophy confronts a “collapse of religious consciousness.” The term in German, *Zerfall*, is the same one Adorno sometimes uses to characterize the demise of metaphysical consciousness. Habermas regards this collapse as a challenge for philosophy because philosophical life-interpretations among the cultured elite traditionally “depended precisely on coexistence with a widely influential religion,” but philosophy itself was unable to master “the meaninglessness of the negativity of the risks built into life – in a way that had been possible for the religious hope in salvation [*die Erwartung des religiösen Heils*]” (*PP* 17–18/35).

addresses topics within each of these fields. To regard all things “as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption,” as Adorno urges, is to surpass the limits imposed by overly professionalized and hyperspecialized philosophies. It is to engage in the risky and provocative project of thinking otherwise.

## 1.2 GOING AFTER ADORNO

In the effort to retrieve Adorno’s social philosophy I am not alone. A number of books have appeared in recent years that try to reclaim Adorno’s insights from Habermasian neglect. Their authors share my desire to do philosophy “after Adorno,” in a double sense. First, we wish to carry forward crucial insights in Adorno’s social philosophy. Second, we try to do this by “going after” Adorno’s successors such as Habermas, refuting their criticisms of Adorno and reclaiming the Adornian insights they overlook or reject.

Yet there is a third manner of doing philosophy after Adorno that deserves greater effort than it has received thus far. This is the project of acknowledging valid Habermasian objections and, in light of them, providing a redemptive critique of Adorno. It is not enough, in my view, to defend Adorno against misinterpretations, to reject inadequate criticisms, and to promote the concerns and claims his successors neglect. One also needs to address legitimate Habermasian criticisms of Adorno and suggest viable alternatives. Otherwise the return to Adorno will not be a fully critical retrieval. Accordingly, this book takes up Habermasian criticisms of Adorno, explores whether these are valid, and offers alternatives that, while inspired by Adorno’s social philosophy, also avoid its problems. Through such critical retrieval, I propose new directions for a social philosophy “after Adorno”: one that, being indebted to Adorno, also “goes after” him, but only by “going after” Adorno’s loyal critics.

In this connection, let me comment briefly on the books to which my project is most closely related and most strongly indebted.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Here I shall not discuss other recent books that question the Habermasian reception of Adorno’s work but with greater emphasis on aesthetics or epistemology. See, for example, Yvonne Sherratt, *Adorno’s Positive Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Pieter Duvenage, *Habermas and Aesthetics: The Limits of Communicative Reason* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2003); Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s*

Simon Jarvis has provided the best book-length introduction to Adorno's thought to date.<sup>7</sup> Like Jarvis, I consider all of Adorno's work to be interconnected, as my book's Appendix demonstrates in short compass. But Jarvis too readily accepts Habermasian criticisms of Adorno's "metaphysics," and he leaves Adorno's aesthetics intact. If Adorno's writings on art and the culture industry belong to a larger project of social philosophy, then his central aesthetic claims also need to be reexamined in a social-philosophical context. This I attempt to do in Chapters 1 and 5, in conjunction with the intervening chapters. Specifically, in Chapter 1 I criticize Christoph Menke's reconstruction of Adorno's socially engaged aesthetics and suggest an alternative to both Menke and Adorno on the autonomy of art.

Jarvis's tendency to accept the postmetaphysical turn is challenged by Jay Bernstein.<sup>8</sup> Taking issue with Habermas's discourse ethics, Bernstein derives a substantial "modernist ethics" from Adorno's thought. I share Bernstein's aim of retrieving Adorno's work from Habermasian postmetaphysical criticisms. The key to Bernstein's retrieval lies in a theory of "the complex concept" that opposes Albrecht Wellmer's criticism of Adorno as having engaged in a critique of conceptual knowing as such. This theory allows Bernstein to read Adorno as offering an ethical alternative to the "disenchantment" and "nihilism" that accompany modernization. Although largely in agreement with Bernstein's interpretation of Adorno, Chapter 2 identifies two problems that motivate Wellmer's criticisms and that Bernstein tends to overlook. It also defends Adorno's "metaphysical experience" against Wellmer's postmetaphysical criticisms. By offering an alternative to both Adorno and Wellmer in the next two chapters, I also elaborate questions posed in my review of Bernstein's book.<sup>9</sup>

*Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004). A crucial opening salvo in the struggle to reclaim Adorno from the Habermasians is Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," *Telos*, no. 81 (Fall 1989): 5–29.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> See *Constellations* 10 (2003): 280–3.



Like Bernstein, Martin Morris resists the deaestheticization of social philosophy in Habermasian Critical Theory.<sup>10</sup> In an effort to recover Adorno's insights for political and ethical thought, Morris discovers potential for democratic communication where Habermas sees only aesthetic gestures. Although sympathetic to Morris's project, I think his proposed "politics of the mimetic shudder" fails to recognize the problems in Adorno's appeal to "emphatic experience" and in his idea of truth. I take up these problems in Chapter 3, with a view to developing a normative theory of democratic truth telling that goes beyond Habermas's political philosophy.

Such a theory would need to consider the structure and dynamic of late capitalist society as a whole. Addressing this topic, Deborah Cook regards Habermas's account of the "colonization of the lifeworld" as too sanguine, and she defends Adorno's critique of "domination" as diagnostically more astute and politically more progressive.<sup>11</sup> She also suggests that, in later writings on globalization, Habermas might in fact be returning to the Adornian fold. That is to say, the later Habermas might actually recognize the pervasiveness of economic exploitation under conditions of globalization. Although I find Cook's defense of Adorno instructive, she overlooks Habermas's normative questions concerning societal rationalization. Correlatively, she fails to challenge Adorno's insufficiently differentiated idea of domination. Chapter 4 wrests Adorno's critique of capitalism from the grip of Habermas's powerful misinterpretation, in order to point toward a normative theory of globalization. As sketched in Chapter 4, this theory takes Cook's critique of economic globalization in a more hopeful direction.

The politics of culture is central for such a critique, both in Adorno's social philosophy and in contemporary attempts to theorize globalization. Unlike critics who fault Adorno for an alleged lack of political engagement, Espen Hammer argues that Adorno "was one of the most politically acute thinkers of the twentieth century."<sup>12</sup> Acknowledging that Adorno never developed a political theory,

<sup>10</sup> Martin Morris, *Rethinking the Communicative Turn: Adorno, Habermas, and the Problem of Communicative Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 1.

Hammer says that Adorno's contributions to political thought lie in his specific critical interventions. I agree with Hammer that Adorno's work as an educator and public intellectual made significant contributions to progressive politics. Yet the absence of a full-fledged political theory strikes me as a significant deficit, especially because Adorno's social theory casts doubt on all collective political struggles for liberation. I take up this topic in Chapter 5, where I explore the implications of Adorno's critique of the culture industry for a revitalized feminist politics. Unlike Hammer, I do not examine how Adorno thought, or would have thought, about so-called feminist issues.<sup>13</sup> Rather, I ask whether certain insights in Adorno's critique of the cultural economy, if released from the blinders of an inadequate political theory, are relevant for contemporary feminist politics in ways that Habermasian Critical Theory is not.<sup>14</sup> The broader implications of my disagreements with these fellow Adornians emerge in Chapter 6, where I propose a democratic politics of global transformation.

### 1.3 CRITICAL RETRIEVAL

Following the trajectory of Adorno's own life work, and of my own engagement with it over the years, this exercise in critical retrieval begins with a topic that, in another philosophy, might be considered "merely aesthetic": the autonomy of art. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, this topic is not merely aesthetic, nor is it peripheral to Adorno's social philosophy as a whole. For Adorno's aesthetics employs a complex idea of artistic autonomy. Modern art is the social antithesis of society, he asserts. Because Western society strips art of overt social functions, the best modern art can engage in a determinate negation of society and thereby offer both utopian vision and social critique. Dissatisfied with seemingly exaggerated claims that accompany Adorno's account of artistic autonomy, Christoph Menke, a former student of Albrecht Wellmer, tries to rearticulate Adorno's "aesthetics of

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>14</sup> By pursuing this question, Chapter 5 both elaborates and modifies my earlier criticisms of Adorno's cultural politics for devaluing "actual struggles for political liberation" and thereby ending up as "a merely cultural politics." Zuidervaat, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, p. 149.