

Introduction

The Sociology of Theodor Adorno reads like an anachronistic title for a book. This is not because the ink of Adorno's last written word dried four decades ago. Many disciplines, notably philosophy and aesthetics, still cite his *oeuvre* as a timely source. It is Adorno's *sociology* that seems so far out of touch with basic trends in contemporary social science as to no longer warrant attention. Adorno conceived sociology as a demarcated discipline insofar as 'there are specifically sociological methods and . . . questions' (IS 99) and insisted that this discipline required a concept of society. These convictions appear to clash head-on with present-day ideas for sociology's cross- or post-disciplinarity (Urry 2000a: 199–200; 2003: 124), its reunification with other disciplines as twenty-first-century historical science (Wallerstein 2000: 33–4) and its abandonment of the concept of society.¹ At first glance, Adorno's sociology promises little more than reactionary obstacles for the discipline's advance into the new millennium.

But the issue is not so straightforward. Adorno's sociology resonates consonantly with some of these developments. He never considered sociology as a conventional academic subject. Notwithstanding the specificity of sociological questions and methods, he assigned no defined, defining substantive field to them (IS 102). Adorno even deplored the 'moats' separating 'scientific . . . disciplines', which swallowed their 'essential interest' (IS 140), and deemed the exclusion of 'economic questions' about society's 'process of production and reproduction' particularly precarious (SSI 504). Adorno conducted no sociological study without pushing or crossing sociology's boundaries. What he refused to rely on was the intellectual's ability to erase or ignore socially enforced disciplinary discriminations purely by dint of a resolution to do so (GS6 524, MM 21). Adorno's work also raises no objections to present critiques of the concept of society as sociology's central category, if what is at issue is the concept of

¹ Outhwaite (2006: 17–53) criticises this trend.

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the nation state (e.g. Beck 2000; Urry 2000b). His concept of society was that of capitalist exchange society. And even this concept, Adorno held, mainly created trouble for sociology. It is just that he understood conceptual problems as expressions of social problems and therefore rejected the relinquishment of the concept of society as all too swift an attempt to silence material predicaments calling for analysis.

The matter is further complicated by the word ‘anachronistic’. Its etymology reveals ‘against time’. What makes a thought timely might well relate to its reconcilability with the present, its conservatism, whereas an untimely ring may tell of a thought’s refusal to subscribe to the present, of intellectual resistance to perpetuating an outmoded status quo and to its suggestions for reform. Benjamin’s notion of ‘anachronism in the better sense’, as made explicit in a 1934 letter to Adorno, points in this direction. Its meaning is not to ‘galvanize the past’ but to ‘anticipate a . . . future’ (A&B 34). It is possible that precisely those dimensions of Adorno’s sociology that tend against time raise challenges to the discipline’s present which are progressively unconventional. The dissonant aspects of Adorno’s work would then be especially relevant today, while references to the ‘passage of time’ (Adorno 1973c: 219) in place of a serious engagement with those aspects would amount to dodging compelling controversies. In 1999, Becker-Schmidt (1999: 104) observed that Adorno’s ‘instructions on self-reflection in the social sciences . . . threaten[ed] to be forgotten’. A decade later, reminding sociology of his challenges will mean remembering many of them as obstacles in the discipline’s way out of the 1900s. But not even a dialectical reading can make ‘forgotten’ synonymous with ‘mastered’. In search of a path into the twenty-first century, the discipline might wish to take a fresh look at the sociology of Theodor Adorno after all.

Adorno’s sociology of society

The primary objective of this book is to provide an inclusive, detailed account of Adorno’s sociology. It focuses on his views on the potentials and problems of a sociology that seeks to examine capitalist exchange society. The book discusses Adorno’s sociology of society. This formulation is not born of a desire to hurl provocations into current debates on the cross-, inter-, multi- or post-disciplinary future of a socio-scientific project unburdened from the concept of society. It is suggested by two aspects of Adorno’s work.

Attending to Adorno’s concept of exchange society is conducive to any foray into his *oeuvre*. Adorno is convinced that thinking has only concepts at its disposal. Inquiring into a salient concept thus constitutes one

strategic approach to his work. As Adorno's shorthand indicators – titles – reveal, 'society' is such a concept. In addition to two pieces entitled 'Society' (an unusual encyclopaedia entry and a chapter in *Aesthetic Theory*), Adorno published 'On the Social Situation of Music', 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', 'Freedom and Organised Society', 'Opinion Delusion Society' and 'Culture-Critique and Society', to name a few. A title, Adorno explains, is 'the microcosm of the work' (NLI 4). The titles listed underline the importance of 'society' in many areas of his thinking, including philosophy, aesthetics and sociology. Spanning almost his entire career, they also indicate the concept's recurrence in his writings. Finally, the titles highlight interrelations between 'society' and other categories germane to Adorno's work, suggesting that discussions of 'society' will inevitably involve other key concepts. However, the analytical difficulties associated with what Adorno's concept of society intends are as noteworthy as the concept's relevance. Among these is society's resistance to definition, its frustrating elusiveness to the concept's grasp. The predicaments pertaining to the concept of society repeatedly raise the question of how society can be examined. Adorno puts this question to sociology.

To sociology, Adorno argues, the concept of society is 'central'. It is not central as a universal summary classifier for all social life or as sociology's fundamental explanatory category (IS 26–9). The concept of society is sociologically central insofar as sociology cannot examine anything *without* it. There is, Adorno argues, 'nothing . . . on earth' that 'is not mediated by society' (IS 64–5); 'nothing under the sun' (IS 15) in which society does not assert or manifest itself; nothing that is not characterised by it. This is partly why sociology lacks a specifically demarcated field of study by which the discipline could be defined. Society's omnipresence means that 'sociology' involves 'reflection upon social moments within any given area of subject matter' (IS 102–3) – upon the ways in which exchange society affects individual phenomena. Thus Adorno suggests the formulation 'sociology of society' for his project (although he never used it).

The following six chapters elucidate a spectrum of themes which decisively shape Adorno's perspectives on the problems and potentials of a sociology endeavouring to examine exchange society. The chapter sequence does not lead from the less to the more complex, nor does it accumulate towards a systematic, complete sociological methodology. Adorno denies the possibility of a step-by-step approach to sociology as passionately (IS 4–7) as he denies that of finally determining the discipline and its concept of society (IS 28–9, 103). No intellectual endeavour seriously concerned with the recalcitrant reality of the present, he suspects, can first deal with the simple, then with the complicated, and eventually achieve a universal overview (NLI 14–17). Although the

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themes of this book are essential to its general topic, they do not exhaust the matter at hand. The chapter sequence seems conducive to letting the themes illuminate each other.

Chapter 1 follows Adorno's naïve student (NLI 14) and reaches for the difficult: the antagonistic present itself. It discusses Adorno's concept of exchange society, addresses the issue of selecting resourceful sociological research phenomena and introduces his ideas for their interpretation. The selection of research phenomena is closely related to the question of sociological material. Chapter 2 explores the complex, multi-faceted empirical dimension of Adorno's sociology.

'Adorno does not just set out to *describe* the world', writes Thomson (2006: 3), 'he wishes to break open . . . appearances and show how things really are'. Ostensibly 'historical arguments' are 'speculative rather than sociological'. This view of sociology is curiously monochrome – as if sociologists were unconcerned with reality, occupied only with describing appearances. For Adorno, theoretical analyses of factual appearances are a necessity precisely for sociology. Chapter 3 explores his understanding of the indispensability, role, problems and potentials of theory in sociological examinations of society. Such examinations, Adorno insists, pursue a critique of society. Chapter 4 investigates his views on sociology's socio-critical dimension, in which the suffering body plays a privileged role. The question whether social critique compels sociology to inform transformative praxis arises in this context.

Chapter 5 discusses Adorno's perspectives on the difficulties and possibilities of writing a sociological text; of articulating – beyond mere identification – what determines social life in exchange society. The final chapter addresses two questions raised by Adorno's sociological vision: Are there any traces of the world that have eluded exchange society? Is it still possible to experience them? Adorno's response is framed in respect of the subject's relationship with elements of a non-social reality. The intersections between his sociology and his thoughts on metaphysics surfacing in Chapter 6 generate fresh insights into both areas of his work.

Recurrent motif

In a 1968 undergraduate sociology lecture, Adorno seemed to reveal in a few expeditious sentences what he thought 'sociology should actually be' – only to ask his audience 'not to write down and take home what I have told you as a definition of sociology'. His entire thinking, Adorno explains, is critical of definitional concepts devoted to 'organiz[ing]' reality (IS 15). He shuns offering sociologists a *Spruch* – literally 'dictum' or 'maxim', and used by Adorno also for 'principle', 'doctrine' (NLI 143)

or ‘a minimum . . . of axioms’ and ‘prefabricated categories’ (ND 24) – to define their discipline. In Adorno’s work, one will neither find a set of general categories encompassing the concepts and arguments in his sociological thinking, nor a fundamental principle which serves as their basis.

Adorno’s sociological writings contain a persistently recurrent motif: the double character of sociology. This motif emerges in relation to several of the themes guiding his sociological thought. Adorno’s sociology pursues not only certain empirical, theoretical, critical, political and textual objectives. Examinations of exchange society must also meet two further aims, which are irreducible to one another and sometimes in conflict. Due to the complexity of this issue, it cannot be summarised in an introductory sentence (for a brief remark, see also Rose 1978: 78). However, it is possible to indicate that the paradoxical aspect of a solidified capitalist society, seemingly operating above the heads of humans, which is nonetheless maintained by nobody but these humans, raises a twofold demand on sociology. In response to this demand, the discipline develops its double character. Since this demand emerges in different forms in Adorno’s sociological thinking, and since many domains are enlisted to meet it in its various manifestations, the double character of sociology makes itself felt in different guises in a range of thematic and sub-thematic areas.

Given that the double character of sociology falls significantly short of characterising *all* the thematic and sub-thematic areas of Adorno’s sociological thinking, it cannot be treated as an umbrella category for them. Given that this motif provides no foundation for all the concepts and arguments in the different thematic domains, it cannot be taken as their basic principle. Some empirical, theoretical and political aspects of Adorno’s sociology are not decisively related to its double character at all. Yet the recurrence of this motif does make it especially important for understanding his vision for the discipline. Sociology’s double character constitutes an often-interrupted substantive red thread in this book. The motif will be investigated whenever it materialises. This renders some repetition unavoidable. Its varied reappearance in different dimensions of Adorno’s writings suggests that the double character of sociology is a motif in variation which needs to be illuminated in its diverse guises.²

Approaching Adorno

Adorno’s work is notoriously difficult. His reasoning is unconventional and multifarious; his dense writing can ‘seem obscure, impenetrable, and

² Paddison (1993: 20) aims to present key ideas in Adorno’s musicology as ‘variations on a theme’.

forbidding' (Thomson 2006: 1). Clarifying Adorno's sociological thought depends on expository investigations and analytical discussions of the concepts, conceptual interrelations and arguments informing his perspectives on each of the six themes as well as on scrutinising the connections between these themes. In her study of Baudrillard, Grace (2000: 1) describes her strategy as 'refin[ing] ... one's understanding of ... concepts ... in light of their repeated appearance' throughout an *oeuvre*. Adorno's work is read 'from the inside', as Paddison (2004: viii) puts it, 'where ideas and concepts are seen as working as ensembles within the texts'.

Yet the potential of expository analysis is limited. On withdrawing his interim definition of sociology from his students, Adorno adds: 'what sociology ... is ... or has to be ... can only happen in that one just does it' (IS 15). The ways in which 'significant theorists' conduct social research are more important than their programmatic statements of intentions (PETG 17). Many of Adorno's views on sociology's questions and methods are linked to his studies of particular aspects of social life. Most of his sociological writings contain both elements (although nowhere are they in equilibrium). Adorno's ideas for sociology were meant as guidance for specific research projects, but were in turn also inspired by, and modified in light of, his experiences with them. This creates the requirement to illustrate the concepts and arguments informing his perspectives on each sociological theme with reference to his examinations of particular social phenomena in exchange society.

Adorno's social research projects threaten to be misunderstood unless they are embedded in the wider context of his ideas for sociology. Simultaneously, his warnings of the problems facing sociological inquiries into exchange society – warnings regularly driven by epistemologico-critical interventions – are often too abstract to immediately reveal their implications for research practice. By homing in on the manifestations of such problems in his research projects, it is possible to make these implications transparent. Likewise, Adorno's perspective on sociology's potential to examine exchange society only becomes fully apparent in those of his studies that aim to realise this potential. Adorno's biographer and former student, Claussen (2003b: 140), remembers his professor frequently signalling to students: 'What I am doing here, you can do too.' I have tried to pick up and amplify such signals in this book.

In contrast to Plass's (2007) fine account of Adorno's *Notes to Literature* or Witkin's (2003) discussion of his critique of the culture industry, the chapters of this book do not concentrate on one or a few central texts respectively. Each chapter brings together material from across Adorno's work. The focus rests on his more narrowly conceived sociological writings. This bibliographical orientation may seem odd. Adorno produced

no single-authored book with ‘specifically sociological content’ in his lifetime (Tiedemann in GS9.2 404). Nevertheless, Adorno’s output comprises a vast range of sociological writings: analyses of sociology’s empirical, theoretical, socio-critical and textual dimensions; discussions of its relationship with other disciplines; inquiries into sociological concepts; critiques of rival sociologists; debates on exchange society; and sociological studies of individual social phenomena. Many of these texts have been collected in three posthumously edited tomes of *Sociological Writings* (GS9.1, GS9.2, SSI). Moreover, Adorno’s collected writings now include the transcripts of two 1960s sociology lecture series (IS, PETG). Several further contributions to sociology can be found in his collections of *Critical Models* (CM), in *Miscellanea* (VSI, VSII), *Prisms* (P), *Minima Moralia* (MM) and in uncollected texts. Finally, Adorno was involved in two collective sociological research projects, *The Authoritarian Personality* (AP) and *Group Experiment* (GEX), and worked extensively in the sociology of art, music and the culture industry (e.g. CoM, NLI, NLII, SDE, 1976). Most of these writings contain ideas informing Adorno’s vision for sociological examinations of exchange society and thus support the expositions of this book. For illustrations I chose texts chiefly representing such examinations with reference to specific social phenomena. The aim in this context is not an exhaustive summary of Adorno’s sociological case studies. I turn to these studies to illustrate Adorno’s vision for sociology. The analysis of individual studies, with a view to how they are guided by that vision, unearths aspects which are not obvious if they are read in isolation. In this specific sense, the illustrative sections also seek to clarify Adorno’s sociological case studies and to help readers deepen their own engagement with them.

According to Sherratt (2002: 9), Adorno’s interpreters provide ‘little exploration of the systematic connection between ideas from discrete areas’, even though ‘transgressive operations’ were cardinal for his thinking (Plass 2007: 11).³ The claim that only interdisciplinary studies of Adorno’s work can be successful would be nonsense. However, without also venturing beyond his sociological writings, it may be unfeasible to produce a satisfactory analysis of his thoughts on the problems and potentials of a sociology examining exchange society. Adorno certainly recognises the division of intellectual labour between disciplines, which, being socially dictated, cannot simply be eliminated by rebellious individuals. Hence ‘isolating [his] specific contributions to discrete areas of

³ Numerous commentaries explore several discrete areas of his work, although perhaps not always their ‘systematic’ connections (Bernstein 2001; Jarvis 1998; Jay 1984a; Rose 1978; Tar 1977).

inquiry' is 'at least partly defensible' (Jay 1984a: 87). Adorno's insistence on specific questions and methods underlines this for sociology. Yet Adorno seeks to push the boundaries between disciplines and deems himself sometimes successful at crossing them (CM 216, ND 141–2, PT1 79–80). This results in numerous interconnections between his sociology and other fields – e.g. philosophy, psychology or aesthetics – which are helpful, at times vital, for gaining clarity on his sociological thought.

Adorno's work took inspiration from a range of intellectual sources. He combined strong reservations against 'unbridled speculation' void of content (HTS 65, see also AE 42–3) with the conviction that intellectual productions could provide such content: for agreement, further development, transformation, criticism or dismissal. Moreover, from an early age, Adorno was close to other twentieth-century thinkers, some of whom – notably fellow affiliates of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research – he eventually collaborated with. Finally, as Nichol森 (in HTS xvii) underlines, Adorno was a teacher seeking to 'pass on . . . tools of thought' that would 'enable' others to 'analys[e] . . . the world'. Engaging with Adorno's intellectual sources is often indispensable precisely for understanding his sociological thought from the inside: for clarifying the concepts, conceptual interrelations and arguments shaping his perspective on the six themes as well as for enhancing the illustrations of these concepts and arguments.

The process of selecting from Adorno's sources those most relevant for this book was guided by the aim of clarifying his sociological thought. Emphasising Adorno's relationship with one or more intellectual traditions is not a specific objective of this study. This is not to deny the relevance of such work. In the debate over Adorno's reading of Marx, Jameson's (1990) defence of Adorno's Marxism offers an important intervention (see also Pizer 1993). Similarly, Sherratt's (2002) discussion of Adorno's Freudian heritage and O'Connor's (2004) study of Adorno's critique of idealism provide original and valuable perspectives. Yet when the primary aim of analysing the sedimentation of intellectual sources in Adorno's concepts is to accentuate his concepts' concord with, or opposition to, a particular tradition, it is likely that his sources from this tradition will receive the most attention. By contrast, when the primary aim of tracing sources is to elucidate the various concepts and arguments shaping Adorno's ideas for sociology, the focus of the analysis must be on the most important sources, respectively, for those concepts and those arguments. The focus constantly shifts, because the most important sources remain neither the same nor of the same kind in each instance.

Three spheres of Adorno's work provide directions for identifying his sources and evaluating their impact. Firstly, there are leads in Adorno's

own writings. This is not a trivial point; following these leads does not constitute a straightforward journey from reference to source. Adorno, encouraged by his publisher, was a bibliographical ascetic, who habitually omitted references (Tiedemann in GS10.2 821). Many passages offer the reader only allusions that someone else's work is at issue and it is often unclear what work it is. Secondly, Adorno's *oeuvre* contains writings explicitly dedicated to other thinkers: appraisals of Kracauer, Benjamin and Horkheimer; immanent critiques of Husserl and Hegel; engagements with Durkheim, Lukács, Veblen, Mannheim and 'positivist' sociology – etc. In some cases, e.g. Adorno's reading of Benjamin, investigating Adorno's sources raises as many questions as it answers. Where extended responses to such questions remain beyond the scope of the following chapters, the questions might stimulate further explorations. Finally, it has been instructive to consult texts characteristic of groups of intellectuals, such as Adorno and his interlocutors, who were separated by exile and thus denied face-to-face discussion: written correspondences. Not only do these 'workshops of ... thoughts' (Claussen 2003a: 22) offer striking insights into the crystallisation of some of Adorno's ideas and arguments; they also help in organising, pinpointing and evaluating his intellectual sources.

Held's (1980: 14) well-known study of the Frankfurt School places 'emphasis ... on an interpretation and elaboration of ... ideas'. Held finds a treatment of themes more conducive to this objective than a chronological or intellectual-historical account. For the same reason, my inquiry into Adorno's sociology is thematically organised. Held also concedes that a sustained interpretation of ideas 'cannot entirely escape intellectual history or chronological documentation'. Although no chapter in this book is chronologically organised, selected subsections deal with certain issues in loose chronology, especially where tracing temporal variations in Adorno's thinking is important for clarifying a theme. (For a chronological overview of his sociological *oeuvre*, see the Appendix.)

My approach to the historical context of Adorno's thinking – its biographical, political and social backdrop – is similarly pragmatic. This is partly justified by the large number of accounts of Adorno's life and of the socio-political background of the Frankfurt School's activities, which have left little of his work's historical context unexplored.⁴ Moreover, where the main objective has been historical contextualisation, the interpretation of Adorno's ideas has sometimes suffered. Jameson (1990: 4) observes

⁴ See Brunkhorst 1999: 11–68; Buck-Morss 1977: 1–23; Claussen 2008; Held 1980: 29–39; Jäger 2004; Jay 1984a: 24–55; 1996; Müller-Doohm 2009; Pabst 2003; Rubin 2002; Schütte 2003; Slater 1977; Steinert 2003; Wiggershaus 1987, 1994; Wilcock 1996, 1997.

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that accounting for 'Adorno's career in various stages, including as its obligatory backdrop the exciting wartime flights across Europe and North America, and the postwar return to a Germany in rubble (with the subsequent emergence of a student movement in the sixties), done in the various appropriate Hollywood and Tv-docudrama styles . . . has generally ignored the philosophical or aesthetic' – and, I hasten to add, sociological – 'components'.⁵ Jameson is exaggerating, but not without underlining the dilemma that biographically and historically oriented accounts almost inevitably lack detailed discussions of Adorno's concepts and arguments.

Still, some aspects of Adorno's thinking were so profoundly influenced by his experiences of specific biographical, political, historical and social events that to ignore his views on these events would frustrate conceptual clarification. Auschwitz forced itself upon several areas of Adorno's work; political developments in postwar Germany shaped his critique of collective activism; and his travelogues – albeit misunderstood if merely read as biographical snippets – bear a characteristic personal dimension. Adorno's own work, his intellectual sources, the correspondences and the existing biographical and historical literature provide guidance for assessing the impact of historical context in specific instances.

Adorno commentaries

In the twenty-first-century Anglophone world, Adorno remains one of the most widely debated twentieth-century European thinkers. The growing number of introductory and multidisciplinary accounts of Adorno's work⁶ and a series of broader surveys and intellectual histories of the Frankfurt School and European Marxism⁷ illustrate this. Yet in the past two decades, Anglophone scholars have tended towards a greater concern with Adorno's contributions to specific disciplines. Several sophisticated studies are dedicated to Adorno's aesthetics (Hullot-Kentor 2006; Nichol森 1997; Zuidervaart 1991), some focusing on musicology (Paddison 1993; Witkin 1998) and literature (Cunningham and Mapp 2006; Plass 2007). Adorno's writings have also been scrutinised with a view to philosophical questions (Hearfield 2004; Jameson 1990). Specialist commentaries deal with epistemology (O'Connor 2004; Sherratt 2002), metaphysics (Pensky 1997; Rosiek 2000; Wellmer 2000: 183–202), social philosophy

⁵ Usually, three stages are covered: Weimar Germany and interwar Austria up to 1933, English and American exile (1934–51), and Adorno's life in the young Federal Republic of (West) Germany (1951–69).

⁶ Brunkhorst 1999; Buck-Morss 1977; Hohendahl 1995; Jarvis 1998; Jay 1984a; Rose 1978; Thomson 2006; Wilson 2007.

⁷ Held 1980; Jay 1996; Kellner 1989; Lunn 1982; Slater 1977; Tar 1977; Wiggershaus 1994.